

The First Chapters Writing Contest

The Vision Casting Chronicles by
Morgan Tucker

(Winning Entry from 2021)



The Vision Casting Chronicles - Morgan Tucker

Set in a fictional version of the 18th century. Kerrigan is an enslaved teen with the magical ability to create “visions” who escapes slavery to find her long-lost brother and, in the process, ends up pitted against the most powerful military leader in the Caribbean. To locate her brother, she must break the law and convention by learning to hone her powers. Along the way she uncovers a mysterious organization of fellow vision casters and a dangerous conspiracy that only she can stop.

One

A slave who wished to keep a roof over her head must always appear pleasant, wellmannered, and content. And above all, she should never mention vision casting. I often found it easier to follow this advice if I stared ahead at a spot on the wall and pretended I was somewhere else. That day a faded oil painting on Old Man Botterman’s wall happened to be in my line of sight. In the painting, a ship with white sails rose over large, imposing waves.

Closing my eyes, I saw myself aboard the ship - the salt air rushing past my face and the pull of an unknown adventure beyond the horizon. I fought the urge to breathe deep as, against my will, a prickling ball of energy grew in my chest. The feeling sent a shock of alarm through my senses, and I snuffed it out with a sigh. Focus, Kerrigan. The last thing I needed was to cast an accidental vision. I had to appear as normal as possible - at least until the sale went through.

If Old Man Botterman didn’t agree to buy me Sister Beattie would have me on the next ship overseas that afternoon. If that happened, there would definitely be no chance of me ever seeing my brother again. I would do anything to prevent that, which is how I found myself standing in front of a bitter, old man being appraised like a cow at the market.

Some said that Botterman's house had once been an enviable estate. Those days had long gone. Instead, the property had fallen into a state of total disrepair that was almost impressive. Glancing around at the moth eaten curtains, soiled upholstery and mossy walls it was a wonder anyone lived there at all. It would take a month of relentless cleaning just to resuscitate the living room. Funny enough, the thought gave me a morbid sense of comfort. Menial, backbreaking work would leave little time to think, and there were few things I dreaded more than being alone with my thoughts.

Botterman leaned back in his wooden chair and watched me with narrowed eyes. His white wig, about one hundred years old like himself, was tied with a frayed black ribbon. He wore a faded Royal Alliance uniform, which looked to be unwashed since it was first fashioned. A fat, orange cat sat in his lap. The creature glared at me as Botterman stroked its fur.

Shifting on my feet beside the soot-caked fireplace I tried to look "capable, but not high-minded," as Sister Beattie had warned me against.

"Can she clean?" snapped Botterman. "Storm whipped through here last week and made a mess in the cupboard. I need a slave girl who can clean."

"Yes, sir," said Sister Beattie, sweat beading on her upper lip as she stretched her pale, pudgy mouth into something like a smile. "She's a hard worker, this one. Cooked and cleaned at the orphanage these past seven years. And she's just fifteen, so you'll get good work out of her."

"Humph. We'll see about that. You, girl," said Botterman, his black eyes shooting darts, "go sit over there."

His bony finger jutted toward a stool near the window. I hurried to obey as Sister Beattie's eyes followed me across the room, daring me to ruin the sale.

I took a seat before the window and glanced through the dirty glass past the grassy hill to the ocean surrounding Barbados. As usual, Royal Alliance ships flanked the dock at port. In my opinion, they ruined the view though I would never say it aloud. I stiffened as Botterman hobbled to my side, bringing the stench of spoiled milk and tobacco.

"My old slave, Eliza, used to sit on that stool mending clothes," said the old man. "She was with my family for fifty years. Few months ago, I sent her to gather firewood, and she came back three hours late. Found out she'd disobeyed me and went to see her grandchildren in the next parish. I had her sold overseas the next day."

A burst of heat flared in my chest. I crushed it back, gritting my teeth. *Well-mannered. Pleasant. Content.*

"That's what happens when slaves step out of line!" snapped Botterman, inches away from my face.

I held my breath. Finally, he turned away, limping back to his chair.

"These are my golden years, Sister Beattie," continued Botterman. "I'm a war hero. Served with Admiral Steele himself. I deserve to enjoy the fruit of my labor as history unfolds. Soon the Royal Alliance will defeat the Spanish, and we will take our place on the world's throne. The Royal Alliance is the new Rome bringing peace and order."

"Couldn't agree more, sir," nodded Sister Beattie. "Now I was thinking twenty shillings for the girl is a fair price."

"Humph," grumbled Botterman, taking his seat. "A man doesn't talk about money without a cup of brew nut tea."

"You heard him, girl," snapped Sister Beattie. "Go and fetch the man some tea!"

"Get the good pot!" Botterman commanded from his chair. I nodded, the muscles in my face burning from forcing a smile as I hurried down the short hall before descending the stone steps to the cellar.

Reaching the bottom, the stench of rotted vegetables slapped me in the face as something crunched under my feet. Looking down there were broken jars of mold-fuzzed food scattered across the floor. I covered my mouth to keep from gagging. *Most High, help me.* Although the thought of living in this house was sickening it was better than being sold overseas. That was a fate worse than death. I would survive this - I had to.

Just then, Botterman's horrible cat slipped through my feet before curling up on the ground before me with a hiss. Behind it, a glimmer of white caught my eye. My stomach tightened into knots.

"Nice kitty," I lied. Kneeling down, I reached past the foul creature and pick up a broken piece of what was undoubtedly the "good" teapot. My sight blurred and there was a sudden ringing in my ear. This was bad.

I'll just explain, I thought for a brief moment before tossing that idea aside. Botterman was not the reasonable sort. He would blame me, cancel the deal, and I'd be on the next ship overseas.

Biting my lip, I studied the broken fragments in my hands. *You can fix it,* a small part of me trilled. You don't know that I wanted to snap back. Besides, it was too risky. But then again...

I turned the ceramic over in my palm, taking note of the cobalt blue pattern of waves etched into its side. Beautiful. A lump grew in my throat, and I was filled with an

overwhelming desire to see the object whole again.

After all, the rule was not to mention vision casting, but as for using it? Well, what choice did I have? Besides, it would just be a small vision.

"You better not be stealing anything," shouted the old man from up above, shaking me from my thoughts. *It was now or never.*

Closing my eyes, I gathered energy to the center of my chest. Breath held, I focused on the image of an intact teapot--whole and shining. As I did, my hands began to glow. With the picture clear, I released, letting the energy flow through my body in a warm rush. Something hard and dark blocked the path through my chest. Fear. According to the mapmaker, nothing tainted a vision like it. Ignoring this sensation, I pushed harder. A moment later, the light in my hands pulsed before fading to reveal a perfect teapot.

A shot of euphoria burst through me in spite of myself. Vision casting was dangerous, and there was nothing as thrilling. With a sigh of relief, I glanced over the slightly shimmering teapot now held in my hands. It was a weak vision from the looks of it, but a vision nonetheless. And yet, the danger was far from past. After all, visions did not last forever.

I filled an iron pot from a pail of stagnant water and paused, startled by the reflection in its surface. It took me a moment to recognize myself. The girl staring back had deep brown skin, and some might have considered her pretty if not for her eyes. They were dark, almost black and too direct. Too frightened. It was like looking up on the beach to find a towering wave barreling towards you. It just wouldn't do.

I carefully adjusted my expression until it looked more docile and calmer. Then grabbing a handful of brewnut pods, I hurried back to the other room with the teapot on a prayer. *Please let the vision hold. Please.*

I placed the pot above the fire and waited, wringing my hands. Then, to my horror, the spout shimmered and faded a hair. My breath caught in my throat.

Meanwhile, racking with cough, Botterman spat before turning to Sister Beattie.

"I suppose I can take her off your hands. If it means that much to you."

"Oh! Bless you," said Sister Beattie, breaking into a red-cheeked smile. "You won't regret it."

Clenching the teapot, I held my breath. Any second now, the vision would disappear, revealing what I had done. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the water rumbled to a boil, and I exhaled, counting my blessings.

With trembling hands, I poured the rumbling water into the teapot.

"Your tea is ready, sir," I stammered.

"Took you long enough." Botterman barked.

I made my way to the old man's side, hands shaking as I aimed for his cup.

"Oh, just give it here, " he spat, snatching the teapot.

Of course, that was when it happened.

There was a flash of light, then a horrible howl. Botterman flew to his feet, his lap drenched in boiling water as he hopped about like some shriveled, manic frog.

"ARGH! SHE'S KILLED ME! THE LITTLE WITCH KILLED ME!"

Before I could process what had just happened, Sister Beattie's meaty hands took hold of my shoulders, shoved me towards the door as Botterman continued to howl.

"Out! Now!" said Sister Beattie, thrusting me into the blinding light. "And don't move a muscle until I say."

The wooden door slammed against my head as the world spun. An invisible rope seemed to tighten about my chest making it difficult to breathe as I stumbled away from that horrible house.

I had done it now. Sister Beattie would sell me to the tradesmen and I would be on the next slave ship overseas. Stumbling across the grass, I leaned against the trunk of a cherry tree and did my best to stop the rising tide of panic. *I must remain positive.* Looking out over the water a hundred white-sailed ships peppered the ocean. *And he could return on any one of them,* I reminded myself firmly. It could be any day now. After all, I just had to hold on until he came back.

As I considered this, my eye looked past the horizon and I recalled with a pang the poor woman Botterman had sent away from her home. Staring out at the ocean, I considered my own predicament. That poor woman's fate would be mine too.

Unless....

Minutes later, Sister Beattie burst from the house red-faced, her bonnet flapping in the wind.

"I've never been so embarrassed in all my days," the woman raged. "I toil away to find you a suitable home, and this is how you repay me? You're lucky Mr. Botterman doesn't have the prowlers whip you for unlawful casting. I convinced him to let me handle you. I hope you're happy."

I followed Sister Beattie back down the hill - lost in thought. No, I was not happy. I had not been happy in many years. But I now had an idea that might allow me to stay in Barbados without finding another owner. It would require me to practice vision casting -- something slaves were forbidden to do by law. However, the threat of

punishment was nothing compared to the alternative.

I did not look back as I followed Sister Beattie down the narrow, dirt path. I did not look back at the hill where Old Man Botterman's house sat or at the single, shimmering rose that now marked Eliza's memory in the afternoon sun.

It was early morning and still dark outside. My knees dug into the cold, hard ground as I pressed my palms into the grass. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to focus through the throbbing pain behind my eyelids. Still, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't summon that unmistakable tingling sensation that always rose in my chest before a vision. There was just nothing.

I had been up all night trying to vision cast with nothing to show for it except an aching, well, everything. And I was running out of time.

The rhythmic sound of waves pounding the rocks below in the dark flooded my senses. It made it difficult to form a clear thought. I had chosen this remote spot on the cliffside, hoping to remain unseen. But, actually, I felt more exposed than ever-like the ocean was screaming at me to give up and turn back.

Realizing I was getting nowhere, I paused to stretch out my arms. They ached from the day's work, and yet, no matter how I looked at it, I was lucky to still be on the island.

When Sister Beattie and I left Old Man Botterman's after the "incident," my stomach was in knots. I was sure she was taking me straight to Hometown and would sell me to the first slave trader we passed on the way. That's why when Sister Beattie took me back to St. James instead and gave me a list of chores that would take two people a week to complete, I almost wept with joy. I didn't ask questions; I just got to work.

And yet, all the while, I knew the temporary respite in Beattie's threats to sell me overseas was just that. Temporary. Sister Beattie was many things, but she wasn't stupid. In all likelihood, she was just buying her time until the best offer for me presented itself. After all, selling me was the quickest, most logical way to pay off her growing gambling debts.

If anything, what happened at Old Man Botterman's had shown me something important. If I wanted to stay in Barbados until my brother returned, I couldn't rely on Sister Beattie or anyone else. I had to take matters into my own hands, which meant

being able to cast a successful vision.

A twig cracked, and I glanced over my shoulder. Of course it was dangerous for an enslaved worker to be out at night. For one, there were the prowlers—men Judge Hollow hired to catch runaway slaves. But that was not the only danger lurking in the shadows. Far worse than prowlers roamed the plains at night, shadows and nightmares. I tried not to think about those things.

An involuntary shudder rippled through me as I drew my attention back to the hateful patch of empty grass in front of me. If I could just manage to cast a tent, I knew I could manage to survive independently.

I made my decision the moment I left Botterman's - I would run away and hide out in the plains. I'd stay off the paved roads, hunt small animals, grow food for myself if I had too. The Most High knew I had the skills. It was about time I used them for my own benefit.

Besides, it's not like it would be forever. It was only until Selassie came back to secure my freedom. Then we would live in the cabin dad built for us all those years ago. We would be free. Safe.

Pushing past the distractions, I conjured the familiar image of a canvas tent in my mind. Hundreds of the raised, white shelters covered the beach where the soldiers camped - like a symptom of a plague.

I almost shouted from joy when the familiar tingling warmth began to grow, spreading through my chest and arms. I guided the energy up towards the picture of the tent in my mind's eye, weaving them together as if I was working with silk. One wrong move, one false gesture could ruin the entire vision. However, to my relief, a light in my palms began to grow and take shape not long after.

I opened my palms and the vision spread over the ground, expanding and taking shape. When the light finally faded, a tent stood in its place—large enough for one person.

I felt a wave of joy followed by intense nausea, and I clutched my head to stop it from spinning. Casting a vision was like running full force up a steep hill, and I had been at it all night. Still, a glimpse of the tent with its edges glimmering in the moonlight made the effort worthwhile. It was more than a tent. It was hope.

Unfortunately, these happy thoughts were quickly cut short when I leaned in for a closer look at my work. My hand grazed the surface of the tent before slipping through as if cutting thin air. Then, without warning, the tent broke into tiny particles of lights.

“No!” I shouted at the pieces of my cast as they floated away in the dark like fireflies.

It was another weak cast - a vision caught between reality and imagination - entirely useless. Kneeling down I pounded the ground with my fists, forgetting for a moment that a slave has no legal right to despair.

Standing up, I paced, trying to recall the basics of casting the mapmaker had taught me. *Focus, courage, and strength*. Those were the foundations of an effective vision. But, as I clasped my glowing hands together again, I realized I’d never felt more scattered, frightened, and weak. Still, I had to try one more time, or the whole night would have been for nothing.

I knew my cast was off before I even started, and sure enough, no tent appeared when the light faded. Instead, I heard the frantic flutter of tiny wings.

An unusual sparrow chirped at my feet, its brilliant blue feathers glowing like a sapphire in the dim light. Its wild wings beat the air, but the bird did not fly despite its effort. Instead, it simply writhed on the ground flapping in desperation.

I had cast this involuntary vision many times. It had a bad habit of appearing at the worst possible moments, usually when I was under stress. I sighed. As I bent down, my glowing fingertips touched the sparrow, dissolving it into particles of light - the easiest way to erase an unwanted vision. I was about to try again when I heard a terrifying sound—men’s voices. I froze.

“This way. I think I heard something.”

I darted for cover behind a nearby Baobab tree. Once hidden, I peeked from behind the gnarled trunk, my heart sinking to my feet. Two armed prowlers emerged through the brush, their faces shrouded in the shadow. I held my breath, sinking deeper into the shadows.

“Thought I saw lights this way,” said one of the men as a stream of moonlight revealed a deep scar across his face.

“You’re drunk,” grumbled the other prowler. “It’s probably just fireflies.”

Gravel crunched underfoot as the prowler paced forward until he was close enough to hear his breath. I clamped my hand across my mouth as he stood there for what felt like an eternity. Then finally, with a disappointed grunt, he turned around, his footsteps retreating through the trees.

I waited until I was sure they had gone before rising from my hiding spot. My hands shook beyond control. It had been close. Far too close. Worse still, by then, the sky was dark gray and pink on the horizon. I was out of time.

As I brushed off my soiled dress, a sobering realization struck me. Even if I did succeed in casting a tent, even if I could live off the plains, all of this running and constant hiding would be my life. Was I really strong enough for that?

The sun rose in the sky over the edge of the cliff. Down below, ships pulled into port from a sparkling gray sea. From habit, my eyes scanned for any unfamiliar sails as I had every morning for the past seven years. Bending to reach the back of my boot, I withdrew a scrap of parchment, yellow with age. I didn't have to read the scribbled words to know what they said. The message was engraved on my heart:

Gone to find help. Look for me when the fire dies. Selassie.

Unfortunately, the note was as unhelpful now as ever. I folded the paper, placing it back into my shoe feeling heavy and lost. I had been rash to assume I could survive on the plains with so little preparation. No, not rash, stupid. I couldn't cast a simple vision even now that my life depended on it.

As I headed back down the hill, I vaguely wondered if my situation could get any worse. Deep down, I knew I should be more frightened than I was. But, instead, all I felt was numb. It was the same aching numbness that had been my constant companion since Selassie disappeared so many years ago. Logically, I knew I had no reason to hope my brother would ever return as he said he would. And yet, I still clung to that hope like a piece of rotted driftwood in the ocean. Perhaps that made me a fool, but it was all I had.

What I did not know at the time was that although Selassie would again never set foot in Barbados, in less than twenty-four hours, I would see him again. And, of course, things could always get worse.