

The Oracle's Tale

A Fantasy Novella

by:
Megan Cutler

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to real people or events is entirely coincidental.

THE ORACLE'S TALE

Copyright © 2021 by Megan Cutler.

All rights reserved.

Cover art by Megan Cutler

This book is protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without the express written permission of the author.

First Edition: January 2021

Other Books by Megan Cutler

The Mystical Island Trilogy

[Island of Lost Forever](#)
[Crossroads of Frozen Eternity](#)
[Sea of Twisted Souls](#)

[The Mystical Island Trilogy Box Set](#)

Eternity's Empire

[The Light of Eternity](#)
[The Soul of the Earth](#)
[Secrets of the Past](#)
[The Bond Between Sisters](#)
[The Family You Choose](#)

Dream Things True

[Dreamers Do Lie](#)
[Life is But a Dream](#)

[The Dream Things True Box Set](#)

The Celestial Serenade

The End of All Things (Coming Feb. 2021!)

[Follow me on Amazon and never miss a release!](#)

Find me on [Facebook: megancutlerauthor](#)

Find me on [Twitter: @Megan_Cutler](#)

Find me on [Goodreads](#)

"You cannot steal the soul, child. Only it's memory."

The words hung in the air, pregnant with meaning but difficult to grasp. And the Seeker needed to understand if she was going to act upon them.

Silently, she folded her legs beneath her and came to rest on the grey, saturated ground that dominated her surroundings. She ignored the soft squish of the mud as it gave way beneath her as well as the creeping damp sensation permeating her thin clothing.

"But how can tangible markings grave themselves in permanent structure upon an intangible, ever-shifting segment of energy?" a second voice protested, as confused and frustrated as the seeker herself.

"Foolish child!" the great voice replied, whipping through the air like branches tossed by a windstorm. *"Are words different when they are written on paper than when they are carved in wet sand? And if waves should catch the edges of the form and drag them back into oblivion, has the meaning really changed? Once written, once read, do words ever really vanish?"*

The Seeker did not deem the answers to all these questions to be the same. Apparently, neither did her companion, who refused to offer an answer.

Not that the Seeker could have changed the outcome of the discussion if she felt differently. This knowledge came to her secondhand, passed through time and memory — the exact forces she was trying to tap into.

"Touching knowledge, is not the same as understanding it. To grasp meaning when its source is no longer in front of you, that is the first step toward true power." The great voice spoke with a weight that suggested a wealth of power indeed. Ancient power. The kind harnessed only by universal elements.

The kind of power the Seeker needed to touch in order to fulfill her task.

She had spent several thousand years studying these words, though she still didn't really understand them. The only thing she knew for certain, the only true remnant from that lost, forgotten conversation, was this: one did not have to steal the soul of the universe to control it.

She only needed to access its memories.

Exhibit One: The Oracle's Disk

Mothers like to tell stories. Growing up, Bethany clung to one in particular. Her mother must have told it half a dozen times, though it wasn't a faerie tale and didn't come from one of her picture books.

The story involved a man her mother met shortly before she was born. A man who loved her. Sadly, this was not a tale of star-crossed lovers finding an unexpected connection that carried them through the years. Because, for some reason Bethany didn't quite understand, her mother never returned her mysterious lover's feelings.

As Bethany grew, she regarded the tale as cautionary, a reminder that love did not always conquer all. Sometimes choices had to be based on logic, no matter what the heart said. It was a lesson that went against both her creative and impulsive nature, which was why she believed her mother introduced the concept while she was young.

She dismissed it as fictional until her twenty-first birthday, when she asked her mother about the mystical man she was never able to love.

"Cameron?" her mother replied in a dreamy tone as her eyes grew distant and wistful.

"He was real?" Bethany exclaimed.

"Well, of course he was real! Handsome too. And rich. He owned some kind of fancy tech company. Or at least he claimed he did. I tried not to pay attention to those sorts of things when I decided who I should spend my life with."

"What was the name of the company, do you remember?" Bethany reached for her phone, ready to search for whatever obscure term her mother muttered next.

"Draft, I think it was? No, Drift! Drift Systems, or something like that."

"Drift Microsystems?" Bethany nearly dropped her phone. "Mom they make the chips that go in practically everything these days! Wait, Cameron? Do you mean Cameron Moreno? *The* Cameron Moreno? CEO of one of the largest companies on the face of the planet?"

"Moreno, yes. That was him." Her mother still had that dreamy, far off look on her face, as if everything her daughter said was meaningless.

Bethany wanted to slap her so she'd realize how insane this conversation was. "*The* Cameron Moreno offered to sweep you off your feet and make you his queen, and you said *no*?"

Her mother laughed. "Money isn't everything, Beth. And he wasn't *the* anything back then. He had come into a small inheritance and invested it in a technology he believed would sweep the globe. It just so happened that he guessed right."

"And you guessed wrong?"

Finally the vapid look on her mother's face vanished, and she narrowed her eyes, casting Bethany the *mom look* that once made her cower. "Bethany! There are more important things than money. I raised you better than that. You were maybe two years old when Cameron happened. Your father died in a car accident before I even realized you were on the way. I was still reeling from that, trying to figure out what was best for my child. You were my everything, my whole world. I didn't feel like I had time for a man. What was I supposed to do? Marry him for the money?"

No longer a child, and no longer reduced to a puddle of terror by her mother's anger, Bethany tapped the tiny screen of her phone, summoning the public details for Drift Microsystems' CEO. "Apparently he never married. Do you think it's because he never got over you?"

"Bethany!" Her mother sounded exasperated.

"What? You're the one who told me that story so that I would learn to consider the long-term consequences of individual decisions!"

Her mother slapped an open palm against the table, making Bethany jump. "That isn't the reason I told you about Cameron at all. I told you so you'd know it's never wrong to follow your heart. Romance isn't anything like the depictions in movies, books or TV shows. For better or for worse, I dedicated my life to raising you, to having the family your father would have wanted, because it was more important to me than money, success or Cameron Moreno's fortune."

"All right, all right. Geeze." Bethany flicked her phone off and set it on the table. "So I guess you won't be upset when I tell you that I've decided to try for artist fulltime?"

"Upset? Bethany, that's fantastic!" Her mother stood up so fast she knocked her chair over backwards, though the wall caught it before it could clatter to the floor. She swooped forward and scooped Bethany into her arms, pressing her daughter so tightly against her chest that, for a moment, Bethany couldn't breathe.

It was a relief knowing her mom was on board with this decision, which she had not taken lightly. At least she never had to worry about family judgment when it came to her career.

But Bethany kept thinking back to that conversation, even months later. Not because her mother offered her support, or clarified the meaning of her childhood tale; because she couldn't stop thinking about how different her life would be if she had access to the funds of Drift Microsystems.

* * *

Everyone knew about the Oracle. Look into the swirling void of spacetime she conjured, think of a singular moment in your life, and she would capture it for you. Take the disk she gave you, shatter it, and you could change that moment, forever setting your life down a fresh course.

Given the draw of such a power, the world should have been in a state of constant fluctuation as people adjusted and modified their lives until they achieved the perfect outcome. But few people were willing to brave the Oracle's sanctum.

It wasn't her prices — which were considerable. It was her cryptic warning that changing the past came at a cost that went well beyond money. Time was not a singular line that easily shifted as people manipulated its slips and bends. Even the tiniest change could have widespread consequences. Blah, blah, blah, and so on and so forth.

Even those who scraped together the initial fee for the Oracle's services rarely made use of their disks. Bethany had visited at least one house where an Oracle Disk sat in the center of the fireplace mantle, the image scored across its surface more detailed and lifelike than any photo she had ever seen. One careless move and the past could change.

"It turns out I didn't really need to go back to make the change," her friend explained with a shrug. "Knowing I had the power gave me the strength and courage to start working in the now. That's why I keep it on the mantle. As a reminder."

The people who did use their disks focused on particular sets of events. Lost love was popular. Changing the circumstances of one's death was another big one. Bethany assumed the price for that was particularly morbid, since someone else would have to die in the disk user's place. Career goals were also common. As soon as someone recognized the critical moment where they had gone wrong, they could go back and save a failing business venture.

These statistics were available on the Oracle's website for those researching her services. It was nigh impossible to speak with someone who made use of their disk because, presumably,

they no longer needed to gain one during the course of their new life.

By the time Bethany set foot in the Oracle's sanctum, she had spent a year wishing she had a pivotal career moment to go back and change.

Succeeding as an artist hadn't worked out the way she hoped. Passion didn't keep her fed. It didn't get people to look at her portfolio either. Pandering put money in her bank account and a roof over her head, but it drained her soul of the essence that drove her to create. Eventually, her mother's smile and soft words of encouragement just didn't motivate her anymore. She was thirty-five, lived in a tiny studio apartment she could barely afford to rent, and didn't have enough accomplishments tied to her name to get a steady paying job unless she wanted to work in a call center coaxing people to purchase the latest scam package.

No, the moment she wanted to change came from so far back, she could barely remember it. Actually, she wasn't even sure the memory was real. She had done a lot of research about how easy it was to fake a memory. All you needed was confirmation from a person you trusted. And her mom said she had been there the day of her final meeting with Cameron. The day she told him it would never work and that she just couldn't get over Bethany's father, the man she had loved with all her heart and soul.

If Bethany stretched the edges of her memory, she could conjure the cloudy image of a sidewalk cafe and a man in a suit sitting across from her mother while Bethany played jacks on the sidewalk. But she wasn't entirely sure she hadn't just pasted the man in the suit into some other memory, his image stolen from one of the business journals she read about Cameron's rocket rise to success.

It didn't matter what her mother said. It didn't matter how deep her passions ran. Money made the world work. She needed money to make money, even while trying to make art. But with the money of Drift Microsystems at her back, with the encouragement and clout of a man like Cameron, she could get her career off the ground before she ever left home.

One tiny little change and it could all be different. She just needed her mother to accept Cameron's proposal. And perhaps if her two-year-old took to him, her mother would change her mind.

Then Bethany's art would be on movie posters and plastered on the sides of skyscrapers in major cities. Her inbox would be full of commission requests. She'd never be able to keep up.

So it was that hazy memory, only half-real to her, that she focused on when she gazed into the black disk the Oracle conjured. And she was somewhat mystified to discover when she left that the disk had captured the moment more perfectly than a photograph, as crisp and clear as her vision today, including details she couldn't possibly have noticed at the age of two.

* * *

Bethany didn't wait to use her disk.

Everyone she spoke to told her she should. The few people she managed to speak to who had disks — they were hard to find — told her it was a good idea. The councilor she had to speak to in order to get the appointment with the Oracle said the same thing.

The Oracle is a timeless being, willing to grant us whatever wish we think we desire. So it's our responsibility to think about the consequences of our actions, about how the change will affect the world around us. We recommend you spend at least a year charting the changes before you put them into effect.

But it had taken Bethany five years to save up for the appointment, and she had spent almost

every waking moment of those years thinking about what she intended to do. What more was there to think about? If money caused all her problems, having money would solve all of them. Simple. Easy. And no one could possibly get hurt. Her mother had never remarried. She hadn't even dated again after Cameron. And according to all the information Bethany could find about Cameron's personal life, he hadn't taken an interest in any other women.

So Bethany went home that night, changed into her pajamas, tossed the disk onto the floor and crawled into bed, eager to awaken and see the results of her new and improved life.

She didn't expect to dream. No one she spoke to had mentioned one. But then, no one she'd spoken to had actually used their disk.

Almost the moment Bethany drifted off, she was back in the Oracle's sanctum. It was a disconcerting place, one Bethany had been eager to escape and never experience again. The room at the top of the tower was small, but every inch of wall, floor and ceiling was set with holoemitters that constantly projected vast, open spaces. It looked like a mountaintop sanctuary when Bethany entered, but it shifted at some point to a cityscape, as if they were hovering above an entire metropolitan district, looking down from the clouds. By the time Bethany left, the scenery had become a jungle. Now it looked like a great ocean, spreading from horizon to horizon beneath her while whales and dolphins jumped and played in the distance.

The Oracle sat cross-legged in the center of her couch, which was raised on a platform set with more holoemitters so she seemed to be floating in the air. Only the cushions of her couch were visible beneath her, as if it were set it among the clouds.

Though experts claimed the Oracle was thousands of years old, her face was young, her skin flawless, her lips cherry red. No one had seen her eyes, if she even had them. They were hidden behind a tight braid of her own hair wrapped tightly around the upper portion of her face. She didn't even lower her head to look in Bethany's direction.

The first time she had entered this room, the Oracle had merely held up her hand and summoned a swirling black void into existence. Bethany had known from her briefing that she was supposed to look into it and think of the thing she wanted to change.

But this time, the Oracle's hands remained planted on her knees. "It is time to speak of your price," she said, her voice echoing through the small yet vast space. "The true price of what you have done."

Bethany braced herself. She half-expected to lose her mother. If this were anything like books and movies, she would have to sacrifice the thing she loved most in order to gain her greatest wish. If she woke up in the morning to find her mother had been dead and buried for ten years or, worse, for most of her life, she thought she would go mad. But she hadn't been able to see any logical reason her mother would be taken from her if she agreed to marry Cameron, and she used that unassailable logic now to ease the mad beating of her heart.

"This is the city you fell asleep in." The Oracle motioned to the space surrounding her, and the view changed. Grand skyscrapers rose from the ground to rake the sky. It was dark, but bright lights shone from apartment windows, office buildings, street lights and billboard signs. The bright neon wash represented hundreds of thousands of lives and the structures that sustained them.

Bethany recognized the city where she had spent most of her life. The city where she had tried, and failed, to succeed.

"This is the city you will wake up in." The Oracle made a motion with her other hand so that she held both arms out beside her, palms facing upward.

Again, the images in her sanctum shifted. The city's structure looked much the same, but

there were new details. Under the bright light of day, protestors held signs aloft as they marched down the city's main streets. Bethany caught flashes of headlines describing higher taxes, lack of healthcare, growing poverty and the chokehold of the rich.

Some of these were issues she recognized, but all were worse in the daylight city than what she remembered. And the chain of flashes went on for some time, making Bethany feel as though she were watching the world collapse.

"None of this has anything to do with me!" she cried. "How could it possibly?"

"Don't you remember?" The Oracle motioned again and, suddenly, Bethany was standing in a park. Her mother was on her phone, her face crinkled with concern. Bethany had wandered away, hopping, skipping and singing until she found a babbling brook and a fake waterfall to splash in. There was a man sitting beside it, and he glanced up at her, smiling as he witnessed her antics.

Vague memory flickered in the back of Bethany's head.

"You never knew his name," the Oracle said, her voice suddenly too loud for their surroundings. "But his name was Mortimer Boswick."

"Moritmer Bos... You mean the senator that pushed for all those healthcare and tax reforms a few years back?"

"The same. You never realized, given that you were only five, but he planned to kill himself that day. He had gone to the park for one last visit, one last chance to breathe fresh air. Then he met you and your mother."

The scene jumped ahead, and Bethany's mother came running up the path to grab her and pull her from the fountain. She apologized to the man for her child's poor behavior, but he only laughed and said that he enjoyed watching her. He bent low and spoke to Bethany briefly. She couldn't remember what he said, only that he had been kind.

"Since you were never there," the Oracle said, "you never unknowingly changed his mind. He never became a senator. He never fought to make things better for people like you and your mother."

"But I only wanted to make one small change," Bethany protested.

"There is no such thing as a small change," the Oracle countered, and the scene shifted again. "Remember your best friend, Summer?"

"She moved to Europe three years ago," Bethany replied. "She got a job at some fancy medical university."

"Not just any job. She's been developing a cure for cancer, the kind that can fight all its strains, not just one. Her grant would have come through this month."

"Would have? How could I possibly interfere with that?"

"Because, Bethany, Summer only decided to pursue a cure for cancer after she watched your family struggle over the death of your grandfather."

The room suddenly seemed filled with mourners, but Bethany looked away before she could see the focus of their attention. She had worked hard to forget how frail and battered her grandfather looked the day he died, surrounded by people who loved him but also shrouded in tubes and wires from the medical equipment that kept him alive and eased his pain.

"I couldn't have cured his cancer simply by nudging my mother toward a different relationship," Bethany protested as gathering tears prickled her eyes.

"You most certainly did not. But you didn't live in the same neighborhood. You never met Summer."

Bethany felt a sharp pang deep in her chest. So this would be her ultimate price, a friend she

treasured.

But she lost touch with Summer when she moved to Europe. The loss to the world would be far greater than her personal loss if Summer was the person who would eventually cure even one form of cancer. Was that what the Oracle wanted her to think?

"What about my art?" she demanded, hot tears searing her cheeks as she turned to confront the Oracle. "I'll succeed now, right? I'll have the money I need for proper supplies and promotions. People will take my work seriously. Can't I use that to do something good?"

"What art?" The Oracle was standing right next to Bethany when she turned

Bethany's jaw fell open, and her eyes nearly popped out of her head. She hadn't even heard the woman move. "What do you mean?" she snarled. "Art is everything I am. I've eaten it, slept and breathed it since I was ten!"

"Because your mother taught you to embrace your passions."

Bethany didn't need to look at the scenes now playing around her to know they involved her mother looking at her scribbles, heaping praise on her, then hanging up the drawings for everyone to see. Every time they had company, her mom would point to the fridge — where Bethany's latest creation was on display — and brag about her talent and creativity.

Out of the corners of her eyes, Bethany watched those scenes vanish, replaced by a modern house with stainless steel appliances and a kitchen completely free of decoration. In fact, there weren't any portraits by other artists on the walls nor any of the eclectic art her mother had collected. It had been replaced by photographs and university degrees hanging in identical black frames.

"What type of influence did you think Cameron Moreno would have on your life?" the Oracle asked, her tone amused. "Did you think he was the kind of man who would encourage you to chase your dreams no matter the cost? Did you think that's how he found success? Why would your mother walk away from a man who shared her philosophies?"

"You changed your whole life, Bethany, sacrificed your passions for money and power."

"No!" It was almost a scream. "This isn't what I wanted! Undo it! Put it back the way it was! I'd rather live in the gutter than lose my creative drive!"

But even as she said it, Bethany realized she had lost her passion a long time ago. Probably the moment she started saving for a meeting with the Oracle. Why hadn't she listened to anyone's warnings? She could have changed directions five years ago. Maybe she wouldn't have struck it big, but she probably could have had something to show for her efforts.

"Return to my sanctum," the Oracle said as she climbed back up to her couch. "Gaze again into the void and scrawl the moment you wish to change across the disk, and all can be reversed."

Bethany breathed a sigh of relief. She could undo her mistake. It would cost her, but it would be worth it now that she had seen the world without her passions. "It's a promise," she whispered as the dream dissolved around her.

* * *

By morning, Bethany had forgotten everything. Her dreams had been strangely dark, but she couldn't grasp the threads anymore, couldn't weave them back into a picture that made sense. She had never been particularly creative anyway. Her skills lay more in the direction of math.

Cold, harsh business logic had always ruled her house. Cameron said it was best to be prepared for any sudden change in the market. Weigh every decision and choose the most

profitable; that was his motto. Passions of the moment were for fools and starving artists.

Bethany had long since learned to live by these tenants, and they served her well. Sometime in the next five years, she would slip into the role of CEO, take over the family business and be responsible for guiding it forward. She had to be ready. There wasn't time for anything else.

So she dismissed the dream images every time they crept back into her consciousness, though she never did stop feeling like there was something important she had forgotten.

Exhibit Two: The Oracle's Challenge

The Oracle dreamed often, though she rarely slept. That was the point of the sanctuary — to soothe her weary soul. To give the magic somewhere to work without constantly troubling her. But also to contain it, to give it shape and boundaries.

She had grown fond of the images the magic tendrils projected across the blank walls and ceiling of her abode. She often lounged on her cushioned couch and watched the shifting shapes through half-lidded eyes. Distant cities and growing civilizations were so much more interesting than bright flashes of shifting light and random color. The magic of the modern age was much deeper and more nuanced than the forces of old. She rather fancied the evolution.

Even in the depths of sleep, the Oracle was aware of the magic surrounding her. It ebbed and flowed like a great ocean, though it kept her always at its center. She was an island that rose above the madness. A focal point. A gravitational pull.

She wasn't certain anymore how she managed so much of it. In the beginning, Sight had been her only talent. But she pressed that Vision until it encountered few boundaries, allowing her to See everywhere all at once.

Maybe it was her determination that fashioned the seeking tendrils that now answered her every call. Perhaps her desire birthed the secondary effects of her abilities. She still remembered the first time she broke the barrier and Touched as well as Saw.

Now she did it without thought. Without effort. Sooner or later, she would be powerful enough to re-write the whole of history according to her whims, though that was well beyond the realm of her ambition.

She didn't want to be a god.

She closed her eyes, allowing the soft motion of the magic surrounding her to lull her into a trance-like state. Things had been quiet since the artist. Though many humans desired a taste of her power, few actually summoned the courage to make use of it. Which left her alone with her thoughts most of the time, to monitor the shape of history as it spread in all directions, etching a myriad of possibilities upon the surface of the universe.

She sensed the exact moment something disturbed the steady channels through which her mystical energy flowed. It was like a shadow, a drop of darkness falling into a bright sea, causing dark ripples to cascade outward from the origin point.

Her eyes snapped open. She sat up and spun to face the door of her breached sanctuary. Her hair flowed around her, binding and covering her wide eyes, protecting her visitor's vision from their bright countenance.

"How come you to this place?" the Oracle demanded, her voice harsh and crisp as the crack of a whip.

"I paid the fee," a rich, sultry voice answered.

The voice belonged to a woman of about twenty-six. Her luscious hair flowed in thick curls across her shoulders, cascading down her chest and back in equal waves. Her skin had a bronze tint to it. Her cheeks were infused with a hint of fire, and gold adorned her eyelids. Her irises were a stunning emerald, and they glittered with a strange hint of mirth no human had ever dared bring into this room.

The intruder set her palms against her hips. Her long fingers ended in thick, sharp nails, painted crimson to match the color of her lips. Anyone else might have believed the nails were fake, but the Oracle saw the truth of everything.

"You are not welcome, Fae creature," she snarled. "My services are meant for humans."

The intruder laughed. The rich, tinkling sound reminded the Oracle of bells. "Money is money. I'll have my disk now. Unless you'd like to give me a refund?" The Fae arched one perfect, auburn eyebrow, as if challenging the Oracle to break her established rules.

The Oracle choked on a soft growl before it could escape her throat. Nothing was more infuriating than Faeries. "Define, then, the moment you wish your disk to detail and it shall be made." The Oracle forced an overt sweetness into her voice to hide her impatience.

The Faerie lifted one finger and traced the base of her chin, somehow managing to avoid clawing herself with her wickedly sharp nails. "Hmm... Let's see..." she murmured while she pretended to think. "Yes, I believe what I want most is a disk detailing the day you first came to power." The Faerie's gaze bored through the hair covering the Oracle's face, forcing her to make direct eye contact, perhaps trying to catch a glimpse of her soul.

But this was not the Oracle's first experience with magical tricksters. She rebuffed the challenge with a snort. "In order to claim a disk, you must have been present for the event in question. If you cannot call forth the memory, the disk will not manifest."

"Ah! Is it that simple? Very well then." Emerald eyes still shimmering, the Faerie began to weave the image the Oracle requested. Her memories were crisper and sharper than human memories, not dulled around the edges by time and bias. It looked as though she had recorded that day, long ago, when the Oracle first reached a hand into one of her Visions.

She saw herself as the memory unfolded, though she seemed to watch from a great distance. Her eyes were bound with black cloth, yet a bright light seeped through the fabric. She sat in the center of a clump of trees, her perch cushioned by leaves, her back propped against the meeting of three gnarled roots that formed a looping snag. Around her swirled the bright, shapeless light of her magic, now purple and sparkling, now green and gleaming, now orange and dim as if all the light had gone out of it.

As the young Oracle lifted her right hand and pushed it tentatively forward, her magic formed a circle around her wrist. The magic glow spiraled outward, forming a whirlpool in the air. The motion of the Oracle's fingers pressed it back, forming a shallow tunnel that looked like a tiny wormhole.

The memory shifted perspectives, and the Oracle saw herself from behind. In the center of the swirling vortex, just beyond her fingertips, was a void of deepest black speckled with the distant pinpricks of stars. The young Oracle tilted her head to one side, curious about this sudden and unexpected development. Then she reached forward and allowed her fingers to grasp the fabric of the universe.

In the sanctuary that sat in the nexus of time, the present-day Oracle waved a hand, shattering the image.

"These memories do not belong to you," she declared, her tone cold.

"What foolishness!" the Faerie exclaimed. "Of course they do."

"They cannot." The Oracle knew that beyond shadow of doubt because she knew the exact origin of those particular memories.

A wicked smile danced across the Faerie's lips. "They may not have originated with me," she admitted, her tone as sickly sweet as the Oracle's had been before. "But they are mine now. Mine enough to manifest your disk."

"Be gone, Fae creature. I will not summon a disk that will undo me."

"Oh? But you're more than happy to undo everyone else with this little service you offer." The Faerie's tone was polite, but the Oracle was familiar enough with their kind to detect her cutting undertone.

"I do no such thing," she replied primly. "If humans wish to ruin each other with their petty ambitions, why should you care? You have more than enough magic to make yourself immune."

The Faerie clicked her tongue. "Care you so little for the lives you touch? Lives are lost, Oracle, for the changes you accommodate. Souls are crushed. Culture evaporates. Chaos replaces the universe's order. By what authority do these decisions rest solely within your hands?"

"I do not force the humans to use the disks," the Oracle protested. "I merely create them."

"What course would the world take without you, I wonder?" The Faerie began to pace, waving her arms as she speculated. "What great minds would thrive? They rarely have the money to achieve an audience, you know."

"That artist you're so worked up about managed just fine." The Oracle smirked.

The Faerie pursed her lips. "And what about those who are confident and content enough with their lot in life never to question where they've ended up? What deity bestowed upon you the right to decide who should succeed and who should fail? Or to subcontract it to the pawns who play your narcissistic game?"

The Oracle sighed, allowing the breath to fall noisily from her throat as she rolled her glowing eyes behind their nest of concealing hair. "Stop preaching your high and mighty rhetoric and simply tell me which human wronged you so that I may correct the mistake and allow this meeting to come to its natural end." She could not, unfortunately, banish the Faerie. Her visitor had already wrapped her magic around her like a cloak, shielding her from the effects of the Oracle's tweaks. And since she didn't actually possess offensive magic, she would have to convince the Faerie to leave.

Again, the intruder clicked her tongue. "It's far too late for that, I'm afraid. You had to know that sooner or later someone would get sick of your meddling. And you'd be foolish to think I'm the only one.

"So it's revenge then, is it?" The Oracle tried her best to sound bored, but she couldn't keep dry bitterness from invading the last few words.

This time, the Faerie smirked. "It's something, that's for sure. I just thought I'd give you a chance to play nice before the fun begins."

"I have no interest in feuding with you, Faerie. Do as you please and leave me in peace."

"I shall do as I please, thank you. But you brought this disruption on yourself." The Faerie turned, her thick red hair swirling around her. But she paused halfway through the motion to glance over her shoulder. "I'll take my disk now, thank you."

"I have already told you that I will not create the disk you want."

"Then I'll take one of this very moment." The Faerie made a sweeping gesture with both hands to indicate the room surrounding them. "So that I may easily return when the time is ripe."

The Oracle sighed. "Have it your way."

She held up her hand. Electricity crackled in the air as her magic responded to her will, swirling into the same void she created in the Faerie's memory. The darkness of space lingered but a moment across the disk's dark surface before an image replaced it. The image was of the Faerie with her arms spread, a pretty smile lighting her face. The Oracle had been flattering to her, a peace offering of sorts.

The Faerie took the disk and chuckled lightly as she looked on it. "Until next time, Oracle," she said, then winked out of existence.

Exhibit Three: The Oracle's Choice

"Hello again."

"I thought you were leaving?" the Oracle answered the cheerful voice with a dry snap, as if her tongue had just broken a pair of fallen twigs. Fae creatures were annoying enough without the liquid sunshine they always managed to infuse into their voices.

"Ah, yes. I suppose, from your perspective, no time has passed," the Faerie cooed. "How interesting."

The Oracle squinted beneath the veil of hair that concealed her eyes. But physical movement had little effect on her vision. The magic swirling through her lair between her luxurious couch and the walls remained unchanged, save for the dark ripples left by the Faerie's passage. Still, the Oracle focused on her visitor's face, enhanced it and traced the contours of her bronze skin, looking for signs of aging, wear or wrinkles. But aside from a few possible inches of extra hair growth — neatly concealed by the cascade of the Fae creature's curls — the Oracle detected no discernible difference between the woman she had been speaking to a moment ago and the one that stood before her now.

"The usage of a disk doesn't usually involve me directly," she admitted, chagrined that her magic had been so seamless she barely detected it. And here she had been hoping for an afternoon of rest to recover from her first encounter with the Faerie. This was what she got for offering her services to anyone willing to pay the fee. Perhaps she should consider stricter qualifications.

Though perhaps that was exactly what the Faerie wanted — to annoy her into changing her policy. The Oracle frowned, displeased that she might be playing directly into her foe's hand.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she demanded when her visitor offered no response.

The Faerie clicked her tongue — a favorite gesture, it seemed. "Tut, tut," she chided. "I would think someone with your power would be able to reach back through history and see exactly what passed before my return. But no matter. It cannot hurt to introduce myself. I am Phalaena, and my purpose has not changed. I still want the same thing I did last time."

The Oracle gritted her teeth. She didn't need a Fae creature telling her how her own magic worked. The pulse was just beneath her fingertips, ready to answer her query. The whole of history unfolded around her, beneath her, before her. She could spend hours delving into its secrets and unwinding its tangles. But there seemed little point when the Faerie's presence was so easy to detect.

In actual fact, she had been gone a long while. But she had erased that passage of time with the use of her disk. Interesting.

"There is the matter of cost to be discussed," the Oracle announced primly.

"Pish posh," Phalaena retorted, flicking her wrist. "I haven't enacted any changes, so there couldn't possibly be a price for returning to speak with you. The disk was a mere matter of convenience. Though if you want a couple locks of my hair, I'd be more than happy to provide them." She grinned, her teeth gleaming white against the purple glow of the Oracle's magic.

The Oracle choked on a sigh. She didn't want the Faerie to detect her annoyance, though she wondered if Phalaena's species exerted effort to be this irritating or if they just exuded vexation naturally. "I suppose the cost will ultimately depend on how you wish to leave this particular meeting," she conceded.

"That depends on you," Phalaena countered. "Technically, I've come back to the moment before I received my disk, so I could simply ask for another one."

"You could. That doesn't mean I would grant you one. You have already had your disk, after all, and made use of it. That means that I provided the service that you paid for."

"Ah, it is true that I did receive a disk, in one version of history. But that history has now been erased. In this version of history, I have no disk, but have already paid my fee. So, if you were to turn me away in this timeline, you would be failing to uphold your end of the bargain. Could you afford a poor review from a Faerie, I wonder? What would the humans think if they knew?"

"Pray, tell me, what is the purpose of this meeting?" the Oracle demanded, sick of her guest's games. "If your intention is to keep returning and demanding new disks so that I may never have a moment of rest, I will gladly endure whatever slander you intend to lob in my direction. A petty revenge it would be, but I would expect no less from one of your kind."

Phalaena chuckled. The sound started low and soft, but quickly grew to burbling laughter. The Oracle half-expected the Faerie to toss her head back and laugh like a maniac, but she managed to rein in her mirth after only a few moments.

"In truth, I came to give you one last chance to change your mind before I took action," Phalaena announced, wiping a stray bit of moisture from the corner of one eye.

The Oracle snorted. "Very well. If it means that much to you, I will reverse the fate of the artist. Then you may inspire her to greatness, and we can all get what we want."

The Faerie smirked. For a moment, the Oracle was certain she had finally reached the heart of the matter, but then the Phalaena shook her head, setting her fiery curls dancing across her shoulders. "It would be a fine start. But no longer enough, I'm afraid. While it's true the modifications surrounding the artist were bold, even for you, and reversing them would set many things to right, I simply cannot allow you to maintain this level of power. Not when you have proven you will only misuse it."

"And who should determine the level of power each being is able to wield, Fae creature? You and your brethren? Should we look at your history of abuses in order to determine your worthiness? You are merely displeased that my magic can undo the effects of yours."

"Every force needs a balance," Phalaena insisted, holding up one finger as if to forestall argument. The Oracle expected her to be at least a little perturbed by the insult lobbed at the Fae court, but her guest was strangely unruffled. In fact, she still seemed smug. "Nature works that way for a reason. So that any force which threatens to unbalance the rest can be reversed in time to maintain equilibrium. Did you think you could weave your tendrils through every possible branch of history and no one would take notice?"

Phalaena pulled something from behind her back, though both her hands had been visible until a moment before and her dress seemed to have no pockets. Certainly none deep enough to hold the object she produced.

The Oracle recognized it instantly. It was a disk like the ones she produced for her clients. And in it, she saw a frozen image of herself reaching toward a newly formed void in the air in front of her.

But this was exactly the disk she had refused to make.

She flung her tendrils through every possible diversion that followed her original meeting, looking for the change to her mind, seeking the creation of this abominable disk. But she had not encountered Phalaena in any other version of history. And when the Faerie did reappear, their conversation was much as it was now. She saw herself granting the Faerie a series of pointless disks that always let her return to this very moment, but nothing else, nothing that could weave a stolen memory onto the fabric of the void.

"Did you think you were the only one with the power to create these?" Phalaena mocked, drawing the Oracle back to the present, anchoring her in a single world. This time, the Faerie's laughter was cruel. "You are a foolish and arrogant creature, aren't you? Everything you'd like to accuse my kind of embodying. But we, at least, understand the importance of limitations. And somewhere out there, in the vastness of the cosmos, is an Oracle who understands how dangerous you have become."

"Wait!" the Oracle cried, lifting one hand, her fingers extended toward the disk. But there was at least ten feet of space between them, and she couldn't possibly rise that quickly.

Besides, the Faerie did not wait. She let the disk slip from her fingers, watching impassively as it fell.

The Oracle shifted her hand so that her palm faced upward. Her magic responded to the desperation of the movement, rippling outward from her position, creating a series of seeking tendrils that grasped for the falling disk.

But this was not how her power worked. She had no ability to manipulate tangible objects. So the disk fell through the glowing appendages and shattered on the floor.

She expected pain. She expected it to tear through her as the magic contained in that tiny fleck of void began to unravel the web she had so painstakingly woven. It was a veritable tapestry by now, containing the whole of history and everything that might have happened had she not tampered with its course. A veritable map of possibilities, each thread representing a life, each knot representing some major event that life might touch.

And as the Oracle watched, those threads loosened and unfurled, losing their cohesion, melting back into the cosmic well from which she had drawn them.

She tried to scream, but the sound froze in her throat. Gentle hands grasped her and drew her downwards, backwards, while all of time swirled around her, fading into an impossible distance.

Then she sat suddenly in front of the ragged knot of roots, reaching for the power that had once surrounded and sustained her. Her eyes were bound by a dirty cloth, and the rough bark of the ancient roots dug into her back. Her clothing was little more than rags, stained by the dirt and mud of the swamp she traversed to reach this place of power.

But though the power spun away from her fingers, leaving her diminished, she recalled the glory of her sanctum with crystal clarity. Memory, at least, had not abandoned her. She could still trace how she had built her empire and where its various roots dug into the fabric of adjacent histories, allowing her to adjust them to her desired pattern. She might not have the power to rebuild in an instant, but she could retrace the path she had taken. Slowly, painstakingly, she could make it better than it was before.

She held all this in her mind as she extended her hand toward the tiny, swirling vortex she had summoned. All she needed to do was reach into its heart and reclaim her power. The future was waiting for her. And this time, no uppity Faerie would keep her from it.

Be careful, a voice whispered in the vaults of her mind. There is a cost for what you desire. A cost far greater than you might wish to pay.

"There is always a cost." The Oracle had known that from the start. She had even divined some of the prices she might have to pay to reach her destination and attempted to compensate for them as her power grew. Humans were strikingly eager to shoulder much of her burden in exchange for a few paltry favors.

But this was different than the first time she had reached for her power. There had been no voice then, no warning, only a bright and glowing path that led to forever.

With a jolt, the Oracle realized this voice did not belong to the Faerie who had come to her

sanctum to mock and jeer.

It was her voice, though it sounded as though it scraped ancient vocal chords.

"The future can be mine," she insisted, her voice impossibly young to her ears. "Every possible permutation, every pitfall, every ideal. I do not have to sit by and watch. I can guide as well!"

Have you any idea what the universe will exact from one with such capabilities? The Knowing alone will drive you insane.

"Not so." All of history had been unfolding beneath her fingertips for thousands of years, and she had always been in perfect control of her mental facilities. "And even if that were the case, it could still be circumvented."

Yet, when she tried to sort through her memories of the future, they terminated at the moment the Faerie dropped her disk. Whatever happened beyond that moment, whatever plans the Oracle had been trying to enact, they were lost to her now.

And if this truly was her voice, spoken through the yawning void of time, how many years had she played with the magic before it finally ate away her core? If she knew, could she stop just before it happened?

Heed my warning, foolish child. It is the only one you will receive. The forces you desire to manipulate cannot be fooled into devouring other souls as payment for your interference. Sooner or later, you must pay the price for the web you weave.

There was a distinct possibility that, in some future the Oracle could no longer connect to, she had come to this horrifying conclusion and, therefore, agreed to aid Phalaena in her conquest. If that were so, she had probably paid with what remained of her life to weave that particular disk. And abandoning her power would certainly be equal to the cost of a chance to live her life over.

But she had not been forced to yield her power. The vortex was still open in front of her, its scintillating stars shining from within the distant void. She could still grasp the power waiting for her, mold it and shape it.

So perhaps there had been no disk. Perhaps there had been no sanctum, no Faerie and no artist. Perhaps this had merely been one potential path, a Vision conjured during the course of the ritual to warn her away from looming disaster.

She had to choose. Ambition? Or Reason?

Surely there must be a balance between the two!

The Oracle drew a deep breath and pushed her hand into the center of the swirling vortex, reaching for power she knew would answer. Ice closed around her fingers and over her wrist, threatening to bite as deep as her bones. But there was warmth beneath those teeth, provided by a series of searching tendrils that would soon be bound to the Oracle's soul for eternity.

She closed her glowing eyes and made her choice.

* * *

"It was as you anticipated, Great Mother," Phalaena proclaimed as she set her hand against the rough bark of the ancient tree. "The Oracle still believes that knowing all possible futures will allow her to change things."

This is often the result of power. The more one gathers, the more they believe they can avoid the rules if only they achieve a deep enough understanding of its natural laws. The voice seemed to flow from nowhere and everywhere at once. It was a whisper on the wind, a breath on the

Faerie's face. Phalaena closed her eyes and let it wash over her.

"Then it will be as you said; she will be trapped in the loop, unable to move forward until she sees the truth."

An imperfect solution, child. But a reprieve of sorts.

"It buys us time," Phalaena agreed. She cast her emerald gaze over her shoulder to observe the tower rising in the distance. Now that the Oracle was absent from her sanctum, it seemed like a massive pillar of obsidian, darker than the night surrounding it and devoid of the lights that flickered in the human city it occupied. It was a silent sentinel, looming over the civilization it was built to control.

The humans who lived at the tower's base wouldn't be able to see the ripples of magic that flowed from the top of the tower. Those dark tendrils flowed backward through time, winding like roots throughout mortal history. A series of bright bands — equally invisible to human eyes — now surrounded and restrained those tentacles, preventing the Oracle from working future manipulations upon history.

All of this, Phalaena viewed through the swirling frame of a Fae portal. Here, in the Great Mother's vale, the wind was soft, the air was sweet and the breeze carried the warmth of spring. She did not hear the sirens and horns that choked the human city's nights, nor did she smell the acrid pollution that choked their skies. Those things waited for her beyond the magical gateway, though she had no wish to pass through it again.

Trapping the Oracle should have been the end of her task but, alas, the Council did not agree with her. They wanted the Oracle eliminated, not merely delayed. Which meant Phalaena needed to unwind the tangle the woman had wrought from the center of her high tower.

"If we cannot fix the mess in a few thousand years, we shall surely grow bored," she murmured, sighing to herself as she turned away.

The wind of the vale shifted, picking up strength, and the Great Mother's gnarled branches bent forward so that several of the soft leaves brushed the edges of Phalaena's cheeks.

Fortune be with you, child. The great voice filled the space around Phalaena before reverberating through her chest. *Be certain you stay alert. Magical workings of this sort are not often what they initially appear. Do not fall into the same trap as your opponent by failing to see the larger picture.*

Phalaena bowed her head to acknowledge the words and show that she would take them to heart. She inhaled deeply one last time, filling her nostrils with the scents of elderberry and honeysuckle. Then she trudged beyond the Great Mother's roots and disappeared through the yawning gap of the gateway into the mortal realm that lay beyond.

Exhibit Four: The Oracle's Opposition

It was hard to believe the very nexus of the universe had come to rest in the uppermost floor of an oversized skyscraper constructed near the edge of the downtown district of a city that wouldn't be at all memorable if it didn't house the Oracle's Sanctuary. Or pit of doom — depending on how one looked at things.

From this height, the city looked like a toy village constructed from tiny grey and black building blocks interspersed with bright splashes of colored light. The people looked like so many ants, frozen in the act of daily living, cluttering the sidewalks and clogging the roadways while they waited for normal reality to resume.

Phalaena wondered if any of them were aware of the disturbance but decided quickly that it didn't matter.

It had taken far less than a few thousand years for her to grow bored of her task. It had, in fact, taken four months.

"They look so helpless with no Fate to guide them," she muttered, her breath fogging the window through which she had been observing the frozen city. "Like so many dolls, waiting for their master to tuck them away."

"Please stop being ostentatious, Phalaena," a second voice sneered from the center of the room. "I can't stand it when you get like this."

Phalaena crumpled her face into a mask of contempt before sticking out her tongue at the reflection of her expression in the fogged glass. It was hard to say who she hated more: humans or Fae. It would be easy to pick a fight at the moment, if only so she would have something to *do*, but it would hardly prove productive. The last thing she wanted was to make fixing this mess take longer. Instead, she flicked her fiery curls off her shoulder and spun to face her companion.

"Have you made any progress, Alstroemeria? Time is *sooo* boring when it isn't moving."

The other Faerie paused to cast Phalaena an acid glare. In contrast to their flamboyant companion, Alstroemeria had pale skin with a slight grey-ish cast, glossy straight black hair, and eyes that carved from chunks of amber. Only their wings — which they almost always kept visible — provided a splash of color. The bright orange and yellow sheens were highlighted by thick dashes of black that cut through the middle. The coloration almost gave the appendages a tiger-like appearance whenever Alstroemeria fluttered them rapidly, as they did now.

"This is not the sort of thing you can expect to snap your fingers and finish. When the Oracle's power dissipates, the tendrils she created will wither, and the changes they made will unravel. At that point, history will correct itself. The veils will be restored, and balance will reassert itself."

"Yes, I'm aware," Phalaena huffed, folding her arms in front of her chest. She began to tap one foot impatiently. "I meant, have you found a way to wrest control of the tangle from the Oracle's grip?"

"The process is tedious," Alstroemeria replied dourly. "I can only work on one tendril at a time, and each has various branching routes like the root system of a tree. We would be moving a little faster if you deigned to help."

Phalaena made the same face she showed her reflection. "There has to be a better way to handle this than slowly chipping away at the Oracle's power one eon at a time." Why hadn't the Council granted her request for greater assistance? If banishing the Oracle meant so much to them, they should want the task finished *now*, not in ten thousand years!

"You know as well as I do there are only two ways to efficiently correct this problem."

Alstroemeria announced each word, making them a series of sharp, staccato beats.

Phalaena resisted the urge to growl. Instead she spun to glare at the clouds frozen in the darkening sky beyond the tower.

Death or discharge. Those were the only forms of recourse. Either the Oracle must agree that she had been foolishly playing with forces well outside her understanding and relinquish control over the power she had spent the last several thousand years amassing. Or she must die.

"I'm starting to think I should have chosen the more expedient method of dealing with this situation," Phalaena muttered under her breath.

But the Great Mother made it clear that death and violence should always be the last resort when she assigned Phalaena this mission. *Think before you act*, she had warned the young Faerie, *because some actions cannot be reversed once taken*.

Phalaena sighed, momentarily obscuring her view through the window.

"Your mother would roll in her grave if she heard you talk like that," Alstroemeria chided, though they had already turned back to their work.

Phalaena stiffened, glad her luxurious curls hid the way the comment made the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. "My mother is the entire reason we're stuck in this mess to begin with," she snarled. Alstroemeria, of all beings, should have known better than to strike such a nerve. "And if the Court weren't so fixated on *families*, we could have handled this *my way*."

Phalaena's area of expertise lay with psychology, not time. In her esteemed opinion, she was the worst possible candidate for dealing with the Oracle. Alstroemeria should have had a small team of their fellows buzzing about the Oracle's tendrils like an army of worker bees, not one cranky upstart ready to break free of the Council's chains once and for all.

Alstroemeria sighed and cast a somewhat apologetic look in their best friend's direction. They must be as tense and frustrated as Phalaena if they were allowing their guilt to show. "I hate to be the one to say it, Phal, but your way often causes more problems than it solves."

This time, Phalaena did growl. She spun away from the window and stalked in a full circle around the confined space before approaching the center where her friend knelt. "At least we would be *doing* something," she snarled. "Something other than watching this endless time loop, waiting for an opportunity to arise. The Oracle doesn't even seem to realize she's been tricked-"

"Of course she doesn't *realize*," Alstroemeria snapped. "That's the whole point of the Great Mother's weaving!"

Phalaena bit the inside of her lip and forced herself to draw three deep breaths before she allowed herself to speak again. "I only meant that I expected there would be more for us to do than serve as caretakers of a frozen world while we wait for the spell to run its course." She chose each word with care, forcing a slightly cheerful tone past her lips so that she wouldn't sound as angry as she felt.

"We haven't even been at this for a year," Alstroemeria insisted, holding both palms in front of them as if begging for a moment of peace. "The Great Mother did say it would take time."

"Time, yes," Phalaena grumbled, stomping across the room to throw herself on the Oracle's abandoned couch. "Everything takes *time*. It will be time to think. That's what she said. I can't help thinking she means time to reflect on past mistakes. As if I'm to be punished for something I didn't even do."

Alstroemeria drew a deep breath and puffed out their chest as if bracing to receive a blow. "Listen, Phal, I know you don't like the Council's decision-"

"I played the role they wanted me to play," Phalaena retorted through clenched teeth. "And

played it well. Why shouldn't that be enough?"

After all, it wasn't the Fae Council that bound her to this mess, though their word was law as far as every Fae creature was concerned. Her mother was to blame. If she hadn't gone and shared Faerie secrets with the Oracle, none of them would have to deal with this tangle.

Alstroemeria slid to their feet, brushed the dust from their knees and glided across the room to sit on the cushion beside Phalaena's. They lifted one delicate, long-fingered hand and placed it on their best friend's shoulder. Their eyes exuded a soft golden glow, meant to project a sense of calm. "Even if you could leave this place, where would you go? The only unaffected chunk of reality is the Fae Court, and you know as well as I do that things are hardly any better there. The Council would never have acted if their situation hadn't been dire. You know their own best interests are their top concern."

Even among Faeries, their rulers' tempers were legendary.

"Their hand would have been forced eventually, since one of their own made the critical mistake," Phalaena protested. "Still, I don't know what anyone expects me to do anymore. I found the key to interrupting the Oracle's work because it once belonged to my mother. But they had only the one interaction, which leaves me nothing to leverage and the wrong kind of magic for the rest of the task."

The friends sat in silence for several minutes listening to the steady hum of power as it radiated from the center of the room. They might have sat there a small, immeasurable eternity, since time was not actually moving. But the Faeries' innate sense of time warned Phalaena only a few tangible minutes had passed before Alstroemeria opened her mouth to speak.

"Perhaps we are going about this all wrong," they admitted, shaking her head. "The Great Mother would not have set you this task if she did not trust you were equal to it. She would have sent one of the elders, and they would have had no choice but to listen."

"Perhaps," Phalaena muttered, but only because she could not speak ill of the Great Mother without whom none of them would exist.

Alstroemeria squeezed her shoulder. "Perhaps she does, indeed, mean for you to handle this your way. After all, you have never been known to stay idle for long. And if your thoughts draw you constantly in a particular direction..." Alstroemeria shrugged helplessly.

Phalaena grinned, mirth momentarily bubbling free of her chest. But her good humor faded quickly. "I wish it were so, Alstro. But as I have said, I have already exhausted my leverage if the drawing of blood is completely off the table."

"Do not be so quick to dismiss the role you are meant to play," Alstroemeria insisted, doing an excellent impression of the Great Mother's voice. "Perhaps your mother left you more to work with than you realize. Or perhaps all you need to do is trust yourself. After all, you outplayed the Oracle once. Maybe all you need to do is get back into her head."

"Wouldn't I love to!" Phalaena barked a laugh. "But if the Oracle refuses to listen to herself, why would she ever listen to me?"

Alstroemeria tilted their head to one side, spilling their dark black hair over their shoulder while they considered the question. Then they nodded as if they had come to some sage understanding. "The Oracle is determined to give herself a choice, for obvious reasons. You, on the other hand, are under no such obligation."

Phalaena opened her mouth to respond, but her snappy retort died on the tip of her tongue.

Maybe she had been overthinking this all along. Maybe the direct path and a few not so subtle threats were all she needed to achieve success. And if she was wrong, at least cleaning up her own mess would give her something to do. Something she couldn't really complain about.

Besides, if memory was the fulcrum of both understanding and control, at least she had something to work with.

"Alstroemeria? You're a genius!" Phalaena proclaimed. She leaned back, made a grand show of cracking her knuckles in front of her, then leapt to her feet. While her stunned friend was still trying to make sense of what just happened, she leaned down and planted a light kiss on Alstroemeria's pale cheek. Then she vanished in a puff of lavender-scented breeze.

Exhibit Five: The Oracle's Ambition

Phalaena folded her arms to her sides and used the momentum of her fall to slingshot her body through the swirl beyond the vortex she entered in the Oracle's tower. Her feet kicked behind her, propelling her through an invisible sea, driving her ever forward while she scanned her surrounds.

Moving through the cosmic void was like swimming, though there was no moisture and little air. Rather than delving into some great crevasse or floating on giant thermals, Phalaena plunged through time. Events surrounded her, visible only briefly before they spun into the distance, waiting to happen or long since passed.

Faces appeared and vanished so rapidly, Phalaena couldn't have identified them if she tried. Voices whispered all around her, sometimes drowned by screams or cries, but always fading as she plunged deeper into the tangle.

She had far to go, and she couldn't be distracted by the possibilities represented in the bright flashes surrounding her. Yet Phalaena found herself scanning the images for familiar faces — faces she had come to know as a result of her hunt.

These were no random events, after all. These were the Oracle's victims, the innocent souls who shattered the discs she gave into their care in hopes of finding better lives. Divergent outcomes passed so quickly, the buzz became a roar and the roar a cacophony that threatened to drive Phalaena mad. Yet she persisted, gritting her teeth as she held the images she sought in her mind.

Her mother may not have provided her with the insight required to finish her task; but the Oracle must hold it somewhere in the vast store of her knowledge. All Phalaena had to do was find it.

At last, she caught a flash of bright eyes and a wide grin as a hand slid across canvas, leaving a bright splash of color behind. Bethany hadn't been the worst of the Oracle's crimes, but her fate struck a chord in Phalaena's cold, black heart.

Bethany had been an artist. She had seen the world a particular way. Perhaps her flaw had been that she could only see the world that way and no other. It had never occurred to her that the Oracle might send her to a world different from the one she wanted. Art didn't concern itself with cause and effect, after all, outside of how mixing certain words or colors might strike the eye or ear.

Bethany had taken all the pieces of her life she hadn't liked and re-written them in her head, sketching them into a masterpiece that should have eclipsed all other possibilities. She had believed in a world where love at first sight could be real. Where logic and money could support passion. Where one successful artist could lift others out of gloom with a helping hand.

In exchange, the Oracle had turned her into the CEO of a fortune five hundred company. Drained of color and exuberance, Bethany had been condemned to a world of grey, to a life where all her choices had been stripped away, leaving her little more than a prisoner of fate.

The Faerie Council had done exactly the same thing to Phalaena. For her mother's crimes, her own ambitions had been extinguished, at least until she could exonerate her family name. In the fae world, blood ties could not be escaped. Power bound power, and the two strongest types of power lay in blood and names.

Bethany's art evaporated around Phalaena as she gained speed, plummeting ever faster into the distant past.

The artist's dreams weren't the only ones the Oracle devoured. It wasn't just economic

progress and medical cures she reversed. No, the Oracle's crimes were far worse. She had toppled entire civilizations into dust in order to achieve her ideal vision of the future, one that allowed her to sink the tendrils of her power into every aspect of cultural development.

Had some of those grand empires survived, the level of human technology in this world might have soared beyond belief. They might have long since reached the stars, built grand palaces among the void and discovered a few secrets of the universe.

But the Oracle simply couldn't allow that to happen. Because as soon as humanity moved beyond the cradle of her influence, history would be beyond her ability to manipulate. She would be trapped like the rest of them, forced to accept things as they occurred, forced to work around the ambitions and desires of those she considered beneath her.

Phalaena would gladly crush her for Bethany, and everyone like Bethany, who had been punished for simply wanting a second chance.

For it was those who used the disks the Oracle punished most. That was the most insidious of her deceptions. The Oracle suggested ruminating on the use of her gifts, not because she wanted people to make wise decisions, because she wanted to populate the material plain with tiny pieces of her power.

The more memories people devoted to the Oracle, the deeper her Vision could penetrate the universe. The deeper she Saw, the more possible historical permutations she gained access to. The wider her reach, the more she could manipulate outcomes, unweaving the rightful tapestry of the universe and reforming it according to her selfish desires.

Great spires rose around Phalaena as she began to spin. Bright light filled her vision, and she saw ancient civilizations offer tithes to the Oracle in exchange for dominion over their enemies, rather than developing technologies that would have allowed them to advance without intervention.

Humanity grew small and scattered, their settlements less numerous than their magical brethren. Here, in the deep mists of time, the Oracle's captured moments became few and far between. There were only a dozen present at one time, often less than that.

Here, in the early years of her power, the Oracle had been weak, barely able to See beyond her current location or the people she interacted with for long periods of time. These were probably the gravest of her travesties, because she had to actively mislead her victims for years at a time before sinking her invisible claws deep enough to twist their lives.

Had Phalaena been trying to penetrate the true heart of the universe, the center of the vortex would have contained the birth of everything, a spectacle that even her advanced brain was incapable of fully comprehending. But because she was descending through the power of the Oracle — a pale imitation of the universe at large — she stopped well short of the dawn of time.

At last, the image she sought took form. The image that once inhabited her disk. The one that made the Oracle quiver with fear.

There was Phalaena's hated enemy, dressed in mud-stained rags, her eyes bound by a simple, threadbare cloth. A crack hung in the air across from her, its contents darker than the deepest darkness.

Beyond that hole in reality, something powerful swirled and slithered, its dark power seeping through the edges of the crack, inviting the Oracle to reach within and seize it.

Be careful, a serpentine voice hissed from the depths. *There is a cost for what you desire. A cost far greater than you might wish to pay.*

"The future can be mine," the Oracle protested, her voice impossibly young, almost innocent. "Every possible permutation, every pitfall, every ideal. I do not have to sit by and

watch. I can guide as well!"

Have you any idea what the universe will exact from one with such capabilities? The Knowing alone will drive you insane, the rough voice insisted with a desperation that made Phalaena cringe.

Heed my warning, foolish child, the voice went on, warping and twisting as Phalaena approached, until it sounded like an old woman instead of a snake. *It is the only one you will receive. The forces you desire to manipulate cannot be fooled into devouring other souls as payment for your interference. Sooner or later, you must pay the price for the web you weave.*

This was the loop in which Phalaena trapped the Oracle, the moment she and the Great Mother were trying to change.

This was a choice the Oracle gave herself. A version of the Oracle, at any rate, a tired old crone who was all too willing to fulfill Phalaena's request to produce a disk from her procured memory. With the mother tree's power to reach between worlds, it hadn't taken long to find a future version of the Oracle eager to change her path through history.

Now the young Oracle had to decide between walking her original path, persisting with the tangled web she created, or abandoning the ambition that would ultimately lead to her ruin.

Allowing history to resume its natural course would release the young Oracle from the Great Mother's roots. She could live the years still available to her any way she chose.

But this moment could not last for eternity. Sooner or later, if the Oracle could not be swayed, she would learn how to break free. Then they would be right back where they started with this mess.

The Oracle on the other side of the void, the one that spoke from the future, was bound to give her younger self a chance to escape her self-made prison. She had to hope youth and vitality could give way to wisdom if only the proper message was conveyed. It was the only way for her to escape her madness and forge a better life.

But the Oracle had given no such leniency to the rest of her victims, and Phalaena hadn't come to reason with her. If she killed the Oracle, she could break the cycle. History would fix itself, and *she* would be free to live the life *she* desired. Because only eliminating the Oracle would clear the taint from her mother's name, allowing Phalaena to escape the shame caused by her actions.

Phalaena summoned a sword of pure energy. Her magic was easy to access here in the heart of the Fae realm. She gripped the shimmering hilt tightly between both hands and raised the blade even as the Oracle lifted her hand and plunged it into the depths of the void.

"The resolution we seek is too important," the young Oracle declared as ice began to form along her fingers. "We cannot be turned aside. We cannot falter."

Phalaena loosed her sword, carving a graceful arc downward. The speed and momentum should carry through most of the Oracle's body, cleaving her nearly in two.

But just as the blade reached the edge of the Oracle's flowing hair, a bright flash surrounded them both. Phalaena fumbled, her blade suddenly heavy and awkward as she tried to shield her eyes with her elbow.

The blade didn't bite hair, skull or flesh. Instead, the Oracle vanished, and so did the crack in reality.

"You cannot steal the soul, child," a familiar voice proclaimed. *"Only it's memory."*

Blinking, Phalaena lowered her arm and tried to regain her bearings. The swamp was gone. In its place stood a rushing river. On one side of the river stood the young oracle, her eyes unbound and full of tears.

On the other side of the river stood a woman Phalaena hadn't seen more than a thousand years. A woman of such grace and beauty, Phalaena had never been able to forget her, no matter how hard she tried.

Her wings were massive, marking her stature among the Faeries. They glittered every shade of gold, orange and yellow, their markings highlighted by thin lines of darkest black. She was like a monarch butterfly, glorious beneath even the dimmest illumination. Her hair was red at the roots and black at the tips. It fell in a waterfall of curls to her knees. Her eyes were a color Phalaena still couldn't name, halfway between green and gold, sometimes flecked with rich amber swirls.

She extended her arm across the river and its girth seemed to shrink so that the two women stood on opposite shores of a babbling brook. Her fingers brushed the tears from the young Oracle's cheeks and, where they touched, they left sparks of purple light.

"If the memory is written upon the essence of the universe," the young Oracle stammered, "then the fate of my village can still be changed?"

"Perhaps," Phalaena's mother murmured, soft and kind even to one who would prove so cruel. "If one could find the power to reach backward, that is. Forward is easy, you see. Forward is pure potential, which makes nearly everything possible.

"Backward, though... Backward is set. That makes it difficult to convince the universe to rearrange its memories, especially if you didn't have your fingers in them to start with."

Phalaena blinked again, and her breath lodged in her throat. She wanted to scream, wanted to charge into the center of the scene and prevent it from ever taking place. Because the words her mother spoke next were the words that damned them both.

But this was merely a memory of a time even the Oracle could not reach. And Phalaena's flailing arms passed harmlessly through air, water and women alike no matter how hard she clawed.

Purple-tinged tears raked the young Oracle's cheeks as the tiny dots of light left by Phalaena's mother's hands began to seep into the whites of her eyes. The light trailed like blood veins toward the Oracle's pupils. The moment they reached them, her fate — and Phalaena's — would be set.

"But it can be done?" the distraught young woman pressed.

Phalaena's mother answered, "Nothing is impossible if you're patient enough, child. But you would have to go forward to find the strength. And the farther forward you go, the farther back it will be, and that will make the task difficult indeed."

The Oracle formed fists at her sides even as the last details of her irises disappeared into the purple glow. "They must know what happened here," she snarled with more acid than Phalaena had ever heard. "The Fae court's actions cannot be allowed to stand."

"Wha-?" Phalaena started, but her voice had no more substance than her arms or legs.

Not that she needed to ask. As the Oracle's eyes blazed with stolen power, the insubstantial ground slid from beneath Phalaena's feet. She tumbled into the darkness of unknown history, unable to orient herself enough to trace the years.

She was still traveling the Oracle's memories, entranced by the thoughts filling her head the moment she reached through the void to claim her power. The flashes were far more frantic than the ones Phalaena passed after entering the time tangle. But since there were fewer of them, they were easier to piece into a coherent whole.

What she found when she strung the events into liner order made her blood run cold.

This had to be the Oracle's Vision; one of her first.

Phalaena saw a white-haired woman with tears coating her cheeks running through a dark wood. Behind her followed a smaller figure, wide-eyed and confused. The girl nearly faltered, but the woman helped her navigate the rough terrain. They paused in front of a massive tree, which the first woman parted with words of power long since lost to time. She pressed the girl into the open space. The girl screamed as the hole in the bark knit back together, concealing her.

Then Phalaena saw the destruction. The remains of houses scattered across the ground. The scorch marks and ashes. The bodies.

How it happened, she could guess. Because she had seen destruction like this before. Ruthlessly efficient. Almost bureaucratic.

The Fae court's specialty.

And suddenly she understood the one thing that had never made sense, no matter how she tried to reconcile what she knew of her mother with her position among the court.

She had betrayed her people, yes.

But only because they had betrayed the universe first.

Exhibit Six: The Oracle's Alliance

"You lied to me." Phalaena's voice echoed through the grand chamber, bounced off every smooth surface and ricocheted back to her ears. Her outrage lingered in the air like fungal spores waiting to infect the first person who dared open their mouth to refute her claim.

In front of her, on a high platform decorated by each of their family banners, sat the Faerie Council, the most powerful Fae creatures to grace the realms, mortal or otherwise. These were the judges of magical creatures great and small. They decided how the Fae should interact with the individuals who occupied each realm. They signed contracts into law and determined when those laws had been breached. They also decreed punishments for said breaches.

They were the people who sent her to deal with the Oracle in order to clean her mother's stain on the court — otherwise *her* banner would have hung near the center of the far wall where only tattered golden rags hung from a sad rod of birch.

The faces that stared down at her wore a mix of varying expressions. Some were outraged. Some were startled. Many were annoyed. All but one seemed too flabbergasted to offer a response.

"Excuse me?" the woman sitting near the center of the group demanded. Her tone was curt, her voice high-pitched. Her eyes were so black it was hard to determine where she might be looking, but Phalaena could feel the weight of her gaze. This was Sibirica, the high advisor of the Faerie king and queen, the Voice of the council, one of the most powerful beings in existence.

In their natural forms, faeries could be whatever they wished. The soft breath of a breeze on a bright summer day. The glaring blaze of the sun at its zenith. The sizzling jolt of a lightning strike or the gentle motion of a leaf drifting toward the ground. But when they gathered to interact with each other — or mortal creatures, for that matter — they often chose their form according to their favored element, plant, animal, insect or season.

Sibirica's humanoid form featured frost-toned skin highlighted by veins of deepest purple that almost seemed to glow beneath her outer flesh. Her hair was white as snow with icy blue highlights at the tips. Her expression was so frigid, it almost made Phalaena shiver.

Phalaena had always favored fire herself. She liked that it was wild, it heeded no rules but the ones it could forge and it always devoured whatever tried to stand in its path. She lifted her chin, letting that fire flash in her eyes as her flaming curls cascaded over her shoulders and down her back. She curled her long-nailed fingers into fists and allowed her outrage to tremble through her bronze-skinned limbs.

"You heard me," she hissed. "You said my mother betrayed the Council and I needed to answer for it."

"She did," another member of the council replied primly. This speaker was a man with a long, thin torso, forest green skin and straight, flowing blond hair. Fraxinus was his formal name, and Phalaena hated him. "She granted Fae magic to a mortal and taught them how to use it," Fraxinus went on. "An act expressly forbidden without a direct mandate from the Council."

Phalaena bit the inside of her lip. "She only shared her power because *you* slaughtered hundreds of innocent mortals and she happened upon the results."

The silence that followed this revelation was spiked with a sense of ignorant denial rather than the nervous anticipation summoned by her initial declaration. It was as if everyone in the room would rather file out and disappear than answer the accusation.

A few members of the Council exchanged glances, and Phalaena got the impression they were ill at ease.

But there were no murmurs of surprised outrage like she expected. No one sitting the seats behind her waiting for their audience or recording the proceedings for posterity shot to their feet and demanded to know if she spoke truth.

Did *everyone* know about the Council's treachery? Was she truly the last to know?

"That slaughter was necessary," Sibirica announced curtly. "The stars warned that they were going to produce an Oracle, and that could not be allowed. Oracles are dangerous, as you have seen for yourself."

Phalaena scoffed. "The Oracle was born as a direct result of your meddling!" This did summon a few of the hoped-for murmurs, but Phalaena didn't have time to wonder whether or not she was swaying the crowd in her favor. "My mother gave her magic to the Oracle specifically to erase the damage you caused. She was a child, frightened and alone, and my mother was just trying to help her! If you had left the mortals alone, none of this ever would have happened."

"You cannot know that for certain," Fraxinus sneered.

"But I do," Phalaena snarled. "I dove into the time stream. The Oracle isn't trying to shape the future — that has *never* been her goal. She's trying to rewrite the past."

"A law that is equally dire should it ever be violated," a twig-shaped man insisted with a flutter of his dry, crackling wings.

"The Oracle's intentions matter not," Sibirica insisted, slamming her hands against the desk in front of her. "Either way, she must be eliminated. Strike while she is trapped in her indecisive loop. Your mother failed the task, so it falls to you. That is why the Great Mother named you."

"No," Phalaena replied, stamping her foot to emphasize the single word.

"Excuse me?" the royal advisor spat. She dipped her chin, then lifted it again, obviously giving Phalaena a once over, silently asking who this upstart thought she was.

"I no longer believe the Great Mother named me to this task to wash away my mother's sin and make clean my bloodline. I believe the Great Mother summoned me to manage the Oracle because she knew I would reject your *bullshit* mission! The Great Mother wishes me to finish what my mother started by reversing the stain you spilled across time's tapestry!" She had almost said as much during their last meeting.

At last, dramatic gasps filled the space behind her, followed by a growing buzz of chatter. More than one voice asked, *has she lost her mind?* But rather than shrink at the judgment leveled in her direction, Phalaena used it to bolster her resolve.

This was why the Great Mother had chosen her, after all.

"Time was my mother's specialty," she continued without giving the Council — or anyone else — a chance to respond. "And despite objections, she passed everything she learned onto me." Phalaena set her hand against her chest. "When she set the Oracle in motion, she would have known intrinsically that affecting something backward through time requires far more power than affecting the future." A small sprinkle of dust was all it would have taken, after all, to give the child the ability to see beyond tomorrow.

"The Oracle's tangle is deep," Fraxinus interrupted. His voice was low and almost seemed to rumble through his chest. "If she were to escape the time loop, she could upset the universe's balance."

"Because she stands on the precipice of completing her task," Phalaena countered, jutting her jaw outward in another act of defiance. "If she unleashed the full force of her power now, she might just have enough to undo your slaughter of her family." Striking the Oracle dead would merely return their timeline to the moment the Oracle set her magic in motion. From then on,

time would move unfettered, impossible to manipulate or divert.

But if Phalaena provided the Oracle with the extra bit of magic she needed before madness claimed her — as the Great Mother warned was coming — the child could unravel the event that haunted both of them.

"You must *not*, Phalaena," Sibirica pleaded as she shot to her feet. "Time must be allowed to pursue its *natural* course."

"You mean the course *you* determined it should take," Phalaena retorted. "Need I remind you that leaving that poor village in peace would have meant never having to deal with this problem in the first place?"

Time travel was starting to give her a headache.

"You do not understand," Sibirica insisted, her tone halfway between outraged and exasperated. "You do not have *all* the information. An Oracle was not the only danger that village posed. There are reasons we meddle."

"And we have always meddled," the low, deep base of a barrel-shaped faerie added. "It is why we are here, why our abilities allow us to traverse the root system that connects all worlds. Without us, the universe would devolve into chaos."

"Why should we exercise the power we proclaim blasphemous for mortals?" Phalaena demanded. After all, when she asked the Oracle what gave her the right to meddle, she turned the question right back on Phalaena. At the time, Phalaena had not cared to answer but, now, she would very much like to hear an answer herself. "What gives us the right?"

"Our nature," the royal advisor replied with an icy smirk. "We were born from the ashes of the universe to keep it in proper alignment. If not that, what purpose are we meant to serve?"

"Who says anyone is ever meant to serve a purpose?" Phalaena exploded. Her temper was like a tripwire now, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could maintain her composure. She fluttered her wings at her back and allowed them to carry her high enough that she was at eye-level with the Council.

"The stars?" she sneered. "Do they proclaim our course? Is everything set before we're ever born? Is that why we sit here in this grand chamber," she waved at the walls and high ceiling surrounding her, "discussing the affairs of mortals as if they were a garden to be uprooted and replanted?"

"This is how it has *always* been, Phalaena!" Sibirica screamed, her eyes flashing with inner light that revealed her pupils at long last. She was practically frothing at the mouth.

"And that makes it right?" Phalaena clenched her fists tighter, driving the sharp points of her nails into her palms. "The Great Mother says that if we do not question, we will never learn."

"You wish to break the course of destiny?" the twig-shaped councilor demanded. "Yet you believe the Great Mother set you on this course. Does that not contradict your act of rebellion?"

"No," Phalaena replied, her tone flat. "The Great Mother chose me for this task so that I would solve the problem *my* way. If she wanted someone who would tow your line, she would have chosen someone she knew would make that choice."

Circular logic — one of the Fae court's favorites!

The Fae Council exchanged glances. Some of them actually looked desperate. Their lips moved, though their words didn't reach Phalaena's ears.

At last, the royal advisor pinned her with a frigid glare. "You will be exiled," she said softly. "Before you are even born, you will be a traitor to your people. Is that what you desire?"

"I'm not sure I want to be part of a group that condones the cold-blooded slaughter of innocents." Phalaena shrugged. It was the same conclusion her mother had obviously reached.

Sibirica clenched her fists and unleashed a cry of frustration. "Headstrong child! You are worse than your mother! Do not do this. You *will* regret it."

"You cannot steal my soul," Phalaena replied.

Ignoring the Council's gasps, Phalaena spread her arms wide and stilled her wings. As she fell backward, she activated the magic that would carry her out of the Council chamber and winked out of existence. She *felt* the very particles of her being dissolve as they allowed the physical parts of the universe to pass between them.

She rode that gentle wave of energy to the place where she would finally finish her task.

Exhibit Seven: The Oracle's Dilemma

"Heed my warning, foolish child. The forces you desire to manipulate cannot be fooled into devouring other souls as payment for your interference. Sooner or later, you must pay the price for the web you weave."

The voice was hers, speaking across the vast gulf of time. And no matter how she tried to deflect it, tried to turn it aside from its mad crusade, it would not leave her be.

The Oracle was not foolish. She knew the Faerie had trapped her in a loop, to buy time, perhaps, or to turn her away from her course. Each time she tried to reach past the vortex to return to her tower and her weavings, the universe seemed to shatter around her, reforming the same moment, returning to the first time she stared into the cosmic vortex.

This was the very instant the Oracle accepted her powers and the task that came along with them. So she would not be turned aside, not even by herself.

No one else had the power to shift time, so she must be trapped in a powerful space. *A Fae space, more than likely.* The Fae could pass between realms with the ease that mortal creatures breathed. They had portals stashed throughout their homeland, but they had also sewn the magic elsewhere, creating liminal gateways disguised as rings, doorways or gas stations.

If the Oracle focused far enough inward, she could still feel her connection to her sanctuary, to the shadow tendrils that wove through time. If she sent her mind careening along them, she could follow their twists in any direction. They couldn't take her back to her tower — something prevented that. But they might be able to take her to her destination, if only she could reach far enough.

"Infernal child, why do you not listen?" her voice growled, burbling from some distant, inescapable future. *"Do you not care that madness awaits you at the end of this road? Madness you cannot possibly hope to escape?"*

The Oracle made a soft sound as she abandoned her probe. No matter how much power she threw into her search, she was still inches short of where she needed to touch. She simply could not reach far enough back. Not without another set of memories to sacrifice.

And she could not use her own or she would also lose the path.

God forsaken Faerie! Why couldn't you wait one more month?

Humans were always hungry for change — for the idea of it, anyway. They liked to imagine possibilities, and they didn't care what it cost to achieve them. Every time they fed the fullness of their memory into the Oracle's well, she inched one step closer to her ultimate goal.

Though it was never enough. Two thousand years and she still could not find the key that would break the last barrier.

"You understood once," she snarled, glaring at the twisted, wrinkled version of her visage that hovered in the center of the magical vortex. "When you were tasked to change the past, you did not turn aside. Else you would not be able to speak with me now."

"Mind the cost, child! Surely you have witnessed enough to know it will not be mild. The rending of the universe's structure is exacting, to say nothing of its rearrangement."

"Let the Fae pay the price of it," the Oracle sniffed. "They are at fault. I was but a child when they came for my village, as innocent as it is possible to be. Surely whatever cosmic arbiter sits at the center of such conflict will side with me."

A soft, disgusted sound issued from the center of the vortex. *"If the Universe were fair, it might be so. But there is no arbiter. There are only the forces that keep the universe spinning. You may choose to walk away, to build a future for yourself. Or you may choose the madness"*

that lies at the end of success. There is no way to spare both the village and yourself. For all my years of trying, I have never found the way. And now the magic that sustains me has begun to fail."

There *should* be a way! There *must* be. If only she had but a trace more power, enough to buffer her mind before she re-ordered the long span of years between the slaughter of her village and the future the universe was originally supposed to spawn...

"What you wish to achieve is theoretically possible," a familiar voice announced, but it also summoned a pang of rage from the depths of the Oracle's gut. She spun and narrowed her eyes as a figure emerged from the darkness into her view. A soft glow surrounded Phalaena, illuminating her bronze skin and fiery curls. A pair of butterfly wings fluttered at her back, then vanished as her feet came to rest on apparently solid ground. Her arms, which were spread wide, fell to her sides and she bowed her head, seeming somehow contrite.

"Why come you to the heart of your prison?" the Oracle snapped. "Have you not mocked me enough already?"

In this place of magic, she had no reason to shield her eyes. Her hair did not form the blindfold, allowing the full force of her magic to blaze from her eye sockets. To an outside observer, they would look like tears in the fabric of reality. Holes that offered a glimpse of the vast, swirling depth that made up the heart of the universe. A place where lightning and magic played tag, flashing and glowing, their brilliance never actually fading.

But as the Oracle anticipated, the Faerie wasn't fazed by the vision. She blinked her amber eyes slowly, as if startled by the strength of the Oracle's venom.

"I have uncovered the truth the Fae Council tried to hide, the purpose that lies at the heart of your meddling. I know you want to save innocents from slaughter, and I believe that you should be free to do so. If you will allow me, I will assist you. I believe I have the power you require to bridge the final gap."

The Oracle barked a laugh. What a sad irony that one Faerie realized far too late the error of her peoples' way and offered a meaningless sacrifice to her blazing pyre. "If you have seen the truth, then you must realize that I knew your mother. *You* can no more reach that distant shore than I because *you* did not live and, therefore, your magic would not have been active."

If only she had discovered her abilities a week sooner! If they stirred within her *before* the Faerie Council descended on her village, she could easily have gone back to challenge them without waiting thousands of years. She could have done it over and over until she found the right path without having to wait until every star in the universe reached the perfect alignment.

If I could rewrite but a single line in the universe's memory, all would be well. What a cruel trick of fate that it is written on a page in a book too high on the shelf for my limbs to extend.

"Not so," Phalaena countered calmly. Her voice started the Oracle from her thoughts. The Faerie waited until the Oracle turned her glowing, flashing gaze in her direction to speak again. "My mother was pregnant the day the attack took place."

The Oracle opened her mouth to snarl a retort, but the words died on her lips. Could the key to her victory have been locked within her singular ally all along?

If only the Fae Council hadn't put her to death. But of course, they needed to hide the depths of their crime.

"Forgive me," the Oracle said softly, bowing her head so her odd eyes were veiled from Phalaena's view. "She never mentioned you. I only found out that she had a child because-"

"They delayed her sentence until I was born, yes." Phalaena curled her lip with disgust. "I'm aware. What you fail to realize is that she transferred her memory of your awakening to me while

I remained in her womb, prematurely awakening my powers. The Council believed she affected this transfer so that I would be able to cleanse her sin — as they put it — which is why they assigned me the task of dealing with you."

For a moment, words fled the Oracle's mind. In her long existence, she had but one creature she considered a friend — this Faerie's mother. Had it not been for the gentle kindness of her benefactor, the Oracle might have lost complete faith in the concept of virtue. But that friendship had been cruelly stolen from her a few years after it formed. Recalling those circumstances tore open old wounds that had never fully healed, merely festered in the darkness beyond her consideration.

"Even so," she managed at last, forcing words past the thick lump of emotion that filled her throat, "if your powers awakened after the fact, you will be stymied by the same barrier that prevents me from moving backward. Power calls to power, but if your power was not present—"

"But it would have been," the Faerie insisted, a thin smirk crossing her lips. "Faeries are inherently magical, after all. If I feed the full force of my current power into you, you will be able to find the spark that lived in my mother's belly on the day of the attack. But the most important factor of our cooperation would be that I could reverse the process she used to feed me her memories so that she would be aware of your need."

"And she would come rushing to my aid!" The Oracle's jaw fell open as she marveled at the simplicity of the solution. If the Fae was the focus of the spell, then the price could be shared. The consequence she had so long dreaded, so long tried to avoid, might be nullified. And she would not need to rearrange a large chunk of history, only a small pocket.

"*This solution is not without risk,*" the older Oracle insisted. The younger Oracle had almost forgotten about her.

"Sacrificing my present should fulfill the universe's price," Phalaena snapped, evidently as annoyed by the protest as the Oracle herself. "After all, if my mother convinced the Council, she wouldn't have to defy them. My entire life will be different."

"*Different for the better,*" the older Oracle insisted. "*The universe demands a balance of consequences, or shifting its tides would be easy.*"

The Oracle closed her eyes. She didn't see darkness behind her eyelids anymore — hadn't for thousands of years. But there was a stillness in the swirling plane that engulfed her.

Life — and ultimately the universe — was defined by choices. Where each branching path led could always be traced to definitive crossroads, the sort that didn't intersect other pathways.

The Oracle could reject Phalaena's offer, return to her tower sanctum and continue gathering the memories of mortals to increase her powers. She could wait another thousand years, or two or three, until she found a way to unweave the massive tangle set at the center of her desires.

Or she could accept the completion of her task, restore the lives that were stolen, and gamble on her personal outcome. If she could somehow satisfy the universe with a personal sacrifice, her mind might be spared the brunt of the blow.

And if she could not...

"This is a risk I have to take," the Oracle announced, sliding to her feet. "But we must first escape the prison you have woven." She peered at the Faerie pointedly. "Can you dispel it?"

"No need," Phalaena replied with another self-indulgent grin. "This place is wrapped in the roots of the mother tree. I believe she assigned this task to me because she was trying to help me understand the truth. If the Great Mother wants you to succeed, she will not bar our passage into the past. She may even help us, though I have no idea if it will spare you from the potential consequences. For all I know, this transfer is just as likely to wreck my mind or body as it is to

damage yours."

Somehow, the Oracle doubted that. If the Fae Council's precious tree intended to participate in their ritual, it was likely to protect its chosen representative. Not to mention that a mother's body was designed to protect a growing child in every possible way. For Faeries, that probably included magical malady.

But this was still her best chance to complete her task without spending the rest of her life suffering for the attempt. She would simply have to trust her fate to the same ultimate power everyone else did — even if she wasn't particularly thrilled by the idea.

"Let us be swift," she suggested, extending her hand to the Faerie, "before either of us has too much time to think about what we are doing."

Phalaena nodded and even began to extend her hand before she paused.

Because of course there must be some catch. There always was with Faeries.

"What is it?" the Oracle demanded, retracting her hand and planting it on her hip. "What price do you demand in exchange for your help?"

"Only that you surrender your power when the task is complete," Phalaena replied. "This was the Fae Council's purpose. If your village survives and you never rise to power, their ultimate desire will be fulfilled. There will be no need for anyone to act."

"I will have no need of my power if my village survives," the Oracle spat. "It was the Fae that caused this tangle, not I. And besides... the universe will no doubt demand my power in exchange for the change." It was the very least of her expectations.

"Then we are in agreement?" Phalaena asked, her voice hard and cold.

The Oracle sighed. "Yes. I suppose we are."

This time they lifted their hands in unison. There was a slight moment of hesitation on both sides as their flesh began to mingle. Then they both tightened their grip with equal resolve.

* * *

Phalaena couldn't pretend looking into the tears where the Oracle's eyes should be didn't shake her to the core. Beyond the lids that once held the woman's eyes, the magic of the cosmos danced and swirled. Looking into that miasma was like looking into the heart of the universe. If reality had a surface, a substance it was made from, this was certainly it.

Now that their deal was struck, a swirl of emotions filled Phalaena's chest. If her mother had been on the Oracle's side, she should have been able to trust that from the start. She hadn't known her mother well, but she had been a kind soul. The Council called her a *bleeding heart*, but Phalaena realized now that much of what the Council told her about her mother was designed to brainwash her into taking their side of the conflict. After all, she had been so blinded by the idea that her mother was a traitor whose actions reflected negatively — and unfairly — on her, that she never stopped to consider *why* her mother did what she did.

Phalaena had always been determined to clear her family name so she could rise to lofty heights. She never cared about forging a connection with her absent mother, who she viewed largely as a thorn in her side. And she saw now that too had been the Council's aim, to turn her into a *good little Faerie who listened to what she was told*.

Now that she knew the truth, now that she saw her mother's treason as an act of compassion, Phalaena was furious. She wanted nothing more than to stick it to those stuck-up members of the Council, though she knew her mother would ultimately have to sway them rather than fight them.

It's all about giving her the right weapons.

The trouble with forcing the Oracle to abstain from her abilities was they would only get one shot at this. If they failed, the Oracle might take up her mantle a second time, but Phalaena didn't trust that she would once again find the answer to the Council's deceit, even with the Great Mother involved.

Please guide us, she pleaded silently to the tangle of roots surrounding the small well of power that held the Oracle and the mirror that looked on an alternate version of her. *Lest we all end up mad for our efforts.*

"Are you ready?" she asked, still tightly grasping her companion's hand.

The Oracle nodded, then lowered her eyes, making it easier for Phalaena to think. She gathered her power, focusing it into the contact she maintained with the Oracle. She closed her eyes, letting her power suffuse her completely, her mind consumed with a singular task.

She must *show* her mother the results of the Council's actions. If the Council knew that their attack birthed an Oracle *before* they gathered, this disastrous future might be averted. But Phalaena's mother would never be able to convince them without solid proof, and the Fae Court were notoriously distrustful of any oracular insight that didn't originate with them.

Phalaena thought of the destruction she witnessed while she fell through the time stream, focusing on the flashes of burnt houses, smoldering ruins and dead bodies. She panned away from the destruction to the image of her mother and the young Oracle standing on opposite shores of a river, the transition similar to a camera creating a cinematic sweep.

Phalaena's mother set her hand on the young Oracle's cheek and brushed her tears away. Where her fingers touched, sparks of purple light danced across the young woman's flesh.

"If the memory is written upon the essence of the universe," the young Oracle stammered, "then the fate of my village can still be changed?"

"Perhaps," Phalaena's mother murmured. "Though backward is set. That makes it difficult to convince the universe to rearrange its memories."

Phalaena had no way of recording her exact reaction to her revelation, but she did her best to imagine she had been holding a mirror. She saw her eyes go wide and her jaw tighten as fists formed at her side.

The emotions, at least, were easy to summon. She had been furious, mad with sorrow and outraged that she had been fooled by the Council's tricks her entire life. She held tight to that agony, letting it swirl across the connection she was trying to form.

All of this she sent careening through the Oracle's skin, into the heart of that pulsing storm of magic and memory that shifted and swirled in her eyes. Phalaena reached across that miasma, through it, into its depths until she found a seeking hand reaching back.

She could only hope that hand belonged to her or, if not, to her mother.

She recalled bursting furiously into the Council chamber, her shock but utter lack of surprise at their response and her determination to set things right, to clear her mother's name and deal with the situation *her* way — the way she truly believed the Great Mother wanted her to handle things.

Phalaena clung to that bright flame as she descended into the tunnel formed by her connection with the Oracle. Once more, she fell through the time stream with images rushing past her periphery at lightning speed. But this time, she focused only on the relevant ones, the ones she had picked to transfer as part of her message.

She concluded with the meeting she shared with the Oracle. This, she believed, would be the key that convinced her mother to act. It mirrored the conference she shared with the Oracle on

the shore of the river, the culmination of two generations of defiance.

If your village survives and you never rise to power, their ultimate desire will be fulfilled. There will be no need for anyone to act.

She repeated the sequence, holding each scene in her mind, hoping to etch a vivid picture with their arrival. The memories flashed in front of her eyes, growing bright with each repetition even as the rest of her memories faded out of existence.

She was unmaking herself with this act.

But I will rise again, she reassured herself as her tenuous grip on her old reality finally shattered. *Just as the phoenix rises from the ashes formed by its own flames.*

The sequence repeated with increasing speed, until the flashes were so rapid they melted together. Her mother on the shores of the river with the Oracle melted into Phalaena taking her hand. The proclamation that backward was hard to travel became Phalaena's pledge to undo the Council's will no matter the cost.

At last, the sequence passed with such speed it stole what little breath remained in Phalaena's lungs, becoming a confusing whirlwind that made her head and heart spin until...

Suddenly, Catasetia sat bolt upright in bed, gasping to catch her breath. Her heart pounded so rapidly in her chest, she thought it might burst from her ribcage if she couldn't calm it.

She set a hand over the rapid flutter and forced breath into the deepest portions of her lungs. Once. Twice. Three times, and the horrible pounding in her chest began to slow.

Her dreams had been frantic, flashing with such terrible speed she could barely follow. Yet they lit a terribly urgent fire in her gut. There was something she must do, and she must do it now. Lives depended on it — possibly hers.

Possibly the life growing within her.

This gave her pause, and she set both hands over her abdomen. She had not yet started to show, so the life growing within her remained a secret to all but a few. Yet she swore as her hands came to rest over the space where the baby was beginning to form that she felt a distant flutter like a heartbeat or a cry for help.

And as her fingers slid across the smooth flesh where she soon expected a bump to grow, the tangle of images from her dream resolved into a linear line, a set of memories that couldn't possibly exist but were also critical that she understand. Catasetia closed her eyes, drew a deep breath and connected to the spark within her, which allowed her to more clearly remember.

Exhibit Eight: The Oracle's Price

For several minutes after Catasetia emerged from her trance, she struggled to determine the date. The images from her dream became so spectacularly vivid when she initiated contact with the life growing inside her, she had come untethered from her place in time and set adrift in the vast sea of the cosmos where it was impossible to tell past from future.

She knew of the Council's intentions. But though she disagreed with them vehemently, she was only one small voice without support despite her usually distinguished stature. Yet if the visions her daughter sent were accurate, Catasetia's stance was correct. Interference with the mortal realm would only cause the Fae greater disaster.

She hovered on the cusp of a decision. Knowing now what came of her original course, she shuddered. But surely her Phalaena did not send these visions to warn her away from her convictions.

Quite the opposite.

Catasetia threw aside her reed-woven blankets and shoved her feet into the soft, silken slippers set at the foot of her bed. For a moment, she expected her body to be heavier, closer to due. But then she found her chronological anchor and remembered that she was still only two months along.

With one hand on her belly, she hastily pulled clothing from her closet. Something warm and simple to protect against the elements. Then she burst from her chamber and raced down the corridors that led to the roots of the mother tree. From there, she could slide through an opening to any of three dozen worlds the Faerie Council had identified and explored.

When she burst into existence in the cool, dim light of another world's dreary dawn, Catasetia worried she had come too late. But then she saw her people arrayed upon the river's shore and realized she had mere seconds to spare.

As a yellow sun clawed across the horizon, piercing the leaden grey clouds hanging low in the air, a bitter wind raked the shoreline, setting her black and red dancing across shoulders. Leaves shuddered in distant trees, and tiny waves formed in the water.

A short march across the open, gray sands that lined the river's shore sat a sleepy little village. Its houses were built from smooth wood and burnt clay bricks. Tiny glass panes were set into little squares in the buildings' faces to provide a view of the world beyond without exposing the interiors to the fury of the elements. Sturdy tiles lined the rooftops, and a smattering of birds swooped low, seeking shelter beneath the eaves.

This was not a large settlement by any stretch of the imagination. But it was sizable enough that at least a thousand humans probably called it home. If Catasetia counted children and travelers, the final tally might be double that amount.

And the Council intended to kill them all just because one of the people sleeping in one of those cozy little houses might one day awaken the Eye of the Oracle.

The Fae creatures lining the shore were probably not visible to the mortals sleeping in the village. Since they were born in the space between worlds, they could easily hide from creatures that belonged to singular worlds. Without powerful magic of their own, their targets might never have any idea what hit them. Because the Council didn't need swords or cannons to make short work of their unsuspecting mortal targets. They would simply bombard the village from afar with all the magic at their disposal, until the buildings beyond were nothing more than heaps of smoldering scrap.

Faeries were creatures of bright colors, fancy clothing and long hair whipping in the wind.

They seemed entirely alien to the grey landscape they occupied. Throats cleared and weight shifted as the Fae shuffled into their positions, inching closer to the outskirts of the village, perhaps waiting for the most opportune moment to strike. Despite the mud churned up by their feet as they moved across the damp plane, not a single dirt spatter marred the feet, boots, skirts or leggings that touched the shoreline.

A distant call split the air, and the line of brightly clad Faerie sorcerers stood at attention. Catasetia's last moments were about to bleed away. Then she would have to decide whether or not to let history repeat despite knowing the ultimate consequences.

Drawing a deep breath of chill air, Catasetia shot across the line, her feet moving as fast as they could carry her. Halfway across the beach, her nostrils flared and she screamed, "*Stop!*" Her voice rang through the air, high-pitched and piercing, drawing all eyes in her direction as she wound her magic around her body and rose above the beach. Spectacular gold, orange and yellow butterfly wings sprouted from her back as she shot like a leaf caught in a gale toward the head of the line.

There, wide eyes turned in her direction. Several jaws fell open and some expressions adopted an edge of scandal, as if the entire attack were about to be turned on her instead.

Sibirica, the Faerie monarchs' high advisor, intercepted Catasetia by teleporting directly into her line of trajectory. Catasetia swerved to avoid the streak of pale blue and black that represented the Council's Voice, but the sudden course correction still knocked her out of the sky — Sibirica's intention, no doubt.

Catasetia put all her power into her wings, flapping hard and fast to slow her descent. She came to rest gently in the sand, and her wings vanished, leaving her haunched over her belly as she attempted to catch her breath. Even from so low a height, a spill might have caused a great deal of damage to the life growing within her, but she was relatively sure they were both safe.

A shadow loomed over her, and she spun, rising to her knees to face Sibirica's wrath.

Sibirica's eyes burned like distant stars, and she bore razor sharp teeth in a snarl, the very vision of icicles come to life. "What do you think you are doing, Catasetia? You spoke your objections numerous times before the Council made their decision. It is time you abide by the ruling!"

"I have new information," Catasetia gasped, allowing her desperation to show. "Please, Sibirica, you must at least allow me to present it. If it truly changes nothing, I will abide by the ruling. But I have proof that we're making a terrible mistake."

"What proof?" Sibirica snarled. "And how did this information reach you?" Despite her tone, the sharp edges of her teeth vanished and the blazing fires in her eyes became merely glimmering curiosity. "You know as well as the rest of us the Oracle's Eye can produce nothing but chaos."

Catasetia drew a deep breath and released it slowly. No one knew this truth better than her. She pressed her fingers lightly against her abdomen, seeking warmth from the life that dwelt within, and she steeled herself for the coming confrontation.

"I have received a Vision," she announced as she surged to her feet. The words were so weighty, they demanded presentation with proper dignity. "I believe it came from the child growing within me. A message of warning from the future. If we attack this village, we will not *prevent* the awakening of an Oracle. We will *cause* it."

Sibirica lifted her chin and exhaled a sharp hiss. "True Visions are rare, Catasetia. You know this. Only the Great Mother can pass accurate information between worlds and times. If your child is awakening early, that would explain a small bit of madness. But have you considered the

possibility that these images were merely dreams made intense by your condition?"

Catasetia rolled her eyes. Ever since Sibirica learned she was pregnant, practically everything had been related to *her condition*. She was yet seven months away from giving birth and there were some on the Council — all of whom had never had children — who believed she shouldn't lift a finger until *her head was clear of the hormones*.

"Probe my mind if you don't believe me," Catasetia insisted. Everyone on the Council was skilled enough to probe a mind with delicate ease. She was surprised the high advisor hadn't done so already. "Or test my child, if you think that is the only way."

Sibirica shook her head. "A magical probe could be dangerous to the child if it has not fully awakened," she sniffed. "I am surprised you dare the risk."

Catasetia laughed. Her child was not yet born, but she had already performed a great feat that would set the entire Fae realm chattering for ages to come. "I am confident about my experience. Time is my specialty, remember? It is why you will call me to deal with the coming conundrum when this ill-fated attack fails. But no matter; probing my mind should be sufficient."

The high advisor heaved such a great sigh that her shoulders lifted and dropped. Without so much as a snarl of warning, a great hand seized Catasetia's mind like a vise. She would have been well within her rights to flail, but she knew she had to submit if she wanted her peers to take her warning seriously.

So instead of panicking or fighting, she relaxed, allowing the images from her dream to float to the surface of her memory. She witnessed again the wreckage left by the Fae's attack and, this time, saw Sibirica's satisfaction with its thorough nature.

Next, Catasetia saw herself standing on the shore of this same river, the smoke still rising in the background and her belly still flat enough to hide her pregnancy. She set her hand against a crying young woman's cheek and wiped her tears away. In the next flash, that same young woman peered beyond a rip in the veil of reality into the depths of the cosmos from whence she drew her power.

Sibirica rocked back on her heels and her lips formed a snarl. No doubt she was ready to berate Catasetia for an act she had not yet committed. But before she could speak, a high-pitched wail pierced the air.

The grip on Catasetia's mind vanished, and she and the high advisor turned toward the not so sleepy village across the sands.

First one door slammed open, followed three more. They were too far distant to hear the content of the cries, but it didn't take long for the villagers to rouse an entire block. Several women took hold of the one who first screamed while the men went in search of someone else.

Sibirica frowned. Her ambush was ruined now that the villagers were awake. Even if the Faeries rained magic fire upon the mortal's roofs, they would now have a chance to flee. But it was again curiosity rather than anger that glimmered in the high advisor's dark eyes when she turned toward Catasetia.

"I believe we should investigate more closely."

Catasetia nodded. As one, they slipped into the air. Sibirica took the form of wind. Her body became a mere outline to Catasetia, a flowing, nebulous form that stayed always somewhat near, yet seemed constantly on the verge of dispersing. Catasetia summoned her magnificent butterfly wings and followed as closely as she could. Though she would not be visible to any of the frantically seeking villagers, she gave each a wide berth as she made her way to the center of the commotion.

There, she found a mother in tears surrounded by several of her peers holding her in a tight

embrace. Beyond her house's small sitting room, where a hasty vigil had been assembled, a door led to a small bedroom that clearly belonged to a child.

The child in question could be no more than eight years old. Her pale skin and dark hair perfectly matched those of the girl whose cheek Catasetia had wiped tears from in her vision. Except instead of dark, intelligent eyes filled with sorrow, the girl in the room had a dull gaze and a slack jaw.

"Gaze into the void," the child murmured absently, "imagine the moment you wish to change."

When her mother tearfully called from the other room, the girl barely stirred. She seemed unaware of anything going on around her. She merely lifted a stuffed doll from her bedside and pressed its head against the wall. It was impossible to identify what she might intend with this gesture but, after a few moments, she seemed to lose interest and set the doll aside.

"Our would-be Oracle," Sibirica murmured as she reformed at Catasetia's side.

"It would seem," Catasetia replied softly. She set a hand over her belly again, wondering what blight might come upon her daughter for the role she played in undoing the world's original future.

The high advisor stepped forward, dropping the thin veil that kept her invisible to mortals of this realm. She held one hand aloft and snapped her fingers, but the girl on the bed did not respond. Even when the high advisor waved her hands directly in front of the child's eyes, she merely gazed blankly into the distance and murmured, "The disk can be made."

"We must go," Sibirica snapped suddenly, her voice tight and strained. "We have made a grievous error. We must not allow it to bear fruit a second time."

Hand still resting on her belly, Catasetia nodded and followed the other faerie from the room.

* * *

For twelve odd years, they kept the girl in isolation, perhaps fearing her madness would spread if she was allowed to mix with the general population. She babbled incoherently, speaking about nonsense no one could understand — cars and guns and squares that showed odd images from distant lands. Only her mother made regular contact with her aside from the traveling physicians she spent all her savings to lure to town to treat her daughter.

But Phalaena has seen the maddened Oracle dozens of times through the magical crystal sphere her mother gave her when she was two. It looked on nothing else, but provided a constant window into the life of the woman who had once been her partner in crime.

It had been terribly difficult awakening to the world while Phalaena still occupied her mother's womb. It had been stranger still possessing the intellect and awareness of an adult while her body was still small and frail.

But the crystal sphere helped, if only because it reminded her that she had received the merciful half of the universe's price for setting the future on its proper track.

Now that her body was old enough and strong enough to handle the rigors demanded by the High Council's training regimen, Phalaena had finally convinced her mother and teachers that she should be able to meet the blighted Oracle in person.

And the day of that meeting had, at long last, arrived.

Phalaena was a bundle of nervous energy from the moment she woke up and checked on her companion in the glowing sphere.

For the Oracle, one day must bleed endlessly into the next. She woke, she babbled, she scribbled on the pages her mother set in front of her, and she moved objects through her room, sometimes forming patterns, sometimes merely causing disorder. She was a woman just over twenty now and, aside from the color in her hair and the dullness in her eyes, she looked exactly like the woman in Phalaena's memory.

It was Phalaena's hope that she would soon *sound* exactly like the woman in her memory as well!

When she thrust herself backward through the tangle of time, Phalaena's primary goal had been to provide enough memories to her mother to prevent the Faerie Council from acting on their violent plans — a measure that succeeded spectacularly.

But the fully grown Phalaena had possessed enough power to accomplish something more. And she glimpsed her chance to gain the fame and renown she always longed for. So when the moment came to thrust her mind backward through time, she held nothing back. She sent it all, hoping the last vestiges of her power could be put to some other use.

Today, at last, both versions of Phalaena would discover whether or not she succeeded.

It took every ounce of willpower Phalaena possessed not to vibrate while she waited for the Oracle's mother to answer her door. She stood with her own mother outside, wearing the form of a human, the two of them draped in matching pale cloaks that bore this world's symbol for Healers.

The Oracle's mother's eyes lit up when she saw them, and Phalaena couldn't help but grin. "We've come to help your daughter," she announced without waiting for her mother to speak.

"If we can," her mother stressed with a patient smile. "We heard that she's a difficult case, and we want to see if we can be of assistance."

Overjoyed, the Oracle's mother hustled them inside. When she closed the door in her wake, she asked them to sit on the couch while she gathered tea from the meager supply in her pantry.

Phalaena knew from extensive observation that the Oracle's mother was poor. She worked herself to the bone to provide for the Oracle. Her husband had long since tired of her determination to save their daughter and abandoned her, though he sometimes sent a small stipend out of guilt. Some of the villagers still assisted the Oracle's mother but, because she spent so much money and effort on Healers, they were rapidly losing patience with her situation.

The Oracle was no longer a child. Yet she was still incapable of caring for herself or helping her mother. Her mother understood that keeping her child safe, alive and some semblance of happy was a lifetime endeavor. And though it didn't seem to trouble her, others shook their heads and murmured their pity when they thought she couldn't hear.

Eager to deliver happiness into this house of despair, Phalaena slipped away from the kitchen while the two mothers spoke and let herself into the room where the Oracle spent her days.

It was the same room Catasetia and Sibirica entered a dozen years ago on the day of the diverted attack. It looked much the same too, except the walls were covered with writing, symbols and pictures. At some point, the Oracle's mother had given up trying to keep ink and chalk marks from her child's walls and simply allowed her to do as she pleased.

Phalaena noted magic runes interspersed with dark, looping tendrils, representations of the Oracle's former power, no doubt. Her memories must still be in there somewhere, the source of her madness. After all, dropping thousands of years into the midst of a mortal child's brain was bound to cause a jumble.

"Who you?" the Oracle grunted when she became aware of the intruder. "What moment?"

she added, waving a finger toward one of the dark drawings sprawled across the wall. "Peer inside. Get a disk."

Phalaena smiled. "My name is Phalaena," she said cheerfully, holding out her hand. "What's yours?"

"No name," the Oracle insisted, pointing again to the wall. "Look inside. Take your pick."

"You have to shake my hand first," Phalaena insisted. "It's how we say hello where I come from."

The Oracle glared at her suspiciously.

Phalaena inched closer, still holding out her hand. But when the Oracle didn't grip it, she tried to set her palm on the young woman's shoulder instead.

The Oracle cringed, but didn't try to escape the descending appendage.

The moment Phalaena's tawny skin came into contact with the Oracle's pale flesh, she felt a universe-tilting jolt. The magical transfer left the flesh and muscles of her arm tingling.

That shock seemed to travel through the Oracle's entire body simultaneously. The clouds in the young woman's gaze evaporated and, for a moment, they filled with the swirling magic and bright flashes that inhabited the soul of the cosmos. The edges of the Oracle's eyes seemed to blur, and lines of purple streaked across her face, threatening to form the tears from Phalaena's memory.

But the magic faded quickly, leaving only a deep purple tinge in the Oracle's eyes. She shook her head, blinked, and focused her gaze on her visitor for the first time since her arrival.

"Phalaena?" she asked, surprised. "Where are we? Still in the roots of your great tree?"

Phalaena laughed. "Do I look the same as I did the last time we met?" She spun in a circle, allowing the Oracle to see that she was not yet fully grown, especially child-like in the eyes of the Fae, who lived for many centuries before their lives grew short.

"Then... we succeeded?" Joy momentarily suffused the Oracle's face, but it faded quickly. She must be searching her memory, noting the twelve years she spent cooped up in this room, lost in the fog of a world that no longer existed. "But how?" she demanded at last, pinning Phalaena with a stern gaze. "The madness should have lasted forever."

"Should it?" Phalaena countered. She planted her hands on her hips and tilted her head to one side, a mirror image of the woman the Oracle spoke to thousands of years in the future of a world that would never exist. "Shouldn't a decade be price enough to pay for putting the universe back the way it was supposed to be?"

"According to my old Visions, thousands of years of madness might not satiate the universe's thirst for retribution," the Oracle protested.

Phalaena clicked her tongue. "Maybe. But you were willing to pay the price, and perhaps that is what matters. Besides, don't act as though this gift wasn't paid for."

The Oracle arched one dark eyebrow, and her lips formed a smirk, the first sign of her old arrogance. "Oh really? What price did you pay for the giving of this gift then? For surely it must have been extracted from you."

Phalaena grinned, pleased beyond measure with her own cleverness. "I suspected when we thrust ourselves backward through time that both of our memories would remain intact, since it was knowledge we ultimately wished to transfer. The difference is that Fae minds are designed for the kind of twisted logic magic requires, while human minds are not. And without your powers — which you agreed to forego — your mind is exactly that, human.

"I also knew I would only need a small bit of magic to set your mind to rights. So the cost did not need to be dire."

"Yet, you have once again changed the future," the Oracle insisted. "In madness, I could never take up my mantle. But with my mind once again working, recalling the power I once possessed, the quest becomes a temptation and the future becomes less certain."

"Part of the price, perhaps," Phalaena countered. "But I have faith in your word, my friend. So I am not worried about that. It was the price I ultimately paid, after all."

"Your price was gaining faith?" the Oracle exclaimed, her eyes glimmering with amusement.

Phalaena laughed again. "My price was friendship. Surely with your memories intact you recall the haughty creature who came into your sanctum. Her hatred for you was great. Even in the final moments, when she agreed to become your companion in purpose, her loathing for you was as great as the ocean is deep."

"Yet you call me friend," the Oracle said softly, her voice seeming to catch on a lump in her throat as understanding dawned on her.

"Exactly so," Phalaena agreed as she flopped onto the bed at her companion's side. "One of us had to pay full price in order to achieve our desired outcome. My alternate self was well aware of that. And oh how she hated the thought of embracing you as a sister! Yet, my love for you must be as complete and enduring as her hatred, otherwise the task could not be done."

"I see," the Oracle murmured. "So this is the source of your faith."

"If you were to betray me, it would not matter." Phalaena shrugged. "I could no more hate you than the sun could suddenly fall out of the sky. But I think that will hold you to your course all the more. For you have a life to make use of now. Perhaps not thousands upon thousands of years worth, but certainly you will want to make up for the twelve you have lost."

"And I do not believe this will be the last time we meet."

"No indeed," the Oracle agreed, laughter flowing from her lips like the tolling of small bells. "But you are right; I am eager to begin."

With more strength than Phalaena anticipated, the Oracle grasped her arm and pulled her from the bed. Together, they sprinted through the door into the sitting room, where the Oracle's mother glanced up to meet her daughter's restored gaze. Instantly, tears sprang into the woman's eyes, and the teacup she had been lifting fell from her hand to shatter on the floor.

But that could easily be fixed by Phalaena or her mother while the woman wasn't looking. And the Faerie suspected it no longer mattered much.

The Oracle might never manipulate the future, but she was not without ability. She would do great things, together with the Faeries and of her own accord, but her mother would never again want for happiness.

As the Oracle and her mother rushed to embrace, Phalaena's eyes drifted toward Catasetia. Her eyes shimmered with both unshed tears and pride.

To know her mother as well as walking in her footsteps was a boon Phalaena would never allow herself to forget. It was worth whatever price the universe might one day carve from her existence.

But that was the future. And the future was, finally, an unknown factor. For now, Phalaena closed her eyes and basked in the warmth and joy of the present. For the present was where she lived, and she knew the importance of making the most of it.

Liked this story?

Check out my latest epic fantasy tale: [Dreamers Do Lie!](#)

Author's Note

If you are new to my newsletter - welcome! If you are a long-time subscriber - thank you! Thank you all so very much for giving my writing a try. Whether you've subscribed for five minutes, a month, or a year, thank you so much for giving me a tiny piece of your inbox space and for taking the time to read what I send. It means the world to me!

I try to make sure my newsletter is worth receiving every month. But when I realized I hadn't written you all a special, exclusive piece in a long time, I decided I needed to rectify that. I hope you like this time-bending tale. Having already taken my sci-fi skills for a spin, I thought it was time to stretch my fantasy wings.

I have a lot of things to share with you this year (2021) and I hope you will enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them!

If you have thoughts, questions or suggestions, I'd love to hear from you. If you'd like to read more of my work, you can find freebies on my blog every other Monday. Or you can check out my published work on [Amazon](#).

If you'd like to leave feedback on your favorite parts of the story, or see sneak peeks of upcoming projects, consider joining me on Facebook (facebook.com/megancutlerauthor/) or Twitter (twitter.com/Megan_Cutler); I'd love to speak with you!

For more of me check out megancutler.net where I blog and release short fiction every other Monday. (The pattern is blog, freebie, blog and so on.)

Thank you so much for reading!
~Megan Cutler

Also by Megan Cutler...

Dreamers Do Lie

Book 1 of the Dream Things True Duology



[Purchase on Amazon](#)

The dead don't usually get to save the world.

Arimand has just arrived in the outermost circle of Hell. A soldier of the eastern armies, he was damned for following orders. Now he competes with the rest of Hell's denizens for the resources to ease starvation, dehydration and exposure. Realizing there is safety in numbers, he secures a position with a clan called Vorilia. Every damned clan covets something, but Vorilia may possess Hell's most extraordinary secret.

Kaylie is a soul too pure - too vibrant - for Hell. Either the old gods made a mistake when they assigned her, or the devil has something up his sleeve. Arimand is so certain, he spurs a mad expedition to set Kaylie's soul free. Mad, because Hell's only exit lies in its inner circles. To reach it, the clan will have to sail a burning river, avoid an army of demons and cross an impassible wall.

If the damned clan succeeds, they may be doomed to far worse torment than they started with. But if they fail, everyone still living might share their wretched fate. The key lies in Kaylie's missing memories. To foil the devil's foul plot, she needs to remember how - and why - she came to Hell in the first place.