

The Quest

Leslie Fire sat on the floor of her room. Notebook open, spells scrawled in tiny handwriting across the pages. The runic lanterns above her flickered as she summoned the necessary magics to perform the spell. As power surged through her, her aura glowed a faint reddish color and the air around her thinned, inviting the atmosphere of the Outer Realm into hers.

The caustic smell used to make her eyes water, her nose bleed. After years of intense practice and excessive exposure, it was comfortable. Familiar. A strong gust of wind spiraled from the runes, blowing her calendar and sketches that hung precariously off her walls and rearranging her bookshelf with an earth-shaking force. Her silver hair billowed like a cape. A blinding light erupted from the runes, she squinted until it faded to a dim glow.

Her familiar, a small skull with primordial ooze as black as tar slowly dripping down him, watched. An outline of a hilt began to form in the air before them, the harder she focused, the darker the color and detailed the texture became. Almost. She reached forth to take the hilt, an ethereal blade emerging from its end, holding her breath...

Will burst into the room, the door slammed into the wall. His lavender eyes had a glint in them. His hair, also silver, hung like vines down his back. Bangs clinging to small beads of sweat.

“Leslie!”

The hilt slipped from her fingers, back to the Outer Realm. She glared at him. Gaining access to the Outer Realm was no easy task. It was an endless abyss of magic and monsters, traps and curses. To say nothing of the constant interference from the being known only as the Gate-keeper.

“Come in,” she said.

“You should take care not to startle people practicing the dark arts!” Geo said, hopping up and down at her side.

The crystal ball-sized gem propping his jaw open made an unsettling noise as it clicked against his teeth.

“Ew, stop.” Will winced. Turning his attention to his younger sister, he said:

“I thought I’d sensed the workings of magic earlier. Trying out some new spells?”

“Yes. One that requires a sacrifice. I suppose you’ll do,” Geo chimed in.

Will rolled his eyes.

Leslie rested her chin on her knuckles, her aura now a sickly shade of pink.

“What do you want, Will?” More apathetic than curt.

Magic, whether performed successfully or not, tends to take it out of you. Fatigue was the only side effect of using the arcane arts. Unless being arrested counts.

“Well, I saw a Quest today...” He paused, waiting for her to say “nope”. Just “nope”.

She could tell by the way he said it, by the smirk on his face, that she should prepare herself for the worst. There was always a catch in circumstances like these, *especially* with Will.

Must be dangerous, she thought.

“Uh-huh.”

Taking that as a maybe, he continued.

“The reward is 500 pieces of gold!”

Very dangerous. Leslie’s brow furrowed.

“Details.”

Will pulled a scroll from his belt and unfurling it, handed it to Leslie.

“I’m not reading that,” She said; taking the scroll and proceeding to skim its contents anyways.

Missing people. Strange noises....Sleepy Hollows Cave....Find and eliminate the cause. Rewarded handsomely.

“Oh. Well, I don’t blame you. It basically says, there’s this creature that has been plaguing the countryside....yada yada, kill it and claim the reward.”

“I get how Quests work!”

He took a step back, putting his hands up in mock defense.

“What I want to know is: How do you plan on fighting this thing? Whatever it is...It’s not specific. What kind of monster? Haunt? Wyrms? Evil unicorn?”

“Don’t even joke! We can handle that, and there’s no such thing.” Waving his hand.

“I repeat, what makes you think you stand a chance?”

“Nothing is invincible. Besides, that’s where you come in. Two mages are better than one hundred sold-”

“No! Who told you that?!” slamming her hands down on the floor.

“Uh...” He rubbed the back of his head.

She rose and sat on the bed behind her. Geo rocked slowly back and forth at the foot of it. Will stiffened, waiting for Leslie to speak. Leslie finished reading the scroll before sitting it in her lap. She sighed and shook her head slowly. The only information of note was that the cave was nearby.

“What would you use the money for?”

His eyes lit up. That was an easy one.

“Books, of course.”

“That’s what you’re gonna risk your life for? You’re always trying to do something the easy
But hard way!”

“Pfft!”

“Why not just steal the books?”

“Are you kidding? That’d get me killed!”

“OH! That’d get you killed? But fighting a mysterious monster won’t get you killed!”

He opened his mouth to respond, but the best he could do was a solid “Hmmm...”

“Is there a chance the missing people took this Quest before you?”

She already had some theories, but it was important for her to hear Will acknowledge the possible danger of the situation.

“I don’t know!” Frowning and glancing away, he muttered, “I didn’t ask.”

A lengthy silence passed between them. Geo seemed to be frowning at the two of them underneath the tar-like fluid. Leslie broke the silence first.

“I heard a saying once: There are a bunch of reasons not to do something.”

“That’s not how you use that,” Will said slowly and softly as if deflating.

“I know. It’s supposed to be motivational or whatever but, in my opinion, it should be used to discourage people from doing certain things....I mean, how do you know that the Quest people-”

“Guild members.”

“Whatever, will believe us or even pay us? Assuming we even survive this?”

“We’ll take something, a tooth or feather, to prove we killed it.”

“How do you know this isn’t some sort of trap to lure out mages?”

“I...hadn’t thought of that.”

The Return of The Sages was at hand. King Arion had become paranoid about unregistered mages living among the civilians of Astoria. He had meticulously searched for those with an affinity for the arcane to join his cause or *else*.

At least he was willing to admit he hadn't considered all outcomes. There may be hope for him yet.

"How will you know you've got the right place? Think there'll be a sign out front?"

"Probably. Ragnarok isn't far from here, I'll just check every cave I come across."

"What if the only way to beat this monster is to use magic? And they knew it all along? Then they'll have our whole family, and you'll be lookin' all sad."

"What about dad?"

"Okay...That's still most of our family."

"That's not going to happen." His eyes darkening. He sighed and leaned against the wall by the door. He twirled the tiny cross chained to his jacket slowly.

Lost for a moment in the light from the room reflecting off the azure gem-stone in its center. Returning it to its rightful place, he met her gaze.

One final push.

Leslie leaned forward, eyes locking on to Will's. He shrank under the intensity of her gaze but did maintain eye contact.

"What if it's one of those evil Fae-Folk that kidnap people?"

"There was a guy that got nabbed a couple of weeks ago, not sure how they got past the city's barrier but, there's usually a seven-year grace period between kidnappings."

"So, you're leaving this up to their *honor system*?"

"Fae are pretty consistent folk."

"What else ya got?"

“This will help people; future victims can be avoided and maybe we can save the ones that are missing.”

On the off chance, they're still alive. She thought.

“Isn't that worth the risk?” He spoke calmly and surely.

If Geo had eyes, he would have rolled them.

“Shut up. You can't say that now. Helping people isn't your reason. It seems *dishonest* coming from you.”

She laid back on the bed. Then, reaching off the side to pick up Geo, placed him next to her.

“It's still a good reason...Besides, when was the last time we did anything together?”

“We could have done *anything* together! But here you are trying to use me for money...Not that I care.”

“Well, then why'd you bring it up if you didn't care?”

“Shut up. Shut. Up.” She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“It'll strengthen the bond between you and your familiar...Experience in the field, and all that.”

She sat up quickly. “Okay, okay! Fine!”

...

If I don't get ready, does that mean that I don't have to go? Leslie changed into her armor.

Flat shoulder-pads adorned her small shoulders, her arms and shins were covered in a similar material. Thin, so as not to hinder speed or movement, and with enchantments for added durability.

She put a chain-mail skirt over her pants and a breast-plate over her sweater. For the time being, she could collect her thoughts.

“You seem unsure about this,” Geo said.

“I’m sure of one thing. Will is going, with or without us.”

“But, you said so yourself, this is a fool’s errand. A dire affair whether it is a trap or not.”

“I could be wrong though. We might be able to help those in trouble. And Will wouldn’t have come to me if he thought he could do this alone. He is at least, semi-aware of the danger. Besides, even if we knew for a fact that this was a trap, he would still go.”

“I don’t know of his melee abilities, but his magical abilities are far inferior to mine.”

“His physical ability is not better, he isn’t as strong as Thomas or as fast as me. But, to be fair, your magic is superior to all of ours.”

“Of course. You are not allowed to practice freely and I am *ages* older than you, but...I just wanted to point it out.” He grinned.

In his room, Will pulled up his long hair as tightly as possible into a ponytail. He slipped on gloves, noticing his sleeves were wrinkled. Reaching into a jar on his nightstand, he grabbed a handful of rune-stones and tossed them on the floor. Energy flowed through him and into the stones. They shook gently as a stream of magic went from one to the next, connecting them and then surrounding them in the trademark circular shape that forms most runes. He stepped inside the circle and steam began to rise. After five minutes, his hair curled, but the wrinkles were removed.

He stuffed a sack full of necessities for the trip. A map, some snacks, extra clothing, and a small book of basic spells. That should do it.

He sighed. Leslie made some valid points. It could be a trap and he had no plan for if it was, but, they couldn’t afford to pass up an opportunity like this.

He gripped the small cross chained to his coat out of habit. He pulled his bag over his shoulders and left his room. After getting ready, they reconvened in the hallway. Leslie smirked at Will’s lopsided bag.

“That bag is packed!”

“What do you mean?” He adjusted the straps.

“I thought we were going on a quest, not a camping trip.”

“It’s better to be prepared.”

“Prepare to get tripped if you slow us down,” Geo added.

“Nice,” Will said.

Leslie shook her head. Picking up Geo, she walked downstairs, past the scrolls hanging on the walls that prevent evil spirits from causing harm...sometimes. Will stopped halfway down the steps.

“Wait, Geo can’t go out like that.”

Leslie frowned. *Almost forgot.*

Geo jumped from Leslie’s arms. The sapphire blue gem in his mouth blazed as the shiny black fluid that constantly dripped down him swirled around him, a miniature whirlwind of tar. He now took the form of a giant rainbow-scaled flying fish. At five feet, he was almost as long as Leslie was tall.

“That’s better,” Will said.

“Quit dawdling!” Geo flapped his flippers. Will got the door for them, Leslie went out first. Geo waited.

“After you,” Will smiled.

Geo floated past him, gently slapping his face with his tail. Will glared and shut the door behind them. Their home rested on the side of a small mountain, dotted with trees so close together that from a distance they looked like brush strokes.

All the shades of green and brown formed a camouflage effect on the landscape, with the area at the mountain's base sectioned off into different farms. A river running from the top of the precipice, separated into three parts like veins. It was noon and the sun was at its zenith.

Cartoonishly poofy cumulus clouds formed parasols that cast broken shadows over the peaceful scene. The wind carried flower petals and pollen in a dance around them.

Wowww! Leslie smiled.

William sneezed until a coughing fit took over.

Wow. Leslie frowned. "Ew... I mean, bless you."

"Thank you." He cleared his throat and rubbed watery eyes.

They made their way across the dirt roads paved around the farmland. A straight shot from here to the town of Hydra located on the lowest level of the mountain that Astoria was built into. Their floating island was one large mountain surrounded by several smaller ones in the areas outside the city limits.

With Leslie checking the map, they set out into the Forest of The Double-Goer. Will frowned but didn't say anything. Can't get haunted at midday, right? His eyes darted from tree to tree.

Nothing there.

The fungi growing beneath the trees were large enough to sit on and had multi-colored patterns across their tops. Purple and gold dust clouds drifted from underneath them. Will couldn't remember what color was supposed to be poisonous. Not that they were planning on eating or huffing them...

It was Summer, but leaves were falling from the trees, a rustling noise echoing from above. Will took a deep breath, releasing it slowly.

Probably just the wind.

It was eerily quiet, though. No sign of any satyrs or centaurs, maybe because it's a haunted forest, but...still! Not even the creepy creatures were causing a stir. How messed up does a place have to be before even a naga won't pass through it? Will bit his lip.

Stop thinking about it...Think about anything else!

He glanced at Leslie. If she was worried, she wasn't showing it. He turned to Geo, who eyed him quizzically. Will looked away.

The further in they went, the darker it became. The tree branches were so close together that the sun's light couldn't penetrate in some places, chilling the air. Will's teeth chattered. Neither Leslie or Geo seemed to notice. Both were lost in thought.

"What if it's a nice creature?" Leslie asked.

"*Ugh!*" Will rolled his eyes.

"Because if it's nice, we're not killing it. Though it has been kidnapping people, so maybe it's not that nice."

"Maybe no one gave him a chance, though. Maybe it can talk, like the dragon in your poem."

"Oh my God." He rubbed his temples.

"When you have a familiar, you think about these things. They're not all monsters."

Geo beamed beside her. Will narrowed his eyes at her.

Could she be right? No. Certainly not. No.

"We should definitely try from a safe distance though," she continued. "I am afraid of death, and getting in its face is exactly the kind of dumb shit that'll get you killed."

Will burst out laughing.

"Our lives are in danger, and all you do is laugh."

"I thought you were joking!"

"I don't joke! You know I don't make jokes, especially about my life...Or anyone else's life."

Will nodded. He'd forgotten.

"I haven't been out of the house for a while, and the only reason I'm coming out now is to fight something...At least it's better than talking to strangers," she said.

"Aww."

"Don't Aww me."

"Awwwww."

"I will destroy you."

"Hold that thought, we're here."

"Perfect transition."

Sleepy Hollows is a small cave outside of the city. The mouth of which was surrounded by jagged rocks covered in foliage. The roots of giant trees hung off the top like vines, shriveled up by the lack of moisture. The grass closest to the entrance was also withered compared to the lush undergrowth that wisely kept its distance. They stopped a distance away from the entrance to the cave. A creepy yet ideal place to fight the creature.

A warm breeze rustled through the brush. Leslie approached the mouth of the cave.

"I really think we should try calling out to it," she said to Geo, who had floated after her. Will remained a way back, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead and palms. A tightness grew in his chest as his heartbeat more rapidly.

"Hm? What's wrong, Will?" she turned to him.

That's what I'd like to know. He shook his head slowly, then clenched his fists.

"Nothing..." He took a deep breath and added, "Let's not throw away our advantage by alerting it to our presence...Doesn't seem safe."

"Neither does startling it." She said.

“You have a better suggestion?” Geo asked.

He sighed. “That’s debatable...We could go inside. Take a look around.”

“Your suggestion is to run right into it?” Leslie asked.

“We might be able to learn something more about our foe...”Geo said.

“And find out what happened to the people who went missing,” Will added.

“What just happened?” Leslie said. *Did they just agree on something?*

“Guess it’s settled then,” Will said.

“No one ever listens to me.” Leslie pouted.

Geo rubbed against her gently.

“Fine, but I’ll take point,” He said.

“What?! Why?” Will asked.

“I would think that was obvious...” Geo smirked.

Leslie cut in. “Don’t question it, Will. He’s here to help.”

“Fine...whatever.”

He emitted a soft light from his scales and “swam” ahead of them, giving the rocks an almost liquid appearance. Glowing moths flitted about overhead. Leslie was enthralled by the aesthetics of their wings and the shimmering trail of magic they left in their wake. Will quickened his pace, eyes darting around. They didn’t seem to notice them, at least, not yet...He never took his eyes off them as he stepped on the back of Leslie’s shoe. She stumbled.

“Back off, Will. You’re in my space.”

He took two steps back.

“So, what makes him an obvious choice, again?”

“Just drop it.”

“I’m curious.”

“Stop.”

“Just making conversation.”

“Don’t.”

The cave was surprisingly humid, causing Will’s hair to frizz. He tried, in vain, to smooth it back down. Geo chuckled at him. He glared.

“Ugh.”

His clothes were beginning to stick to his skin. He peeled at them gingerly. Geo stopped short, and Leslie and Will bumped into him. Leslie patted him gently while Will glanced around his large, nautical form.

“What is it?” she asked nervously, as Geo deliberately blocked her view.

“If we see any bodies, I’m leaving!”

The Creature

Wings folded over the torso. Thin and membrane-like, appearing as a wind-whipped umbrella, ragged and worn. Its head rested on its front paws, long and narrow like a horse. The talons on his feet were large enough to shred any potential prey it chose. Dim light reflected off the twisted horns that stood above the sharp, quill-like fur of its mane. The tail lashed like a metronome with the head of a snake at the tip.

“You think, by chance, the creature we’re supposed to fight is *behind* that one?” Will asked, taking a step back.

“Or rather, *inside* it?” Geo added.

“Your resolve is *garbage*, Will. Do you want the money or not?” Leslie folded her arms.

Before Will could reply with a snide comment, the creature rose. He was the size of a chariot and on all fours. His glowing eyes narrowed at the trio. Leslie took a step forward. Will tugged the cross on his chest. Breaking the chain, imbuing his magic into the cross and breaking the seal that was placed on it. The runic symbols expanded in the air around the cross until they finally evaporated in a poof of red mist.

“Release,” Will said.

The cross grew until it was the length of a sword, levitating, he snatched it out of the air with a flourish. The *chimera* growled with a force that pushed them backward. Geo’s tail caught Leslie before she hit the ground. The veil between the two realms was torn and tiny silhouetted creatures crawled out. The Outer Realm always wreaked of sulfur and death.

Will covered his mouth and nose, his eyes watering. The cross reverting back to its broach-like size.

“Oh m-!” Will sank to his knees.

Geo shook his head slowly. “Down for the count now, are we?”

“S-s-sensory...*over-load!*” Will gagged.

Leslie knelt beside him and rubbed his back gently. He looked up at her and smiled.

“Leslie, how many fingers am I holding up?”

She shook her head. “You’re not... Are you okay?”

“I don’t see any dead people, so why does it smell so bad in here?”

“Okay.” she pulled him to his feet. “Come on.

A chill ran through the air. Leslie shivered. The creature’s tail stood straight up, its eyes meeting Will’s. He stiffened before his body collapsed. The thud of his body hitting the ground caused him to jump.

“AH!” Will glanced around.

“What was that?” He turned, his still frame laid out on the ground behind him. He screamed again, though no one seemed to hear him. Or see him, either, for that matter.

“Will?” Leslie asked, making her way slowly towards him. She didn’t turn her back, nor take her eyes off the creature for a second.

The tail and the head came together. Leslie closed the distance between her and Will. Geo followed close behind. Leslie shook Will's arm. Nothing. She grabbed his bag and started rummaging around in it.

"Let's hope he really does prepare for everything," Geo said.

...

A feminine voice spoke to Will telepathically, her voice rang in his ears like chimes. Something about it seemed familiar, but he couldn't place it.

Please, don't kill him!

"Are you kidding me? It *just killed* me! I'm gonna *kick its ass!*"

Look, I-I can fix you! Just...don't be hasty.

"How? There's no magic that can bring back the dead."

Well, you aren't technically dead. A more chipper tone, this time.

"That's reassuring."

I'm serious. All I have to do is bind your soul back to your body. She said matter of factly.

"Hmm, clever.... But, what am I supposed to do, if not kill it? What about the missing townspeople?"

It's not what you think.

“You say that like there are more than two possibilities. Either he did it or he didn’t.”

He couldn’t see what she looked like, or tell where her voice was coming from.

I need you to trust me. I’ll help you get back to your body, but only if you swear to me you won’t harm him.

“As long as it doesn’t hurt Leslie, I swear I won’t kill it.” His hand over his heart.

Thank you. Exhaling the words.

“Yeah. Sure. No problem.” His smile fading with each word.

The binding spell will take some time to complete, however.

“Of course it will.”

...

The chimera spoke, its voice emanating a strength that made each word feel solid.

“A feast of mages. The Fates spoil me.”

Leslie’s heart sank. The shadows that escaped the Outer Realm were surrounding the chimera. Leslie ripped Will’s spellbook from his bag, tossing it aside with reckless abandon. She tried to open it. A sigil appeared on the cover, preventing her from gaining access to its contents.

What! Damn it, Will! Why would he do this? She glanced back toward the chimera. He opened his mouth wide, jaw unhinged as a vortex sucked the spirits right into it. His fur darkened as he absorbed the magical properties of the being’s souls.

“What are you doing?” Will said, “Powering up? I don’t appreciate that!”

Come on, come on. Leslie shook the grimoire.

“Try a command!” Geo ventured.

“Um, *Release!*”

The broken spell sent the residual magic on a fireworks display. Leslie flipped quickly through the pages. There had to be something in here that would help Will.

The chimera lowered his head, hind legs rocking to and fro, about to pounce. Geo positioned himself between Leslie and the creature.

Will’s body lit up like a wisp. The creature turned to it and lunging forward, pinned Will to the ground.

“I appreciate *that* even less!” Will said.

“Oh no you don’t!” Leslie said. “Forma Telum!”

Geo’s form melted into a bow. Leslie snatched him out the air.

“Ow!”

“Sorry.”

She took aim at the chimera, with a clear head-shot. She released a magic arrow, striking the chimera...right in the shoulder. She shot him again, this time in the leg. Her hands kept shaking.

The chimera staggered back. Then, unhinged his jaw, a dark humanoid substance forced its way out and crawled onto Will. Leslie aimed at him, releasing the arrow and right its mouth. The entity was completely absorbed by Will, causing the chimera to keel over. Leslie lowered her bow.

...

Will's soul was absorbed into his body, gently and evenly, like filling a glass. The sensation was chilling. His body adjusted to the sudden change from ice-cold death to the complete opposite of that. Everything was going smoothly until...a burning sensation began as both souls tried to inhabit the body at the same time.

Will was flooded with conflicting emotions: anger, depression, a lust for vengeance or power or the truth? One more emotion slipped through before the flood gates were closed. One that was so completely foreign to him that it took him a moment to process...Hope. He shivered. *What the hell?*

The two were water and oil; as they filled the corpse it was wracked with convulsions.

“We’re too late!” Geo said.

“There has to be something we can do.” Her voice threatening to shatter.

“You can destroy his body now-”

“That is the *dumbest* thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I was just-”

“Next!”

He frowned.

“I would rather that thing take over and we have to figure out a way to expel it.”

“I don’t know a way to do that.”

“Then we’ll make one.”

She skimmed the book while Geo watched Will. As quickly as the convulsions started, they stopped. Will’s body sat up. He blinked rapidly. Geo tensed in Leslie’s arms and she looked up.

“Will?” she said.

He stood up and brushed himself off. Leslie went over to him, still holding Geo.

“Will?”

“No. But you get two more guesses.” he grinned.

