

A woman named Amil ground her teeth and stamped at the floor. She stood in a library-temple dedicated to the goddess of libraries. A pile of tomes and scrolls and magical gems lay scattered on a cart behind her. Her body was slender and beautiful, but far too fit to be described as "delicate." She wore a simple outfit, a traveler's garb, though at the moment it was disheveled in such a way as to show off her shoulders and sternum. A necklace hung from her slender neck, and on it was a medallion engraved with the image of two red birds tightly entwined. She grasped at it with one hand and scowled in a concoction of frustration and despair. As if by instinct, a prayer sprang to her lips- and there, it choked to death in silence. It was a musical prayer, you see, and for almost a year now music had been extinct.

The birds in the morning no longer cooed with joy to find their mates, the howling of wolves lost its soothing air of companionship, and those who sought to play musical instruments reaped no sound from their tools but that of nails embedding in rough stone. Mortals could not sing, no matter how they tried, and those who did sometimes dropped spasming and then died. The phenomena struck all the wide world at once, and it had persisted beyond the life of any curse wrought by malice any less than the gods' themselves. As time passed animals had stopped mating and some even ceased to eat. The color was fading from the world as all of its non magical inhabitants bled themselves dry of the will to live.

Those "higher" beings not ruled solely by instinct, the sapient creatures of the mortal coil, persisted through cool intellect alone. Deprived of the instinct to eat, to bathe, to store food for the winter, some had perished without realizing it. The planet, the trees, the ocean would persist, but...everything else was dying. The loss of animal life over time would cause untold damage, but it was not for the planet's sake that Amil journeyed. Her goal was much more personal.

Two goddesses had gone silent starting sometime briefly before the curse began to surface. Their domains were such that rumors practically birthed themselves that they were the cause: a pair of sisters, the goddesses of passion and music. Amata, the divine passion, was the most powerful and widely followed deity in the modern age. Comparatively young, she was prone to interfering on the mortal plane as flagrantly as she could get away with. Hers was the imagery that adorned Amil's medallion, and hers was the scripture that Amil had once carried with her everywhere. Amil was an apostate now, as almost all the adventurers from the slowly crumbling church's ranks now were. There was simply no use in wasting prayers on a goddess who would leave the entire planet for dead. Or worse...on a corpse.

The other, the younger of the two, was Melody. She was notably sexless for a deity, taking the form of a mature young woman yet radiating a disinterest in her own body that turned away all stupid enough to try and court the beloved little sister of the protective goddess of love. Hers was the field of music and romance.

As if to confirm to herself, Amil muttered a simple incantation to work magic once given to her by Amata. Nothing came of it, and even trying to call out influence from the former object of her

worship left acid in Amil's throat and scratches on the inner wall of her heart. It was useless. Her goddess was not listening. She considered, as she had many times before, converting to become clergy of another faith. Gradam, lord of knights perhaps, or Falta, the deity that presided over ale. Those who pledged themselves to the former got a horse for their troubles, after all, and as for Falta...who didn't love getting drunk to numb the end of all mortal life?

"Excuse me dear," said a cute girl who worked at the library. She had soft hair and soft eyes. Amil looked at her and manually made herself smile. "You've been standing in place awhile. Is everything alright? May I help you find what you came here for?"

"Not unless this temple is hiding that they secretly know what caused this curse," Amil muttered with more bite than intended. She skulked over to a chair and collapsed into it with her head hung in her hands. The girl from the temple followed on soft little steps, her body language gentle, nervous, and concerned...perhaps even a bit frightened. Amil tried to remedy that by forcing herself to take on a more relaxed posture. There was no use causing this poor dear any undue trouble, after all. She was doing her best. "I've been traveling, you see. My aim is to try and break the curse placed on the world...ideally." Amil cast a glance at the desk piled high with books and scrolls. Logs of communication, maps, records of great magical upheavals put in place by the gods...all of it near useless.

Not all of it, technically.

Some was more than "near" useless.

"Well...Johanna has some theories," the girl practically whispered. Amil raised one eyebrow as she performed some divine mathematics in her head to discern whether this was a thread worth pulling at. Unfortunately, her intelligence had never been that much greater than average, and even rhetorical calculus made her head hurt.

"She does?" Amil asked. "She's one of the curators here, I take it?" The girl shook her head yes. Amil took a deep breath and decided to just go with it. Worst case scenario, this would be no more a waste of time than she was already shouldered deep in. "I'd like to speak with her then. Make no haste, mind you, I'll still be here whenever she has a moment."

"Understood," said the girl with a vigorous nod that moved the entire uppermost third of her body so it looked more like she was bowing, "I'll let her know. It shouldn't be long. Anything else?"

"No. I should look over my amassed materials and sort through what I'll be borrowing, if any," Amil said with another glance at the pile. The goddess who ran this cult would likely hunt her for sport if she saw the pile Amil had made. The girl nodded again, no less exaggeratedly, and

scurried off. Amil sighed and slumped backwards in her chair. It was becoming clear to her that her old order did investigative work as a unit for a reason.

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Amil ho-hummed and paced back and forth. She stood in an office with lots of parchments, folders, shelves, and books piled high against the far wall. Before her there was a simple desk, broad and plain. One of its four legs had a distinctive chip in it. Behind that desk, a human sat in a chair. She had her hands clasped together and her forearms planted on the desk, and she watched Amil move with intent. The woman, Johanna, pursed her lips together and waited for Amil to say something.

"When you say this is a theory," started Amil. She paused, both in speech and her movement. She pivoted her tight tall body to face Johanna and wiggled the fingers of one hand. The two made eye contact for a while. Neither spoke.

"I have little in the way of evidence," admitted Johanna. Despite the words leaving her mouth, she stared at Amil with airtight confidence and unwavering conviction. Amil began to pace again, her face narrowing with worry. Johanna's eyes followed her as she walked from one end of the room to the other. "But my hunch is based on reasoning, and little evidence exists for any single explanation over another...to my knowledge."

"To mine as well," Amil muttered angrily.

"Yes. But this curse...usually when a god fades, their domain might react, but no records indicate anything nearly so violent or extreme. Even Gradam's testimony of the war that shattered the world gives no indication that the *death* of a god could have consequences anything like this. Amata is not dead."

"Are you sure that's not your deity going into denial?" Jabbed Amil. The patron of libraries was Amata's daughter after all. The family of the goddess of love and sex was...predictably, a bit of a clusterfuck. "Besides, if she is alive, then she's abandoned every living being on the planet."

"Yes..." the curator muttered, her voice dark and foreboding. Amil froze and stared at her. There was more to this theory, then. "I suspect..." Johanna waved a hand and muttered an incantation. A hollow cone of ephemeral white light enveloped both women, wavering and pulsing as though its walls were made of fluid. Amil recognized the spell with ease: this was a barrier that allowed sound to pass through it from one side but smothered it when the source was on the other. This gesture alone made Amil dread what she was about to hear.

"That bad, huh?" Amil murmured to herself. Johanna gave no indication that she heard.

"I fear that *Serenade* is dead."

Amil froze.

"...what? You mean both of them, then? Of course we've considered that, do you think that this theory is new to-"

"Not-!" Johanna practically growled. "Not both of them. Just Serenade." Amil stared at the curator. Johanna continued, "let's review. Amata carries on her body at all times a weapon made to kill her father, the most virile and resilient of all the gods, and she falls prone to the same merciless bloodlust she channels through her inquisitors. Is it not possible then, that the weapon in question could destroy her little sister, who is so much more vulnerable than its intended quarry and so coddled as to have no way to defend-" Amil had heard enough. She felt heat, like lava infused with bitter acid, pooling inside of her. The kind of rage that once drove her to execute those who blasphemed against her lady took hold for the first time in her recent memory. Instinct snatched a dagger from Amil's side and before she knew it, she was crouching atop Johanna's desk with the blade pressed to the woman's throat. Her eyes practically bulged from her crimson, quivering face as she spat words out with animalistic disgust.

"Stay your tongue, treacherous worm!" Hissed Amil, whose entire body violently quaked with barely-restrained violence. "To speak such vile accusations in her own daughter's place of worship- I ought to take your head from your shoulders!"

"I did not mean to imply that she performed the killing herself, madam," Johanna said calmly. She met Amil's gaze gently, perhaps even compassionately, with a soft look in her own eyes. "Though it may be a possibility, Serenade has had her mind taken before and...well. Any number of possibilities exist, but I would wager my life that Serenade is gone and this curse is her sister's grief turned outward like the dying gasp of a dragon turning entire settlements to ash." The rage in Amil persisted, but it cooled enough to rob her body of its shaking eagerness to enact violence. She backflipped off the table onto a pale blue rug and sheathed her dagger.

"Damn..." she muttered. The thought was horrid, blasphemous even! But...Amata either had died, was abandoning the world as a conscious decision, or had been consumed by despair. Her death would not explain the curse; another deity would certainly try and claim her domain for the power its absurd breadth and existing base of worship granted. The idea that she'd turn her back so quietly on the world was unthinkable; even if she did have a sudden radical change of heart, she would be the type of woman scorned to shower the world in undeniable proof of her hate and anguish. If it was grief...well...

That one was plausible.

"By Regina..."

"One more thing." Johanna stood. She stared upwards and donned a hat that helped shield her face. Tears streamed down it. "Our Lady visited the other day. Her sister goddess Heather has been weeping at a portal to Amata's palace for a month straight, blaming herself." Amil's heart

sank. That...that sounded rough. "She blames herself. The portal isn't far from here. I would suggest paying it a visit. If she won't answer family nor her followers, perhaps she'll answer both."

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"No luck?" Asked an human dressed in the dull lavender colors of the Lilac Inquisition. The leaned against a rather unassuming horse with their arms crossed. The recipient of their question- Amil- silently trudged closer instead of answering. Whatever she may have hoped to hide with her silence was nonetheless confirmed effortlessly by the way she hung her shoulders in a slouched posture of defeat. The human's expression had been neutral before, but the closer she drew to them the more it curved into a frown of deep worry. "I suppose not. Damn."

"Of course not," Amil said. She practically heaved to get the words out of her mouth, such was their tremendous weight on her. "My only lead is that Heather has been beside herself with grief." The human flinched as though they'd been struck with a two-ton log. "And we all know that if she's abandoned her self imposed duty...she doesn't know any more than we do." The human pursed their lips and placed a hand on the large tricorne hat that was their most distinguishing garment.

"Things are grim," they muttered.

"Not new information, Cortin," said Amil with pain deep in her voice. "Have the Inquisition found any leads?" Cortin rubbed a few fingers on their chin.

"A town that may have seen something. We're partway through investigation regarding it, but the relevant inhabitants had to be evacuated there after some calamity, so we also have to figure out who did and didn't survive, where those of them went, who did make it, what exactly that event actually was...it takes time." Amil nodded, although she felt uncertain still. That much...it was something, she supposed, but it wasn't terribly much.

"Cortin." Amil looked up at the sky. It lacked the brightness that had once offered her so much hope in her younger days. "I lied."

"No shit you lied. You think I didn't know?" Amil flinched from Cortin's admonishment but felt no surprise or ill will in herself. The Lilac Inquisition may have been robbed of the lesser miracles that normally aided them in their pursuits, but even without magic they still had experience sifting through falsehoods. Cortin, more than that, was her former partner as well. She had little hope of deceiving them on a good day, let alone on one like the day she was currently having. "You found- or heard- something, didn't you?"

"...one of the curators," Amil hesitated before finishing the sentence, but Cortin spurred her on with a pressing glare, "proposed the theory that Serenade is dead, and the curse is an active effort by Amata. Grief, perhaps, or spite."

"..." Cortin's expression darkened but was notably devoid of anything resembling surprise. Amil's heart sank at the sight. If this wasn't Cortin's first time hearing the idea, the Inquisition was likely considering it. Judging by the shadows on their face, it was likely their prevailing hypothesis as well. "Yes," said Cortin, "we've considered the possibility. Her agents have been absent without leave for some time too, though their disappearance was much more gradual than the goddess'."

"Yes, yes, I was there when that was discussed," Amil said dismissively and waved a hand. "So those were likely connected. You think something killed them and then it went after Serenade? It would take more than an unusually powerful beast to put even her down."

"No, no mere monster could have gotten to her under Amata's eyes," Cortin rebutted. "Our efforts to open the gates to her palace have yet to yield any fruit, so whatever did this is likely still there. Amata would have butchered it."

"Assuming she's alive," Amil interrupted.

"Correct. But there's little chance she isn't. The other gods haven't spoken, and I...I've asked. You go to her daughter, I'll return to the town to continue investigating." Cortin produced a scroll from a sack on their horse's saddle and began to read from it. The ancient words leaving their mouth seemed to ignite the ink that ran on the scroll's parchment in a blue light that resembled flame. A circle formed on the ground around Cortin's feet and the hooves of their horse. Runes and lines and elaborate sigils filled the dirt and glowed until in a flash of azure, both Cortin and their steed vanished.

Damn.

Amil fell to her hands and knees, trying not to be shaken at the idea that her goddess might truly be the root of this. She clutched at the necklace she wore, silently offered words to the being who it represented, and was answered only by silence. Her sobs weakened over time. She stood back up after a few brief moments, still weak but determined regardless. As the last of her tears rolled down her face and fell unceremoniously onto the dirt and patches of grass around her, she swore to enter Amata's palace.

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Amil awoke next to a dwindling campfire. Visions faded rapidly from her mind of a dream she knew had to be important. She shakily rose to her feet and rubbed her forehead. She remembered a blonde figure in a blue and white dress, young and beautiful with piercing red eyes hooded by sleepiness. She remembered the figure's mouth moving gently, prettily. She remembered...had she agreed to something?

Amil waved a hand at the fireplace and muttered something by instinct. A fine spray of water darted from her fingers into the flame, where it crackled into vapor with little effect on the fire. Amil groaned in annoyance and retrieved an enchanted, fireproof blanket from her sack. She tossed it over the fire, which went out in seconds. One of her problems was gone now. Unfortunately for her, it was the least of them by a long shot, and none of the others could possibly be solved so easily. She whipped the blanket off the ground and back into the bag as she grumbled about life on her own. She didn't have a horse because it had been stolen from her after a drunken bender, and walking all day every day towards such bleak odds was disheartening.

Well, she reassured herself, at least the horse was okay. She'd tracked down the thieves with ease and taken her mount back, but overcome with shame she gave it to a kind farmhand that she trusted. She moved on unsteady feet for hours towards the gate. Using a compass instead of magic wasn't entirely second nature to her but she knew how to do it. Each time she held the device and watched it attune itself to the gate, she found herself annoyed she could not simply accomplish the same with a few words and a flex of her mind. Still, she was glad she had the tool on her person.

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Amil clutched at a sack of special sand that the church had given her to play with when overwhelmed. The sound of a distant woman's lament grew louder each pace, tore with greater ruthlessness into her heart. This had to be Heather: the goddess of flowers, rainbows, and community. Her wails were ceaseless and profoundly drenched in true despair.

After what felt like hours, and may have been longer, of that awful song, Amil found the gate. She emerged from a clearing to see a long, uninterrupted plain. Short grass surrounded a great golden disk, which sat upon a marble platform decorated with over a dozen silver sculptures of beautiful individuals of different species. Also on the platform was a beautiful young woman with curled, dark brown hair. She held in one hand a ginormous bow made of rushing water which pulsed always the seven colors of the rainbow. The...Rain Bow, as she had personally elected to name it.

This was a goddess, in the flesh.

In person.

In *pain*.

"H-hello," Amil said awkwardly. She racked her mind. There was a generally accepted title for her lady's faithful to use addressing every other member of her family, but Heather's...?

"It's my fault isn't it mom?" Heather whimpered with a violent sob. "I'm here now! Answer me, please! I'll never leave again! I promise!" Her words were like talons a mile wide, tearing into the core of Amil's being. "Do I need to turn back the clock and be a better daughter for you!? I will! Just say the word, please-"

Amil placed a hand on the mourning goddess' shoulder. She shot to her feet and notched a single arrow in her divine weapon, which instantly became seven deadly spears of differently colored light. The bow bent to its full draw so close to Amil's face that she could hear the trickle of its contents flowing across the arch. Heather's face contorted in rage but it was drowned instantly in sorrow.

"We miss her too," Amil said gently. "Perhaps if your mother won't answer you...she'll answer for *us*? We have a spell to open these, and it's not working but with a goddess- her daughter even- putting her weight into it..."

Heather gulped down a breath and loosed her bowstring. The bolts that would have reduced Amil to dust vanished. She seemed to consider it. Fear took root behind her eyes. She looked away.

"But...but what if she..." Heather's body trembled. "While I've been here wasting time, surely my duties have crumbled, and-"

"Heather. When was the last time you took a day off?"

Heather sighed in defeat.

"Three hundred years ago."

"Your mother would forgive you for a few months off even if nothing was wrong, okay? Come on, let's go ask her." Heather seemed convinced. Amil felt relieved, since any more convincing would have felt risky. She clenched her necklace in a fist and held it up so her holy symbol dangled before the great gold disk. As expected, this on its own accomplished nothing. "Stand behind me and hold me close."

"Like this?" Asked Heather, putting her arms around Amil's waist. A pair of soft, heavenly breasts pressed against the back of Amil's head and turned her face beat red. Heather was soft, and warm, and had...a soothing, magical aura about her. It wasn't dissimilar to the mind-affecting one that Serenade projected (in legend anyway. Amil, despite having fucked Amata, had never met the younger of the sisters). Amil stammered for a moment before catching herself. This was no time to be thinking about how hot her goddess' daughter was.

"Close enough," Amil whimpered. The world-clouding fog that had started creeping up on her was gone, violently expelled by Heather's warmth. "Now just...repeat after me as I chant."



"Okay."

Amil began muttering the words to an old ritual. Her mutterings would have no effect, of course, but soon enough Heather joined in. Magic flowed through the goddess, through Amil, through her necklace, into the amulet. The energy was warm, it was benevolent, it was giving. Light began to emanate from the symbol. The disk, at first, did not react. But the two chanted harder, and Heather poured magic through into the symbol. More and more of it. More than Amil had ever employed herself. The energy surged across her like flame eating oil, sweeping past and leaving her woozy. She wobbled on her feet but the goddess held her up. Heather's words became heavier and stronger. A flood of magic coursed through Amil, enough to make a dragon burst like a balloon. Her mind flew apart at the seams as torrents of energy coursed mercilessly across her. The disk glowed blue. The portal shimmered slightly. There was some kind of...lock holding them out. No amount of brute force was going to fix this. Amil opened her mouth to-

More magic. A tsunami punctured her. Amil flew apart. Heather rushed in through the mile wide gaps with furious intent. Amil tried to drag her pieces back together. Her eyes had rolled into the back of her head. She couldn't see. Was she chanting still?

More magic. A wave that seemed like it could shatter the moon and drown heaven blasted what remained of Amil's consciousness in all directions. Whatever wall this barrage was attacking started to give way. What were they-

More magic. Enough to flood Ribinia. Enough, it seemed, to kill every mortal being twenty times over. The physical constraints of Amil's body could barely contain this terrible hose. It was like she was going to rupture and physically come apart-

More magic. Amil would scream but her mind couldn't reach the controls. Enough magic to douse the sun, to wash away each and every star in the night sky.

Something distant shattered.

The flood stopped. Amil was on the floor, piecing her mind back together.

"No! No no no!" Heather banged on the bright blue pane of the portal with her fists. She'd ripped it open, yet still it rejected her. Tears rolled down her face. "Let me past, damn you! Please just let me see Mommy! Pleaaaaase!" She slouched against the portal, sobbing. It started to close.

No!

Not now!

Amil surged past Heather, her mind still not all together. She threw herself against the wall and it allowed her to pass. The last thing she did as she entered was turn her torso to point it Heather and give her a reassuring thumbs up.

Progress.