

The Forgotten Bracelet

The market economy at school is hard to break into. Not only was there a lot of competition, but most of the students didn't have much disposable income. Some kids found success selling snacks, drinks, or homework. One girl, Mariel, was interested in joining the ranks of entrepreneurs. Mariel didn't *need* a job but still wanted some spending money of her own. She felt that the only way to break into the economy at her high school was by getting creative, so she chose something with untapped potential—fortune-telling. After buying an electric kettle, a few cups, some cheap loose leaf tea, and a poster board, her tea leaf reading business was ready to go. Initially, business was slow. Her customers mostly consisted of the goths and the curious. But soon, word started spreading that her readings were accurate. Since she only charged five dollars, and was the only one at school offering psychic services, her business boomed.

It was Friday after school and most of the kids had already gone home. The orange glow of the sun coming in from the window told Mariel that it was time to head home herself. She grabbed her tote bag and started putting her supplies away. Suddenly a girl ran up to her.

“Hey, are you still doing fortunes?” she asked.

“Well I was about to leave, but I can do one more. Have a seat,” Mariel said as she pulled her things back out. First, she turned on the kettle. While waiting for the water to bubble, she opened her tin of finely cut English afternoon tea and poured a small spoon of leaves into a green cup. They both sat in comfortable silence while they waited. Mariel looked out the window while the other girl observed her. Before long, the water was ready. Mariel poured the water into the cup and set her hourglass timer. After the time was up, she topped it off with a splash of cold water from the water fountain to cool it down. A trick she had learned after impatience caused her to burn her tongue several times. She placed it on the floor.

“Is it ready?” asked the girl.

“Yup. By the way, what's your name?” asked Mariel.

“Vanica.”

“Nice to meet you. Anyway, first I need to ask, what exactly do you want to know about the future?”

“I don't know. What do most people want?”

“Sometimes people just want general readings, other times they have questions about grades or money or family and stuff.”

“I guess a general reading,” Vanica said as she reached for the cup.

“Focus on your desire of wanting a general reading as you drink it, and stop when there's still some liquid left on the bottom. Just enough so that you can still swirl the leaves.”

Vanica nodded in reply and started sipping. She looked at the poster board beside Mariel who was leaning against the wall. It said, “Tea Leaf Readings-\$5” in big black letters at the top, and then listed some rules beneath it. The letters were smaller but in all caps and read “NO REFUNDS, NO LOVE FORTUNES, YOU BREAK IT YOU BUY IT”.

“What's with those rules?” Vanica asked as she pointed to the poster board.

“The one about the refunds was always there, I added the other two after this one time when a guy asked if he was going to find a date for prom and when I told him no, he broke my cup and refused to pay for it.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. But doing love fortunes is just a bad idea in general. They're too touchy, too volatile, and people get real mad if you say the wrong thing.”

“So, why did you start doing fortunes in the first place?”

“I wanted some money and I’d been reading my own fortunes for a while so I thought why not do it for other people.”

“Where’d you get the supplies?” asked Vanica. Mariel perked up at the question.

“There’s this store called ‘Spiritual Earth’ that has all kinds of cool witchy stuff like books and cards and herbs. I walked in there out of curiosity and found these books.” Mariel showed her her reference books on how to read tea leaves and coffee grounds. “I got the kettle for my birthday, the tea from a supermarket, and the cups from an estate sale.”

“How much money do you make from this?”

“At first only like 20 dollars a week, but now it’s like 50 to 100 a week. But that’s the total, as in not including the cost of the tea and the supplies,” said Mariel. Vanica looked at her cup and then showed it to Mariel.

“Is this enough water?”

“Yeah. Now just swirl it three times and let me drain it,” said Mariel. Vanica swirled the cup and then gave it to her. They waited a minute for the liquid to drain and then Mariel began to study it with a look of concern on her face.

“What is it? Is it something bad?” asked Vanica. Mariel looked up at her with worry and then chuckled.

“Sorry I was just messing with you. I actually see a large branch near the rim on the right which indicates that you will succeed in carrying out your plans. There is also a lot of wealth which will closely follow the newfound success.” She turned the cup around slowly while still looking at it. “But at the very bottom I see envy. Probably someone who is going to be jealous of your newfound wealth, so watch out.”

“Wow you actually see all that? How accurate are these fortunes anyway?”

Mariel paused to think. “Well, the symbols are always true, it's just a matter of knowing how to interpret them. For example, the number three can mean three days, or three months, or it can symbolize bringing joy to others. It usually depends on the context, like what question the other person asked and what else is in the cup. But overall I would say my predictions are 70 percent accurate. But they aren't necessarily set in stone. For example if you get one saying that you're gonna lose a ton of money, it doesn't mean losing it is inevitable. It's more of a warning. Like it's telling you, ‘you will lose your money unless you start being more cautious.’ You know what I mean?”

“Yeah. Well this was fun, thanks,” Vanica said as she stood up and swung her backpack over her shoulder. Mariel was sad to see her go. Oftentimes people just come to get their question answered and leave, but this felt more real. Maybe it was the intimacy of being alone on a Friday evening, or maybe it was just Vanica's willingness to talk to her.

“Hey, if you ever want to just drink tea for fun, I'm always here after school. We can try this fancy shoumei white tea I bought. It's really cool, they compressed it into a little brick and it has mandarin peel mixed in,” said Mariel.

“Yeah that sounds fun. I might come by some time.”

Vanica left and Mariel was alone. The sunlight was getting dimmer meaning it was definitely time to go. She noticed that there was still some water left in the kettle. Although she used to read her own fortune a lot for practice, she stopped doing it once her little business took off. But there was just enough water left in the kettle for one more cup, so she decided to do her own reading. The cheap tea she used for these readings hardly tasted good, but it worked fine and helped her keep prices down. Having been used to the sublime flavors of the fine teas she

bought with her profits, this tasted especially bitter. She finished the cup, drained it, and then gazed inside.

Let's see what we have here. She looked into the cup curiously and then stared into it more seriously. *Good friend, jealousy, greed, loss of money, broken relationship.*

It was Monday morning and Mariel rushed to the stairwell to meet with her friend Ryan before class started.

"I got your text, what did you want to talk about?" Mariel mumbled.

"Well, don't freak out, but there is some news. You know how you said that you liked doing the tea leaf readings because no one else was doing anything like it?" Ryan said nervously.

"Yeah."

"Well, that's over. While I was eating breakfast in the cafeteria, I saw that there's a girl there offering to read runes for three dollars."

"What?! Who is it?" shouted Mariel, now wide awake.

"You might not know her, she's a sophomore, I think her name's Vanica or something."

"Wait, *she's* the one doing it?"

"You know her?"

"Yeah she came to me on Friday to read her cup. She asked me a bunch of questions, I thought she wanted to be friends or something."

"Well, I figured you'd be curious about it so I asked her to read them for me."

"You paid her?!"

"Yes but it was to help you!"

"And?"

“Well, you already know I don’t know much about this stuff. But first she told me to ask any question I wanted, and I asked what grade I was gonna get on my finals. She grabbed a bunch of rocks, or runes, or whatever they’re called and put them inside a bag. Then she shook the bag and let a few of them fall out. After staring at them for a second, she said I would get mostly Bs and one A, and that was it,” said Ryan. Mariel looked back at him with confusion.

“Wait, that’s not even how runes work. You can’t ask specific questions like that because it can’t answer them. At most it would have said pass or fail, or that you need to study more, and you’re not supposed to just shake them out of the bag! Not only is she trying to take my money, she’s just lying to people!” yelled Mariel. The bell rang for class to start but it was clear she wasn’t done talking about this.

“I’m real sorry this happened, but I figured it was better that I tell you before you saw it.”

“Ugh, I can’t believe she stole my idea!”

“Did she, though?” asked Ryan. A piercing glare from Mariel told him to choose his words carefully.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“W-well, I’m just saying, you didn’t exactly invent fortune-telling, you just happened to be the only one doing it. And she’s not even doing the same kind.”

“But she’s charging less than me, and trying to steal my customers!”

“But it makes sense that she’s charging less because she uses less supplies and it’s faster. Yours is more of an interactive experience.” Even though he was trying to calm her down, Mariel still looked upset. “Look, I know you feel like she’s stealing your idea, but think about the other people around here who sell stuff. There’s like 11 kids who sell snacks, one of them only sells cookies, we’ve got multiple people in our grade who do homework, and we even have

a bunch of choir kids who sell the fundraiser chocolate. Yes you have competition now, but so does everyone else and they're doing just fine. Besides, you have one thing she doesn't and that's a reputation. Everyone knows you're the one to go to for accuracy." Mariel paused to think for a second and took a deep breath.

"You're right. Given the *lies* she told you, it's obvious she's just making things up. I'm just gonna mind my own business, and focus on myself until she fails," said Mariel calmly. Ryan was going to comment on the last part but decided it was best to stay quiet.

Mariel's vision of her righteous triumph and Vanica's well-deserved failure did not come to fruition. Vanica's lethal combination of low prices, quick service, and lack of limitations were destroying Mariel's profits and sanity. The thought of destroying Vanica's cutesy mass-produced crystal runes crossed her mind, but given how easy they were to replace, it would have been pointless.

It was Friday after school and all Mariel had to show for that whole week was 15 dollars. She usually stayed after school for a while to do more tea leaf readings, but she was in no mood to talk to anyone and decided to call it a day. She was walking down the hallway when she heard people talking around the corner.

"I see 'ansuz', a message from the universe that you will get the good grades you desire." It was Vanica.

"Really? So I'll pass the semester?" Mariel recognized the other voice as well. It was her first and most frequent customer, Hannah.

"Yes, and over here I see the symbol for 'ice', symbolizing a cold relationship in your life," said Vanica, with a bizarre mystical tone. Mariel listened, enraged.

“Can you find out if my boyfriend lied about hanging out with his friends two days ago?” asked Hannah.

“I sure can,” said Vanica. She shook out another rune from the bag. “It says here he was telling the truth.”

“Are you sure? Because I asked his friend Jake and he said that they all went to the movies but that he didn’t go because he was busy, but when I went to his place his mom said he was hanging out with Jake at someone else’s house,” said Hannah. Vanica listened intently and then took a closer look at the rune.

“Oh wait a second, I think you might be right. I can’t say for sure why he lied but I do see deception here.”

“Stop lying to people! That’s not how runes work!” shouted Mariel as she turned the corner towards Vanica and Hannah, startling them both. Vanica stood up and looked at her defiantly.

“Could you leave? We’re in the middle of something,” said Vanica. Mariel turned towards Hannah.

“Stop paying her for this!” Mariel picked up the bag of runes. “She’s making everything up, she can’t tell if your boyfriend cheated on you two days ago by looking at a bunch of rocks!” She threw the runes at the wall, making a sharp sound. Hannah was worried that things would escalate so she grabbed her things and ran off.

“What is your problem?” yelled Vanica.

“You know exactly what my problem is! You stole my idea!”

“Oh really? Since when do you do rune casting?”

“You stole my fortune telling idea and you’re taking away all my customers!”

“Calm down, you’re just mad because you don’t have a fortune-telling monopoly anymore.”

“No I’m not, I’m mad because you don’t even read runes! You’re just making things up!”

“Last I checked none of this crap is based on science, which means that it’s *all* made up. Those stupid reference books you use were probably just written by some scammer who wanted to make easy money from gullible people like you.”

“If all of this stuff is so stupid, then why did you ask me to read your tea cup?”

“Even though I don’t believe in this stuff, everyone else said your predictions were accurate. So I went to you to find out if my idea would work out or not, and you told me that I would succeed and find wealth, which I did. But you also said that there would be jealousy, which is clearly coming from you.”

Mariel’s tears of anger wouldn’t let her speak, so instead she swung her heavy tote bag hard at Vanica, who stumbled into the wall. Mariel wanted to rip Vanica’s hair out but if she did, she risked getting expelled. So instead, she turned and walked away.

Although Vanica wanted Mariel’s weekly earnings of 100 dollars for herself, she didn’t necessarily want to hurt her. She was somewhat touched when Mariel offered to share her fancy white tea with her, but knew the offer would disappear once she started casting runes.

“If you want to keep doing things by the book that’s fine but you’re never gonna make money that way,” shouted Vanica. Mariel stopped. “The only reason people go to fortune tellers in the first place is so that someone will tell them what they want to hear.”

Mariel had saved up most of her profits over time and, as a result, had an impressive stash of money at home. She decided it was time to use it and invested it in her little business.

She bought better tasting tea, replaced her bargain teacups with cuter ones, and started offering snacks. When that didn't work, she changed her poster board. She removed the rules and lowered her price to three dollars, just like Vanica. The change in price brought more people to her, but she lost most of her money to the snacks and expensive tea. She tried to remedy this by removing the snacks and switching back to cheap tea, however this was met with complaints. So instead, she tried to raise the price back up to five dollars while keeping the snacks and expensive tea, but she lost customers again and was back to only making 15 dollars a week.

It was the end of another fruitless week for Mariel. She was waiting in the hallway for anyone who might want a fortune. The sky was gray from the rain earlier and it was starting to get dark, so she decided it was time to go home. As she stood up she heard footsteps come towards her. She turned and saw that it was Hannah.

“Hey, can you read my cup? It's an emergency,” said Hannah.

“Sure,” Mariel sighed, “have a seat.” She took out the kettle, filled it with water, turned it on, and dumped the leaves into a black cup. They waited silently. Hannah tapped her fingers the whole time while Mariel rested her chin on her hand. After a few minutes the water was ready. There was no need to tell Hannah the instructions since she had already heard them plenty of times. Hannah gulped down the tea until there was the right amount of liquid left and handed over the black teacup. Mariel flipped it over and waited for it to drain. Hannah's constant finger tapping was starting to get on Mariel's nerves, so she decided to flip the cup back over a little sooner than usual.

“Oh wait,” said Mariel, “I forgot to ask, what was your question?”

“I need to know if my boyfriend Connor is cheating on me,” replied Hannah.

Mariel tried hard not to not roll her eyes. *How many times do I have to tell you that's not how this works.*

“I know you’ve said a bunch of times you can’t see that in tea leaves but Vanica said that *she* can so that means you should be able to too.”

Mariel sighed and looked at the cup anyway. She turned it around, looking at it from every angle.

“It says ‘stability’,” said Mariel.

“But I know he’s been lying to me. He keeps saying he’s going here and there but when I go to check, he isn’t where he says he’ll be! And he keeps dodging my questions about it and he’s also been acting really weird,” said Hannah.

Mariel has always been annoyed by Hannah’s tea leaf readings but this one was particularly irritating. She sighed and took another look at the cup. Still there was nothing. She looked up at Hannah, ready to deliver the unpleasant news that she was wrong and that her beloved boyfriend was not a cheater. As she looked at Hannah’s eager expression, she suddenly heard Vanica’s words in her head. *The only reason people go to you is so they can have someone tell them what they want to hear.* Mariel looked at the cup again.

“Well?” Hannah asked impatiently.

“I just took a closer look and I noticed a carnation at the very bottom, and that can mean betrayal or unfaithfulness.”

“Oh my god really? So I was right? He’s been cheating on me with Jessica, hasn’t he!”

“Well,” Mariel paused, “it seems like it, yes. I even see a crooked letter ‘J’, although I can’t guarantee that it stands for ‘Jessica’.”

“I knew it, I knew it!” Hannah quickly grabbed her things and left. Mariel watched her run off, hoping this would be enough to revive her business.

Mariel was walking home, sad from her lack of success, but hopeful that Vanica’s advice would help. She was less than a block away from the school when she felt something yank her backpack hard.

“Thanks a lot, freak show.” It was Hannah’s notorious boyfriend, Connor.

“What?” Mariel said nervously.

“Thanks to you and your stupid tea Hannah broke up with me!” he yelled.

“Wait wait, I never told her to break up with you.”

“Oh really? You didn’t tell her I was cheating on her with Jessica?”

“Well, not exactly, she was the one who suggested it. I told her there was nothing there but she wouldn’t believe me and then she kept insisting that I confirm—”

“I don’t care what she said! Everything else you’ve said to her came true and now that you told her I cheated on her she won’t believe anything I say! I was gonna take her to the spring dance but now I can’t, thanks to you and your Satanist crap!”

“It’s not Sata—” before Mariel could finish her sentence, Connor ripped her tote bag from her hand. “Wait give that back!” she yelled. She lunged forward to grab her bag but he pushed her, knocking her down. Connor grabbed her expensive kettle and threw it across the street. Then he took out her instructional books and tossed them towards a muddy puddle near Mariel. She leaped forward to try and grab them but couldn’t catch them in time and landed in the mud herself. She looked back helplessly at Connor as he flipped the bag over, letting all the cups fall

out and shatter on the concrete. Once there was nothing left inside, he threw the empty bag at Mariel and stormed off.

Mariel tried to salvage what she could, but it was useless. The electric kettle was dented and had the power button smashed in. The books were drenched in mud and impossible to read, and the pages were so wet that some of them ripped out when she tried to flip through them. Most of the cups were broken beyond repair. The only things that weren't ruined were the tote bag and the tea, which would have been the easiest to replace. She picked everything up and walked home. Once there, she changed out of her dirty clothes and threw everything away. After taking a long shower she laid in bed, sad and defeated, trying to make sense of everything that happened.

She should have known that only someone as crazy as Hannah would be willing to date her. How come none of this happened to Vanica, she thought. She immediately stopped herself, realizing that being jealous of Vanica is what got her into this mess in the first place. However, Vanica was always more vague about her lies, probably to prevent something like this from happening. She should have listened to Ryan and minded her own business. Maybe if she had, there would have only been a small dip in her earnings rather than being completely in the red. Even Connor admitted that she was good at fortune-telling. Maybe that reputation really was all she needed. But thanks to the reckless spending she did in an attempt to beat Vanica, there was nothing left over to replace the cups or the kettle. Maybe that was for the best. At least this way she wouldn't have to see Hannah anymore. Plus she was turning 16 soon, so maybe she could find a job at a tea or coffee shop, or maybe even at that store, Spiritual Earth.

Maribel got up off the bed and walked to her dresser. She opened a drawer to get out her hair brush, and remembered a cute hair pin she bought months ago at an estate sale. She found a lot of nice things at that sale, including the teacups, some hair pins, and a jewelry box. After such a rough day, she felt that she deserved a small treat, even if it was just a pretty trinket in her hair. She dug through the drawer to get to the jewelry box and pulled it out. It was small but very ornate. She opened it and found the hair pins, but just beneath it was something else. Something important that she had forgotten. It was an evil eye bracelet that she had planned to wear when she started doing tea leaf readings.