

# That Which Must Be Heard

a *Carnival Row* fanfic

by **Rodo**

for **thereinafter**

OVER THE DECADES, Aoife had seen many girls become young women, then mothers, then crones, and finally, she'd seen them die. It was the way of things for fae who lived among the humans, and by and large, it hadn't been a burden. Not to her. But the girl – now a young woman – who stood before her was different. Piety had always been a curious girl, with an interest in haruspexy that others thought unseemly. Now, she was a young woman with an iron will, her future on her mind and questions she had the means to answer, but not the wisdom not to.

“Will you help me?” Piety asked, eyes pleading.

Aoife hummed and continued in her task – mixing herbs, spices and more unsavory things into a potion. Maybe, just maybe, Aoife thought, she shouldn't have shared as much as she had with the girl. Affection had clouded her mind as it rarely did. Piety had so many questions, but not the ability to accurately judge which were the right ones to ask.

“Which of my two suitors will be the greater man?” she had asked.

Aoife sighed and measured the sage. A good question, maybe, for a young woman looking for an advantageous match. A bad one for a haruspex, who knew that omens were as treacherous as quicksand. A bad questions could lead one down the path to ruin, all the way tricking you into believing you were walking towards the brightest of futures. And now, thanks to Piety's question, Aoife found herself at a crossroads that might lead her to similarly disparate outcomes.

“That depends,” she answered, putting away the sage and taking the dried cow's blood off the shelf.

“On what?”

Piety was impossibly cute when cross still, and Aoife couldn't help but smile. This girl was the daughter she never had, even if she was of a different species.

“On whether you're willing to listen to what I have to say.”

In a quick motion, Piety grabbed Aoife's free hand in both of hers. "I wouldn't be here if I wasn't," she promised, a hint of madness in her eyes that might only grow if fed.

"I'm sure you think that," Aoife replied, taking back her hand and going back to her work.

For a moment, Piety was silent, hands still hovering where Aoife's had been. "What do you mean by that?"

Aoife sighed and focused on her task. "You always were a bright child, girl. You learned the principles of haruspexy almost as fast as your numbers. But you lack wisdom. You ask a question, but you don't ask yourself whether it is the question you should ask yourself, and whether haruspexy can help you answer it."

For a moment, Aoife lifted her eyes to look at her student's face. Another lesson, hopefully not too late.

"And what question should I ask?"

Aoife smiled. "Do you truly want to know? And will you listen to what I have to say?"

The silence lasted longer this time. Piety looked past Aoife, at the wall, eyes far away, brows furrowed. Aoife lowered her eyes again and added the oak ash next, mixing everything well. There was a calm in her work, a focus, something she had never found in any other activity.

"I will listen," Piety finally said.

Aoife wasn't quite ready to believe it, but still. "You ask which one of your suitors will be the greater man. You do not ask which will be the better husband, which will offer you a better life, which you should marry. Why did you choose your question?"

"Because it answers all of them – the greater man will offer me a better life, he will make a better husband and so I should marry him."

Aoife laughed, loud and raspy, startling her student. "Oh, the naivety of youth."

"Don't mock me..."

"I don't, child. I simply know that life isn't quite as easy and uncomplicated as you make it out to be. And I know a wrong question when I hear it."

"So, what do you think I should ask instead?" Piety sounded angry now, and agitated. Aoife could understand it. She had made plans, after all, clever plans, and only come to her to be reaffirmed in her determination to climb Mount Carpe and consult the oracle there.

"A simple question, with a simple answer. Sometimes, that is better than all the haruspexy in the world. The heart, you see, has its own magic, even if it is not one I use often."

"So you're telling me to—"

“Listen to your heart, yes. Marry the one you want to marry. All things considered, I have found the heart to be more reliable in these matters than omens. Even parents tend to be a better advisor than witches when it comes to marriage.”

“But Absalom...”

“May have many great qualities, but none of them will make him a better choice for you, my dear.”

Piety sighed, staring past Aoife again, no doubt weighing her two suitors when her heart already knew the answer. It was time to add the wine now, and heat the mixture. When Aoife poured the dark liquid into the pot, thoughts on her student, she caught a glimpse of a man – a little rotund, with an aura larger than his body. And behind him, a shadow that was even bigger than he was. At once, she knew that he was the man who hadn’t managed to capture Piety’s heart, just like she knew that choosing him might prove fatal. There was an aura of fate about this Absalom, and fate was never kind.

“Maybe you’re right,” Piety finally sighed. “Ritter is going to be a great man too.”

“And there is always you,” Aoife assured her. “You can help him climb higher than he would on his own. A wife can turn her husband into something he would never become on his own.”

A small, dark smile spread on Piety’s face, lighting up her eyes with hunger. Aoife had been right, she craved something more than greatness in a husband, and that was greatness of her own. Her parents – fools that they were – had never seen fit to foster those ambitions in their daughter. When Piety left, there was a new fire burning in her heart, turning thoughts of oracles and magic to ash. Soon enough, Aoife would receive word of an engagement to Ritter Longerbane, of a marriage, a son. But for now, she had a potion to finish.

*Fin*