

## What Are You Hiding?

She hadn't been herself last night. She had been someone else.

Adela shed her Player's cloak as her morning coffee warmed her from the inside.

Performing in the desert was always difficult: Her nose froze above the blankets at night, but her costume stuck to her skin by the time the fifth bell tolled.

Damien approached her with a tin cup of coffee. He swapped it out for the empty one in Adela's hands.

"It looks like you need a double this morning," he said.

"Thank you." She cradled it in both hands. Even with the heat radiating from her core, her hands were still cold. Her circulation suffered when she was worried about something.

"Did you get a vision last night?" Damien asked, accurately interpreting her pensiveness. He was one of the few Players that Adela had told about the prophetic dreams. She trusted him, and it was hard to cope with the visions alone.

"Yes, but this one was different," she explained. "This time I wasn't me."

"Who were you?"

"I don't know."

Damien's brow crinkled. "Did you still ask your question?"

"No," Adela responded. "I don't know what it all means."

Usually, her prophetic dreams would lead her to someone with a secret. Dream-Adela would always ask, *What are you hiding?* and the dream-person would be compelled to answer. Adela had been having these visions since she was eight years old. Her first one had taken place in her old nursery. Dream-Adela had walked through towering piles of toys to discover her little brother drawing with crayons on an invisible sheet of paper. When she asked her question, it

didn't feel like a choice. It had been drawn out of her as naturally as breathing: "*What are you hiding?*" Jameson had looked up with tears in his eyes.

"I ripped the arm off Dr. Longfellow and put him under my bed," Jameson had responded before going back to his coloring.

When Adela woke up, she had gone straight to Jameson's bed and found her favorite teddy bear, arm maimed. She had been too surprised to be angry. In the years since, she had experienced many strange visions. Some helped her determine if someone should be trusted. Madame Ilia, the Troupe's leader, knew about Adela's visions because they had provided important information about venues. The dream version of a town clerk had once responded to "*What are you hiding?*" with "I plan to accuse the Players of public drunkenness and licentiousness in order to break my contract and avoid paying them."

Crucially, one dream had helped Adela decide to be a Player. She had visited her mother in her sleep, and in response to "*What are you hiding?*" her mother had said, "I lied when I said you weren't talented, just pretty. You're the best Player I've ever witnessed and I'm so proud. You make me want to cry and laugh whenever you step onstage. I just don't want you to go on tour and leave me."

But Adela had always been herself in her dreams until now.

"Are you sure that it was a prophecy dream?" Damien asked.

"I suppose I can never be sure," Adela responded. "But it felt exactly like all the other visions I've had. I just wasn't myself."

"What do you remember happening in the dream?"

“I woke up in a room filled with dusty sunlight. I was lying in a bed covered in a quilt of oranges and yellows. I got out of bed and saw my face in a long mirror. It wasn’t my own. That was it. Then I woke up.”

“What did the face look like?”

“I didn’t recognize her,” Adela said. “Long, straight black hair. Intense eyes. Slightly hooked nose. High cheekbones.”

“So, witchy?”

“No,” Adela said, frowning. “Or...I guess so? Just...beautiful.”

Madame Ilia approached them. “Are you two lovebirds keeping that bench warm for our paying customers? Or are you just wasting time while the others are setting up?”

Adela sprung into action, hoping that Damien had ignored the casual mention of “lovebirds”. They had tried being a couple for a little while. Adela had been the one to call it off. It hadn’t felt right. She preferred to be Damien’s friend, and had told him so as kindly as she could. She was relieved that they had drifted back into a tight-knit friendship.

The Troupe was only in town for three days. It was a convenient stop on their way to their favorite winter venue, the Yazah Oasis. The performance the night before had gone well, but Madame Ilia never let them rest on their laurels, especially when doing a show that involved stage combat. They would spend the morning marking through the whole show, running all the fights in their entirety, and then the Troupe would be free to explore the small desert outpost until dinner.

Adela was glad that Damien hadn’t been cast as her love interest this time. They were usually the romantic leads, but this was a family comedy rather than a romantic comedy, so they were brother and sister. It felt much more natural. During the morning’s rehearsal, she moved

through her blocking with ease, as did most of the Troupe. They were nearing the end of the tour, so everything felt solidly locked into place.

Just as they were finishing the final act, a group of strangers approached them. All three of them wore the pale, gauzy robes that desert people of all genders preferred in this region, which kept them cool and offered protection from the sun. The figure at the front pulled back his hood and nodded in greeting.

“We have brought you refreshment,” he said, gesturing to his two companions, who each held a box covered with dark fabric. “Our coffee is regarded as the best in the region.”

The two robed figures pulled the coverings off their boxes, revealing carefully packed trays with two urns of coffee and enough glass cups for the whole Troupe. With murmurings of thanks, the Players formed two lines to accept the strong, dark drink from the visitors. Damien shuffled into line behind Adela.

“I’m so thirsty after that last fight—I hope drinking this coffee won’t give me a headache.”

Adela rolled her eyes and untied the water skin hanging from her belt. “Your water skin might be more useful if you didn’t leave it in your tent everyday,” she teased, handing him her vessel.

He gratefully took a gulp. “Yeah, but then I’d forget it on the stage. Or in the costume tent. Or at the hearth. Or...”

Adela had stopped listening to him. She had accepted her cup of coffee from the visitor, and before she could mutter a thank you, she gasped. Underneath the pale, thin hood was the face that had looked back at her in her dreams. The woman cocked her head with an inquisitive grin as Adela stood tongue-tied. Luckily, Damien came to the rescue with a nudge.

“Adela, I prefer my coffee hot, if you don’t mind.”

She mumbled an apology and moved out of line, casting glances over her shoulder at the woman. Her face was once more hidden from view.

Ramona grabbed Adela’s elbow, guiding her towards the hearth. “Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Adela said, a little frustrated to be pulled away from the mysterious dream woman. Ramona was one of her closest friends in the Troupe. They often played opposite each other, either as nemeses or confidantes.

“Are you *sure* you’re okay?” Ramona probed, and Adela felt a specific weight behind the question.

“Yes...do I seem like I’m not?”

“You seem perfectly fine, but that’s pretty standard for you when something’s wrong. I heard that you and Damien broke up.”

“That was a few weeks ago.”

“Yes, but you didn’t tell anyone,” Ramona said. “I only just found out from Damien. Obviously he’s heartbroken, but you knew that.”

Adela nodded. She felt bad, but she didn’t know what to do. The night before she ended their romance, she had dreamed about Damien. She had asked “*What are you hiding?*” and Dream-Damien had said, “I would do anything for you. But I’m afraid to tell you that, because I worry that your feelings aren’t as strong as mine.” Adela had woken up knowing she had to call things off before their romance progressed any further.

Ramona continued. “Damien told me that he didn’t blame you at all and that you had let him down very kindly. I’m not worried about him, though. I’m worried about you.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve only known you for five years, and in that time you have casually seen and rejected over a dozen men. And you seem like you’re in a fog. ‘How’s Mr. X, Adela?’ ‘Oh, he’s fine, I guess.’ ‘Whatever happened to Mr. Y, Adela?’ ‘Oh, it didn’t work out.’ I’m worried that you feel some strange compulsion to entertain these men when you don’t actually feel any connection to them.”

Adela’s lip trembled. Ramona had hit the nail on the head. Adela had spent many nights lying in her tent thinking, “Am I broken? I feel nothing.” When a kind, charming man came along and wanted to hold her hand, she automatically said yes, hoping that some sort of romantic feeling would follow. But it never did.

Ramona continued in a low voice. “And Damien? Other members of the Troupe said things like, ‘Finally!’ and ‘At last they’ve come to their senses!’ when you got together, but I knew the truth. You’re like brother and sister. I think the rest of the Troupe has just seen you kiss on stage so many times that they got confused.”

“I know,” Adela said, holding back tears. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I guess I was so afraid to say no. I didn’t want to hurt him.”

“But in the end you did,” Ramona said, not unkindly. “Though I know you didn’t mean to. And I think Damien knows that, too.” She set her coffee down and put her arms around Adela. “I think you need to figure out what you want for a little bit. Start saying ‘no’ to a few people. Figure out what ‘yes’ feels like. Or maybe even better: try asking the questions for once!” She gave Adela a peck on the cheek and then wandered off to put her props away.

Damien quickly took her spot. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Adela blinked away her unspilled tears, thinking, *Why does everyone keep asking me that?* She said, “Yes. The woman with the coffee is the woman from my dream.”

Damien’s eyes grew wide and he rummaged in his belt pouch. “Then you need this!” He pulled out a small piece of parchment with “Sandseed Cafe” written on it in swooping font. “Have you tried the coffee? I took a sip as soon as she gave it to me and it’s heavenly. I asked her where I could get more, and she explained that the three of them work at this cafe. You should go and see if you can learn more about her! Have you even tried yours yet?”

Adela looked from the note in his hands to her untouched coffee. She took a tentative sip. It was rich, thick, and sweetened like hot chocolate. She finished her glass and licked the residue from around the rim.

“It looks like you need another cup,” Damien said. “Let’s pay Sandseed Cafe a visit!”

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Adela was struck by how colorful the outpost was. The houses were formed from a sandy mud that kept residents cool during the day. Each home was hung with brilliant tapestries woven with reds, yellows, and oranges. The colors put Adela in mind of the quilt from her dream. Damien led the way, but it wasn’t hard to find the cafe. The smell of rich coffee reached them as soon as they turned down one of the main, stone-lined streets.

The smell recalled memories of last year’s trip to the Yazah Oasis. Though larger than this outpost, Yazah was just as colorful and had coffee shops on every corner. Adela smiled while remembering the only dream she had had while in Yazah: “*What are you hiding?*” she had asked a pot-bellied man in a carpet shop. “I don’t want anyone to know how proud I am of my

business,” he had responded. “I’m afraid of seeming boastful or gloating, so I just stay quiet, even though I’m really quite pleased!” It had been a rare, wholesome dream.

Sandseed Cafe had a tapestry tied above the main entrance with the name of the establishment embroidered in bold, looping thread. Adela could see the woman from her dream through the open door. She was smiling at a customer while spooning beans into a parchment sleeve. Adela stood transfixed, watching her slender wrists gracefully rotating as she went about her task. After a moment, Damien took her arm and guided her into the store.

The woman’s eyes met Adela’s over her customer’s shoulder, and Adela felt as if there was a flash of recognition—something beyond what would pass between them after their brief glance this morning.

The desert woman tied the parchment bag closed and said goodbye to her customer. Damien stepped forward. “Thank you so much for the free sample this morning! It gave us a much-needed burst of energy.”

“Our pleasure,” the woman responded, and Adela felt a shiver run through her. The coffee pedlar’s voice was deep and husky, and scratched an itch in the back of Adela’s mind. “We think it’s a crime that any visitor should leave without tasting our coffee.”

“I’d like another of the same, please,” Damien said.

“Of course. And for you?” The woman’s eyes met Adela’s. They were deep, reddish-brown and almond shaped. Their depth was magnified by the smudged cosmetics that she wore around them.

Adela struggled to unlock her tongue before saying, “The same, please.”

“Have a seat! I’ll bring them to you.”



Damien and Adela sat in a couple of cushioned, wrought iron chairs outside. Damien picked at his fingernails. “I know we’re trying to learn more about this girl, but are you sure you want a fourth cup of coffee? You seem really jittery.”

Adela was thankful that her nerves could be explained by caffeine. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. I’ll just jog back to camp to get it out of my system. It’s so good—I’m not going to say no to a second cup.”

The desert woman appeared with a tray of two mosaic tiled glasses. She set them down and said, “Adela, yes?”

Adela’s hand froze on the way to her glass. “Yes. How do you know my name?”

The woman smiled. “This morning at the amphitheater. This gentleman—”

“—Damien—,” Damien provided.

“Damien said it while you were in line for samples. It is a beautiful name.”

“Thank you,” Adela responded weakly. Damien picked up the conversation for her.

“You know our names. So what’s yours?”

“Cassandra,” the woman responded with a slight nod. She turned her attention back to Adela. “I couldn’t help thinking this morning: Have we met before?”

“Perhaps in your dreams!” Damien responded. Adela turned bright red. She loved Damien, but he was terrible with secrets and often said the one thing that would cause the most chaos.

Cassandra, however, looked genuinely curious. “What do you mean by that?”

“He means that we’ve never been here on tour before,” Adela recovered. “So it would be very unlikely that we’ve met unless it was in another realm.”

“Ah, I see,” Cassandra said, her eyes searching for more than Adela’s answer gave her. “Then please, I’d be happy to give you a tour of our outpost. It’s not very large, but it’s full of hidden gems.”

“That would be wonderful!” Damien said.

Even though Damien had responded, Cassandra’s eyes stayed fixed on Adela. “Stop by anytime after cafe hours. It would be my pleasure.”

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Cassandra returned inside and, except for a brief thank you as they dropped off their cups, Damien and Adela didn’t interact with her again. The two Players hurried back to camp so that they could prepare for the evening’s performance. The show itself was uneventful: it went off without a hitch. Adela, however, found herself looking out into the packed audience hoping to see Cassandra. If the woman was there, she couldn’t see her. Final scenes, bows, and evening preparations all flew by as Adela replayed her conversation with Cassandra in her mind. What did it mean that the desert woman thought she looked familiar? Was it linked to her dream?

Once the costumes and props were put away, the Troupe assembled around the fire for their usual late night chatter.

“...made from goat’s milk and ground carnation petals,” Delia was saying. Delia was one of the older members of the Troupe, and she was always falling for various beauty schemes. One day, she had paid far too many coins for a strange slime that was supposed to get rid of wrinkles. The acidic slime had burned off a thin layer of her face and made her skin red and angry for a

week. They had turned their comedy into a masque so that she could hide her face from the audience.

“You rub it on twice a day and it drills into the lines of your face and fills them in.” She looked around the fire. Most people were chatting amongst themselves, having begun to ignore her as soon as she began talking about lotions and potions.

“I’m listening to you, Delia,” Adela said, having always had a soft spot for the older woman. (Delia had once crept into Adela’s dream. She had answered “*What are you hiding?*” with a coy little smile. “I hide a box of letters in my trunk. They are from all of the suitors I had when I was a young woman, still living on my father’s estate. Sometimes I take them out and read them when I’m feeling melancholy.”)

“Ha!” Madame Ilia guffawed on the other side of the campfire. “Adela, the only one among us who doesn’t need a single drop of that nonsense, is the one who’s listening to you.”

“I don’t know,” Adela said, tucking a ringlet behind her ear. “I’m not as young as I once was. I have wrinkles, too.”

“Face it, Adela,” Madame Ilia responded. “You have many more years of being the perfect ingénue: rosy-cheeked, lithe and light, destined to charm any man in the room.”

Adela’s face fell, and Ramona noticed. “Why does that bother you, Adela?” She asked, moving closer to her on the wooden bench. “A lot of people would kill to look like you.”

“I know I’m very lucky,” Adela responded. “But it just reminds me of my family. My mother. She never understood why I wanted to be a Player. She said that I could marry any man in our county if I wanted. My whole childhood, I was told how important it was to start a family. And it *is* important to people like my mother. But being told that I should find a nice husband before my beauty fades didn’t make me particularly proud of my looks.”

“They mess you up, your family,” Madame Ilia said. “I remember my father telling me that starting a Player’s Troupe would make me nothing more than a common prostitute. Looking back, I think prostitute would have been the better choice. The *money* those ladies make!” The campfire erupted in laughter and the conversation turned to other topics.

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That night, Adela dreamed.

Once again, she was Cassandra. But this time, she was in the back room of the cafe, writing labels on sacks of coffee. She brushed some stray grounds off her hands and then slipped through the curtain to the front room where she saw—

—Adela.

She was staring at herself. This had never happened in the twenty years that she’d been having visions. And she knew what was going to happen.

Her—Cassandra’s—mouth opened. “*What are you hiding?*” she asked.

Dream-Adela frowned slightly. “I’m not what people think I am,” she said. “I’m not the golden ingénue that I play onstage. I’m finally starting to understand why I can’t be the girl that my mother wanted me to be. Why none of my relationships last.”

*No.* Adela thought, inside Cassandra’s body.

Dream-Adela continued. “I’ve been acting all this time. And I’ve suspected for a while now. I keep hiding it from myself, hoping that the feelings will go away.”

*No.*

The Adela across from her gazed into her eyes, her mouth hinting at a grin. “I—”

NO.

Adela woke up drenched in sweat.

—

She drowned herself in busy work. She didn't think about what her own mind had been trying to get her to admit. She helped the kitchen crew even though it wasn't on her chore list, she shook out the mats in her tent, and she repainted the handle of the mirror that she used in the show.

Her thoughts occasionally crept in. *Why are you so scared?* She didn't know. *What could possibly go wrong if you just admitted it to yourself?* She had no idea, but she was sure there was something. She didn't want to think about it right now. *If someone else was in your shoes, would you want them to feel this way?* That last question gave her pause. But she shoved it to the back of her mind.

When breakfast was ready, she grabbed a bowl of oatmeal and sat next to Damien, hoping that he would distract her with some inane chatter, but he seemed oddly subdued.

“Are you going back to the coffee shop this morning?” he asked.

Adela tried to seem nonchalant. “I don't know. Why? Do you want an excuse to tag along and get another cup?”

Damien smiled. “Well, yes. But I thought you might want to go by yourself.”

“Why?” Adela carefully didn't make eye contact.

“Adela.”

She glanced up, her spoon of oatmeal half raised to her mouth. He was giving her the look usually reserved for when she was teasing him and he wanted her to stop.

He continued. “I think I know you better than anyone in the Troupe. You’re my best friend. For a while I thought you were something more, but I’m understanding better and better that that was never meant to be. And that’s okay. But it’s not okay for you to just ignore a whole part of yourself just because...what? You’re scared? You don’t understand it? You think we won’t accept you?”

Adela remained quiet.

“Did you dream of her again last night?”

Adela nodded.

“Then go to her.”

Adela set down her bowl of oatmeal. She grabbed her satchel off the bench beside her and set off towards the town center, knowing she had to hurry to be back by rehearsal. She walked so quickly, replaying her dream in her head, that sand poured into her shoes.

*I’ve been acting all this time—*

She entered the main square, adorned in colorful banners.

*—And I’ve suspected for a while now—*

The streets were still relatively empty in the early morning.

*—I keep hiding it from myself—*

Sandseed Cafe, however, was already busy.

*—hoping the feelings will go away—*

She squeezed through the door, apologizing to the line of people who looked at her with curiosity.

—I—

Cassandra stood behind the counter. Her momentary look of surprise was quickly replaced with delight. Adela basked in the beam of the woman's smile before asking, "Are you free tonight? There's a ticket with your name on it at the amphitheater, and maybe afterwards you can show me your favorite places around town?"

*—I've been looking in the wrong places for love. But there's a chance I might love you.*