

An Excerpt from Prospero Lost by L. Jagi Lamplighter

Chapter One: Miranda

It was after midnight when I discovered Father's last message.

After a long day of work, I had been relaxing in the lesser hall of Prospero's Mansion in Oregon, flipping through one of my father's old journals, when I came across a blank page. An intuition from my Lady prompted me to hold the book up to the phoenix lamp.

With a loud crackle, red-gold sparks leapt from the burning phoenix feather housed in a glass lantern beside the hearth and crawled across the journal, scorching words into the parchment. A strong odor of burnt paper and cinnamon filled the air. I nearly dropped the book.

I had seen secrets revealed by the phoenix lamp before. Father had a habit of scribbling notes in the margins that could be read only by this light. Normally, the letters appeared slowly. This smoldering script was something new.

The blazing letters read:

*My Child:*

*I have unwittingly unleashed powers best kept bound. If I fail to constrain them, they shall destroy me and all I have wrought. If you have not seen me since the writing of this message, assume the worst and warn the family. Counsel my children to keep close the gifts I have bestowed.*

*Beware the Three Shadowed Ones!*

*Prospero,  
Magus*

I turned the page, but the rest of the journal was blank, even by phoenix lamp.

Was Father in trouble, or was this another of his pranks? Our family had many supernatural enemies. We had bound many malevolent creatures throughout our long lives, any number of which could have broken free of their restraints. On the other hand, in the last century or so, Father had seemed to handle every difficulty that had come his way with ease. This was most likely one of Father's many jests, set up years ago to startle any youngster unlawfully searching his books. Finding no further evidence that this message had been written recently – and not knowing any method by which he could have sent a message into the book from a distance – I dismissed it and continued reading.

That night, letters of flame troubled my dreams.

The next morning, I sent one of the invisible spirits of the air who serve our family to Prospero's Island. (Father refused to keep any kind of phone. He claimed the "constant caterwauling of that new-fangled contraption" disturbed his concentration.) If Peaseblossom found him at home, she was to tell him of the laugh he might have at my expense.

Only he was not there.

It took Peaseblossom six days to circumnavigate the globe, reach my father's island retreat, and return to Oregon. Upon returning, she reported that the Aerie Ones on Prospero's Island were agitated. Great Prospero had not returned from his most recent voyage, even though he had been expected several months ago. Nor could his servants find him any place upon the earth.

This news disturbed me. Never in my long life could I recall a time when the Aerie Ones had been unable to find Father. It was time to act. I sent for Mab.

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I decided to meet with Mab in the Everblooming Gardens, as I seldom could afford to take time from my busy workday to enjoy it. This botanical wonderland, which one reached by leaving the house through a back door, was always in bloom, no matter the season. It lay between Prospero's Mansion and a tall stone wall, beyond which lay an enclosed forest of aspens and virgin pines. At the garden's center, in the midst of the flowerbeds, a fountain leapt, the water rushing and gurgling.

I sat at a wrought-iron table next to the fountain, stirring my tea. My hair, so pale as to appear silver, was piled atop my head in a Grecian style that had gone out of vogue more than a century ago. My garment, a tea gown with a high lacy collar – the enchanted satin of which matched the emerald of my eyes – was also of a bygone age. Fashions change so quickly. Long ago, I had stopped bothering to keep up.

As I reached for another sugar cube, Mab, our company's head gumshoe, came slouching down the path, his hands stuck in the pockets of his gray trench coat. He was the granite-faced, hard-boiled type. Too many years of chasing supernatural perpetrators had given him an intense dislike of all things arcane. He might have passed for human himself, had he not looked so precisely like a detective from a 1940s movie.

Coming up beside me, Mab respectfully removed his fedora and gave me a nod. Mab and I had worked together on numerous occasions, though I never called on him personally unless the matter was one of particular importance. Lesser matters I left to his men.

"You wanted to see me, Ma'am?" he asked in his Bronx accent. There was a sardonic quality to everything Mab said; even his terms of polite address, such as "Ma'am" sounded vaguely defiant.

"Mab, are you familiar with the Three Shadowed Ones? The name sounds vaguely familiar, but I can't place them."

"Don't know, Ma'am, but they sound like bad customers. If you want my opinion, you'll turn down whatever they're offering and stick to legitimate mundane business."

"This has nothing to do with me..." I began.

"Glad to hear it, Ma'am," Mab picked up his hat and turned to leave.

I frowned severely to express my disapproval. Secretly, I was amused. I appreciated his concern for my safety but would have preferred if his methods had bordered less upon insubordination. Still, he was a superb detective and as loyal to Prospero, Inc. as an old hound dog.

"It's about my father I have reason to believe he may be in danger."

Mab froze in the act of returning his fedora to his head. "From these "Three Shadowy Ones?"

"Shadowed. It's Three Shadowed Ones."

“Sounds supernatural.”

“They are.”

“Too bad. Rather liked the old man.”

“I didn’t say he was dead!”

“Playing with fire gets you burned, Ma’am,” Mab said. “Playing with the supernatural gets you dead. You gotta take my word on this. I destroyed my share of meddling humans in my youth. I know how the game is played. I told your old man he’d run afoul of one of us someday, if he kept putting his nose where it didn’t belong. And the nose of a human never belongs sniffing about in the arcane.”

Mab had been one of the blustery winds before he agreed to inhabit a fleshy body, and he was blustery still. When dealing with Aerie Ones, I had found over the years that it was often quicker to let them say their piece and then nip any further impertinence in the bud, than to try to restrain them from the start. Besides, what use was asking a detective for advice, if one did not listen to what he advised?

Because of this, I was in the habit of allowing Mab to rattle on, but this did not mean that I allowed his doom and gloom speeches ruffle me; gales may blow, but a queenly peak remains undisturbed.

“We’re not here to discuss Father,” I clarified in my calm and business-like fashion, “although, I want you to have your men begin searching for him. We’re here because my father left a note saying that these Three Shadowed Ones might be a threat to my siblings and me. He asked that I warn the family, and so, I shall do so. However, it has been years since I’ve spoken with most of my brothers. I want you to help me find them.”

“Your personal safety comes first, Ma’am. I suggest you rid yourself of all supernatural devices. It’s a matter of security, Ma’am. When you stink of magic, it draws them like a beacon. If you rid yourself of magic, no supernatural being will be able to sniff you out.” Mab tossed his hat onto the table and counted off his points on his fingers. “Quench the phoenix feather. Burn the magical tomes in the library. Empty the Vault. Unravel your enchanted gown. Dismantle the wind-slicing fan. Destroy the orrery. Pour out the Water of Life. Free we Aerie Spirits in service to you. Oh, and break that accursed flute. That should do it. You’ll be safe then.”

I smiled behind my teacup. It always came down to the flute. Not that I blamed him. If a flute controlled my free will, I would plot its destruction, too. Ignoring the rest, I limited my reprimand to his mistake of fact.

“The orrery is mechanical, Mab. It is made of clock work.”

Mab frowned. “It looks arcane. I’d destroy it to be on the safe side.”

“Mab...” I began sternly.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“My brothers. I want you to help me find my brothers.”

“You won’t be expecting me to find the dead one, too, will you?” he growled.

“Could you?” I inquired, taken aback.

Mab crossed his arms. “Hrumph! Wouldn’t if I could. Same as I told your father.”

A chill ran down my spine. I felt relieved not to have been privy to that conversation!

“Let’s stick to my six living brothers...oh, and my sister.”

“I don’t know your brothers, Ma’am, excepting Mr. Mephistopheles and Mr. Ulysses. However, if the others are anything like them, I don’t think I’d care to meet them, thank you. Might be better if you left well enough alone.”

I inclined my head regally. “Ordinarily, Mab, I would quite agree with you, but as Father has specifically asked...,” I paused and asked curiously, “When did you meet Ulysses?” I knew he had met Mephisto on one of the many occasions when my brother came to borrow money from Father.

“It was back when Mr. Prospero was still living here. He had a blue crystal called the Warden that he kept in the Vault. Some gizmo given to him by a two-bit gypsy.”

“Oh, yes. I recall. It warned its owner if something was about to be stolen. Worked for quite some time too.”

“Catch was if the Warden itself was the target of the theft, it didn’t work. Ulysses stole the Warden, and then the jewels.” Mab shook his head. “I warned him and warned him; it never does to put too much store in magic. Mr. Prospero didn’t listen. You take after him a bit, Ma’am.”

“Why, thank you, Mab!” I replied, flattered. Mab scowled. “We got the stolen goods back, if I remember, thanks to your good work.”

“Bah,” Mab spat. “How is any self-respecting detective supposed to track a teleporting thief? He let us have them back is more like it. Even then, two of the pieces we recovered turned out to be fakes.”

Mab’s point regarding my brothers was well taken. With the exception of Theophrastus, they had become a sorry lot, and nowadays Theo...well, I would face that hurdle when I came to it. Normally, I would not have even considered squandering the time and resources necessary to search for them, but Father had asked it of me, and Father’s requests could not be ignored, even if I disagreed with them.

“Mab...I want to find my brothers.” I remained firm. “How would you suggest we begin?”

Mab rubbed his jaw. Like every tough guy since Bogart’s Philip Marlow, he showed a half-a-day’s growth of beard. Only, bodies inhabited by Aerie Ones do not change, so it must have been put there deliberately. “I’d start by finding out what we already know, Ma’am. Do we know where any of them are?”

“We will ask.” I whistled for the butler.

As we waited, I sipped my tea, savoring the strong minty flavor of the pennyroyal. A soft breeze blew through the enclosed forest that lay beyond the stone wall surrounding the gardens, causing the pine needles to whisper and the aspen leaves to make their peculiar clapping sound. I listened to the chatter of three magpies and enjoyed the soft caress of the balmy air as it mingled the delicate scents of lilac and hyacinths with the heady perfume of honeysuckle and roses, as well as the faint odor of pine.

Breathing the fragrant air, I had a hard time believing that if I were to leave the mansion by the front door, or even walk through the archway into the enclosed forest behind me, I would step into the sharp chill of early winter. Prospero’s Mansion was situated in Oregon’s Cascade Mountains, where early December meant cold winds and near-freezing rains.

Taking a last sip of tea, I emptied the tea ball into the remaining liquid and swirled the cup. The tea leaves settled into the patterns for tall dark man and long voyage. Shrugging, I pushed the cup aside. Standard tealeaf rhetoric, could mean anything.

Meanwhile, Mab stood beside me, frowning and fidgeting with his hat.

From somewhere in the vicinity of my shoulder my invisible butler spoke. His voice was soft and lilting, as if a flute could give tongue to words.

“All hail, Great Mistress! Vestal Lady, hail! I come to answer your best pleasure; be it to fly, to swim, to dive into the fire, to ride on the curled clouds; to your strong bidding, require of your servant what you will.”

I smiled ruefully. The butler had learned English during the reign of King Henry the Eighth and still spoke much as had the men of that age.

“Ariel, I must contact my brothers. What is our latest information about their whereabouts?”

“Mortals must sow to reap, even so Master Cornelius. Twice yearly, tidings of the yields from his stocks in your father’s great company are sent to him in Braille at his post box in faraway New York City,” Ariel’s voice sang.

“I’ll send him a letter,” I said. “What of the others?”

“The Sun in Scorpio shone when Master Mephistopheles last came weeping at your gates. He had lost that wand, curiously carved and steeped with strong enchantments, which Prospero had bestowed upon him. He claimed to have lost it during a tryst with a damsel of dubious nature; but what became of it, whether lost at sea, or upon the mountains of Tibet, or in remote Hyperborea, he knew not, nor could his addled wits recall. Pity touched even my airy heart to see him, who was once so keen of mind and so skilled of sword, so piteously reduced. Empty-headed and empty-handed he came, and empty-handed went away. You refused him audience.”

I shrugged. “He was drunk.”

“The cold and adverse wind, which escorted Lord Mephistopheles from the property, reported to me the words he muttered beneath his breath. He sought your noble sister, the Lady Logistilla, in some isolated isle of the Western Indies.”

“He’ll be lucky if she doesn’t turn him into a toad. She has less patience for his drunkenness than I have. What of the others?”

“I ride the rumor-bearing winds, and what I hear, I know. Of Lord Erasmus, word on the wind is mute. Yet, certain of your servants, mortal men made of clay, found trace of his name in print. The magazine was called Smithsonian; many learned men know it; but fey spiritlings do not.”

“You can follow that one up, Mab,” I said. Mab nodded. Pulling out a stubby blue pencil, he scribbled something in a small spiral-topped notebook.

“Of the other three, few tidings have been gathered,” Ariel continued. “Of Master Titus, no word has been heard by breeze or zephyr, not for two autumns now; and yet you know his art. Our kind never could approach him.”

“Probably sat down somewhere and forgot to get up,” I murmured. Titus, once a great warrior, had become lazy in recent years.

“Lord Ulysses, you well know, can be everywhere and nowhere, all at once; he is swifter than the swiftest wind, and he hides his deeds. Master Theophrastus is still governed by his strange vow. He has asked the family not to seek him out.”

I nodded slowly, considering Ariel’s news. How little I knew of the recent doings of my siblings! Once, not so long ago, we had all worked together, back before Mephisto’s madness, Gregor’s death, and Theo’s desertion. Now, that life seemed but a distant dream. I wondered if we would ever do anything together as a family again.

I could feel Ariel still hovering over my shoulder.

“Is there something else, Ariel?”

“Let me remember thee what thou hast promised, which is not yet performed,” came the soft answer.

“Oh? And that is?” Though, I knew, of course. We had this conversation nearly every time we spoke. Poor Ariel. He had been having this conversation with Father since his days as Father’s personal servant on the island, and he was still harping on the same note now that he had been promoted to running Father’s entire establishment. Only, when Father retired, he asked Ariel to stay with me, as there were many Aerie Ones back on Prospero’s Island and few competent enough to oversee the workings of this vast and multifaceted house.

“My liberty.”

“Before the time is out? No, Ariel. Neither you, nor any member of your race, will be released from your service to our family until the thousand years of the millennium you swore to serve have gone by. It has been a little over five hundred and fifty years since you swore to Father in Fourteen Fifty-Eight, the year of my birth. Be glad that you are finally more than half way through.”

“I pray you remember, I have done you worthy service; told you no lies, made no mistakings, served without grudge or grumbling: your father, the great and dread magician Prospero, did promise if I accomplished these things to free me one full century early.”

“Even then, you still have three and a half centuries to go, Ariel. Do you forget from what torments my father freed you? Or would you prefer to have remained within the cloven pine where the witch Sycorax had imprisoned you?”

“No,” Ariel replied sadly, “though still I dance to its tune.”

Mab snorted. I shot him a quelling glance.

“That will be all, Ariel!”

Ariel departed, but Mab still stood beside me, fidgeting with his fedora and frowning. I met his gaze evenly.

“And you are waiting for...”

“I’m on it, Ma’am,” he said quickly. “I’ll let you know as soon as I find something.”

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That evening, I lit a fire in the enormous hearth of the lesser hall. The night air had a crisp coolness to it, though not enough to warrant turning on the heat. The amount of oil it took to warm this drafty old mansion could keep a small town toasty for a year.

I sat cross-legged upon a priceless Persian rug before a coffee table that had once graced the Versailles of Louis XIV. To my left, the phoenix lamp shed red-gold sparks, illuminating the reflective objects upon the mantelpiece: a black marble bust of my father; the sapphire eyes of a little wooden figurine of an elf – a gift from my brother Mephisto; and a shiny vase of Jerusalem lilies. Nearby, amidst silk-covered pillows, my familiar, Tybalt, Prince of Cats, lay purring.

The matter of Father’s letter troubled me so much that I had decided to take an evening off from company business – something I seldom did. While Peaseblossom had been at Prospero’s Island, searching for my father, she had recovered some of Father’s journals. Officially, I was reading one of these, looking for clues that might give me some hint as to Father’s whereabouts; however, concern over Father’s disappearance kept disrupting my concentration. Finally, I closed the volume and let my thoughts wander over the past.

Shakespeare wrote a well-known account of my youth. His version tells how my father, Prospero, the Duke of Milan, was betrayed by his brother Antonio and sent into exile with only

his books and my infant self for company. Stranded on an island, Father freed Ariel from the cloven pine in which the witch Sycorax had imprisoned him and received in return, a promise of servitude from Ariel and his kind.

With the help of Ariel, Father called up a tremendous tempest. The storm blew to our island a ship carrying, among others, my wicked uncle Antonio, the King of Naples, and the king's handsome son, Prince Ferdinand.

I was, by this time, a young maid of fifteen – innocent and dewy-eyed – who had grown up with only Father and Caliban, the vile and misshapen son of the witch Sycorax, as company. Through the machinations of Father and Ariel, as Shakespeare tells it, I fell instantly in love with the handsome prince, the true perfidiousness of my wicked Uncle Antonio was brought to light, and Father was reconciled with the king. As we prepared for our triumphant return to Milan, where we were to celebrate the marriage of myself and Prince Ferdinand, Father drowned his magical tomes and freed his spirit servants.

Only Shakespeare did not get our story quite right. Father never drowned his books nor freed his airy servants. Nor did I marry Ferdinand, who was but a tool of Father's stratagem to reclaim Milan. At the age of five, Father consecrated me to Eurynome, the Lady of Spiral Wisdom and the Bearer of the Lightning Bolt. Handmaidens of Eurynome receive many privileges – among them immortality. Yet, every blessing has its price. Eurynome's other name is Monocerus, Greek for "one horn," and, unicorns only come to virgins. I was not about to trade immortality for the likes of Ferdinand, Prince of Naples!

Father finally did retire, three years ago. He turned his back on the modern world and moved back to our ancient island home. (Funny how the most solitary of prisons can become a longed-for haven.) Even then, however, he did not drown his books but gave them to us, his children. He split them among the eight of us, saving the most important volumes for me. After all, I had lived with him back in the days when books and airy spirits had been our sole companions – unless one counted Caliban, which I did not. Father also signed over to me this mansion and control of our company, Prospero, Inc.

What did I do with my share of his books? The same thing I did with all arcane tomes. I scoured them from cover to cover, searching for any hint as to the nature of the Sibyl, the highest order of Eurynome's servants.

During my first few decades in Her service, I rose rapidly, climbing from Initiate, to Novice, to Vestal Maiden, to Handmaiden in record time. Only the rank of Sibyl remained beyond my reach, and I yearned to be worthy of this final honor. Days turned into weeks, however, weeks into years, and years into centuries, yet Sibylhood continued to elude me.

After five hundred years of searching, I was beginning to get discouraged.

Alas, my latest glimmer of hope, Father's journals, was also proving unenlightening. In their pages were copious notes on ancient fertility rites, drafts of a metaphysical treatise on death and rebirth, numerous renditions of Father's latest attempts at poetry, and descriptions of some horticulture project; not a word of which shed light on the mystery I pursued.

When Father retired, I fancied him enjoying centuries of relaxing study. I had even harbored the secret hope that he might spend some of his copious free time helping me track down the Book of the Sibyl, an ancient volume in which the secrets of the Sibylline Order were recorded. After all, it had been Father who originally set me upon this path, so I had hoped he would be inclined to help further my progress..

I certainly had not expected him to vanish, leaving behind but a single cryptic note!

Leaning back against a large silk-covered pillow, I spoke to my familiar, purposefully making light of my growing concern. “If Father must release enemies to hunt down the family, he could certainly have picked a more convenient time to do it! I wonder what these Three Shadowed Ones are. Efretes, maybe? Or brollachan? I swear I’ve heard the name before. Do you recognize it?”

The black cat opened one golden eye and regarded me disdainfully. Raising his head, he glanced this way and that, as if to confirm no one else was present.

“Were you talking to me?”

“I was.”

“Did you not notice I was napping?”

“You always nap. If I waited for you to wake up, I could never talk to you...which would make you useless as a familiar.”

“I will be useless as a familiar if you disturb me while I am cavorting with the Dream Gods,” the cat replied.

“Were you really cavorting with the Dream Gods?” I asked, curious.

Tybalt did not answer.

“This is a very busy time of the year for Prospero, Inc.,” I continued. “We have nine large contracts due to be completed before the New Year, not to mention the myriad of other matters to be seen to: the Johannesburg office is being remodeled and is all in disarray, the Zurich office is in the midst of three major purchases – a real estate firm, a confectionary chain, and a watch factory, and we have warehouses all over the world working overtime to fill requests from retailers who need more stock before the final Christmas rush. Worse, five of the contracts coming due are Priority Accounts, and you know how touchy those can be!”

“How inconsiderate of your father.” The cat yawned. “A more thoughtful man would have waited until after Christmas to disappear. Perhaps we should ask these Three Shadowed Ones to hold off until after the New Year before they begin attacking your family.

“Ah, if only...” I sighed, smiling at my own expense.

“What puzzles me,” continued the cat, “is why your father asked you to warn the others. He must have known you were busy and that you don’t like your siblings anyway...all those latecomers, born after you and Prospero returned from exile.”

“It’s not their birth order I object to, so much as what they’ve done recently. When they are loyal to Father, I like them just fine, most of them anyway,” I objected. “Besides, I adore Theo.”

“For all the good that will do you,” Tybalt replied. “If there even is a Theophrastus anymore. How old would he be now? Sixty? Eighty?”

“Well over five hundred,” I replied, deliberately ignoring the cat’s point.

Unbidden, the faces of my six living half-brothers and one half-sister arose before me, few of them dear to me, but all of them familiar...family. I thought about Gregor, who had died in 1924. I had never cared much for Gregor, nor had I been close to him. Yet I had genuinely grieved when he died. Father had been so distraught, he had gone into seclusion for three years.

“I don’t know, Tybalt,” I shook my head. “My brothers may have failed the company, and mankind for that matter, but they are still my brothers. Perhaps, Father asked me because he thought I was the only one of his children who would obey him.”

“You are certainly the only one who always obeys him.” Tybalt watched me, unblinking. “What are these Three Shadowed Ones after?”

I gazed into the fire, enjoying its warmth upon my face. The logs crackled. The flames leapt like dancing imps, casting flickering shadows against the back wall of the great hearth. Tybalt waited patiently, fixing me with his unblinking stare.

Finally, I sighed. “Our staffs.”

“Oh, dear. That could be less than pleasant for you!” the cat exclaimed. “After all, what would the mighty Prosperos be without their staffs? Heaven forbid you should become perfectly ordinary humans.”

I shot the black feline a sideways glance. “Ah, how very droll you are.”

The cat fixed me with his golden eyes. “You do not fool me, Daughter of Prospero, with your affectation of icy disdain. I know you are terrified for your father’s safety. He may be the Dread Magician Prospero, but even dread magicians can go astray, especially if they meddle with that which is even more dreadful.”

With my comfortable mask of mild concern pierced, the fears besetting my heart poured out. “How could anything have happened to Father?” I cried. “I thought he had grown tired of magic. Why would he take it up again? If only he had let me know he was planning something dangerous, I could have stood by to help! He has always appreciated my help in the past!”

“Perhaps, this recent mishap was an accident – Dread Prospero was strolling in the garden and stumbled over a flower pot which contained some horror once bound up by your brother Gregor and his ring, inadvertently releasing it.” My familiar tilted his head to one side, his gaze acute. “Or maybe he wished to perform some act of magic of which he thought you would disapprove?”

“Me? Disapprove?” I cried, aghast. “Why would I disapprove of anything Father thought suitable?”

“Why indeed?” The cat echoed softly.

“At the very least, he might have told his servants where he was going!”

“Now, now, Handmaiden of Eurynome, fret not.” Tybalt leapt lightly onto my lap and rubbed his cheek against mine. “Would you like me to inquire among the denizens of the dreamlands and the spirits that wander afar?”

“Yes.” I quickly wiped away a stray tear before he could spot it and mock me. “That would be very nice.”

The cat turned about three times, kneaded my legs with his soft paws, before settling down, his black body vibrating with contentment. I stroked his sleek fur, touched that this prickly cat had felt my plight so great he was willing to put aside his eternal snideness to comfort me.

“Very well, then.” His voice was a gentle purr. “Shall we see what the Guardians of Dream have heard?”

I would have responded, but when I glanced over, I saw he had fallen asleep again, his tail twitching. Smiling, I left him to his dreams. Who knows? Maybe he was cavorting with Dream Gods.

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Mab stood in the doorway of my office in the mansion, fidgeting with his hat. “It’s bad, Ma’am...you’re not going to like it.”

I glanced up from behind the desk, where I had been answering company email while speaking on the phone to Foxglove from Accounts Receivable. I had spent the day juggling

matters at Prospero, Inc., trying to insure that service to our Priority Contracts would continue uninterrupted, should the matter of Father's message require that I leave town. In the three year since I had become the executive officer, I had not bothered to take a vacation, so no precedent had been set for how to handle matters in my absence. Thus, I was now conducting a sort of corporate triage, giving certain vice presidents my cellphone number, while turning other of my projects over to subordinates, and putting still others on hold until after the Christmas season.

Hanging up the phone, I regarded Mab as he chaffed his arms against the chill. I was more fortunate; a small space heater hummed away to my left, blowing a pleasant dry heat upon me where I sat behind my great rosewood desk.

"Yes, Mab? Go on. What am I not going to like?"

"I traced Mr. Mephistopheles to Chicago...that's the last known location where he's approached a Prospero, Inc. office for money. With some additional research, I located a person matching his size and description. The official I talked to described a guy with longish black hair who was wearing a poncho when he was apprehended. Oh, and he answered to 'Mephisto.'"

"Official? Apprehended?" I reached down and turned off the space heater, so as to hear better.

"Prison official, Ma'am. He's in jail."

"What was he arrested for? Drunken and disorderly conduct?"

"Apparently, he does have a previous conviction of that nature. But, this is more serious, Ma'am," Mab paused. "He has been accused of...of rape."

Of all crimes, rape is the one I most abhor. In my youth, my father's horrible servant Caliban had thrown me down and broken my arm in his attempt to dishonor me. The memory of his betrayal still haunted my nightmares, even centuries later, and my heart went out to all my sisters who had suffered such degradations. My relatives all knew how I felt about this heinous act. Even in their soldiering days, my brothers were careful never to mistreat women.

Were I raped, my own discomfort and humiliation would be nothing compared to the harm my family would suffer. Loss of my innocence would deprive me of my station as Eurynome's Handmaiden. Since the blessings this station brought included the Water of Life that maintains my family's immortality, a rapist would, in effect, murder my whole family.

Father and I differed sharply as to the proper punishment for monsters who attempt this crime. I had always held that rapists, even attempted rapists, should be killed. Father favored a more lenient sentence. Years after our rise to power, I returned to our island prison to seek my own revenge but found no sign of father's loathsome servant.

"If my brother has become a rapist, let him rot!" I thumped the rosewood desk. "Even family honor does not demand I protect him under these circumstances. Perhaps Providence will arrange that the Three Shadowed Ones get him. Modern justice is far too gentle."

"He claims he's innocent."

If Mephistopheles were guilty of rape, he could hang for all I cared. In fact, I hoped he would. If he were innocent, however, locking him in prison would make him a helpless target. We might as well hand him over to the Shadowed Ones on a platter.

"Okay, Mab. Where is he?"

"Chicago, Ma'am."

"I'll have Ariel pack the usual gear, and we'll leave first thing in the morning." I rose. "But first, I need something from the Great Hall."