
The Sorcerer's Receptionist
4
Written by
Mako
Illustrated by
Maro


The Sorcerer's Receptionist
4
Written by
Mako
Illustrated by
Maro

The Sorcerer's Receptionist: Volume 4 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10


The Sorcerer's Receptionist
4
Written by
Mako
Illustrated by
Maro

Tale of a Magical World

Below the birds soaring the clear skies, countless islands float in the air, some of them host to ostentatious castles, no two of them alike. Below said islands is the enormous continent of Keedolmani, too vast to see in its entirety even from a place high enough to leave the sky behind. These lands teem with magic, a great and mysterious power that has evolved in unique ways in each of the hundred nations that have made Keedolmani their home.

The shape of the world itself is not yet known—one of many mysteries yet to be unraveled.

At the center of this continent, in the so-called three-season zone—owing its name to the only three seasons these lands know—lies, among others, the Kingdom of Doran. With forests along every border with its neighbors, it is a land rich in vegetation, and its blooming flowers are a sight to behold.

The nation is ruled by King Zerolight Bal Doran, a wise monarch beloved by his people. His continued devotion to cultural exchange with other nations even after Doran and the rest of the world was saved from peril, as well as the efforts to restore Doran itself, have made him ever more popular.

It is a kingdom host to many callings: from the king's direct servants assisting in government, to the knights who carry out his will, to common folk selling goods in stores and on the market. One such occupation is "sorcerer"—a vocation so reputable, you would be hard pressed to find anyone in the world unfamiliar with it. It is said that sorcerers are second only to knights in prestige throughout the whole world.

These skillful mages' chief business consists of ridding the land of demons that beset its people, as well as other tasks that no commoner or knight can bear. They are also adept at handling simple odd jobs, and bound to come to the aid of those in need. It is proper, paid work, however, and anything but charity.

Not a day goes by in the kingdom without somebody seeking the help of a sorcerer. So common is it, in fact, that often enough such people don't know

where to go and who to ask. Acting as a broker in Doran between sorcerers and those who wish to recruit their help is the Sorcerer's Guild of Harré Mooren.

"Welcome! What kind of request might interest you today?"

I, Nanalie Hel, couldn't wish for a better workplace. Working here had always been my dream, and it has come true.

Tale I

I've been a receptionist here at Harré for three years now. I was clueless on how to do this job when I first joined, but now, after three years, I think I know my way around it pretty well; my days certainly feel a lot calmer now. The smiles of the sorcerers coming in for their daily workload and the encouragement from my colleagues let me keep my own perfect smile as I sit at the counter, and today is no different.

"I'm not gonna give up on you so easily, Nanalie!" exclaims a sorcerer across the counter.

"How about this request—would you be interested?" I ask him.

"I'll take it!"

Breathing rough and his eyes sparkling, the large-built man takes the request form and storms out the door, slamming it open so hard it leaves the doorbell ringing for some time. As I lower my hand after waving him goodbye and make a mental note of his energy in the morning, Cheena Kasar, my junior colleague staffing a nearby counter, calls out to me.

"Can I tell the blond prince about this?"

"What? Why?" I ask.

"Because then he'll totally start coming here every day!" she says in an excited voice.

Rendered speechless, I turn to look at her and find her grinning with a hand over her mouth. I look away in silent protest, but Cheena doesn't seem to care. As much as I like her, this face of hers bothers me.

"Don't tell him," I say in a firm tone, keeping my voice down.

"Tsk, too bad," she complains, pouting.

I just *know* she'll spill the beans if I don't say it like that; definitely a matter of concern.

It's been more than eight months since the whole affair with the demons that

shook the entire world. Thanks to the king granting my wish, I have been able to go on living a peaceful life. And only now, at this phase of my life, at this age, I have someone I love.

I'll leave the name out since it's too awkward to say it, but there's this guy I couldn't *stand*—a guy I've since warmed up to fast, thanks to a few incidents between us during the recent strife. I've known him since magic school, and I'm pretty sure he hates me too. Or at least, that's what I'm used to thinking.

Thinking about it now, it was pretty reckless how I ended up confessing to him almost as soon as I saw him for the first time after regaining consciousness. I get mortified just remembering it. If there was a grave nobody could ever dig up, I feel like I'd happily bury myself there.

Also, he's a noble, and I'm a commoner. Our relationship hasn't really progressed since its inception; we're not even boyfriend and girlfriend. At most, we're friends that eat together every two months or so.

I don't know about him, but this is my first time being in love; I know, I'm quite the late bloomer. I'm a complete greenhorn on the subject. It's not like they teach love in school, so I've been going through lots of romance novels, cheering for the main characters' love and lecturing their partners when they cheat, knowing full well they're just ink on paper. As a result, my bookshelf—once full of detective novels and reference books—is now a completely different picture.

"Ah, speak of the devil," says Cheena.

"Huh?"

I spot white feathers through the window. I only know the one creature with white wings and a silver mane that, and that's a pegasus. And only the kingdom's knights are allowed to ride them.

The door swings open, its bell announcing a visitor.

"Excuse me. May I have a copy of your records regarding demon sightings?"

At the door stands the third prince of Doran and vice commander of the knight order, Zenon Bal Zeus Doran. Suddenly, he relaxes his stiff eyebrows, sidles over to Zozo Parasta (my senior colleague, currently staffing one of the

reception counters for dealing with clients), and strikes up a conversation with her.

“Man, I thought it was the blond prince... But hey, this one’s so handsome I could look at him all day!”

“Calm down, Cheena.”

Though at first she sounds disappointed upon realizing the visitor’s not who she expected, her cheeks quickly flush once she sees it’s Zenon. No wonder—he’s always been handsome and manly. Back in school, he had his own secret fan club—one everyone knew about save for the man himself. Its members would glare at me a lot, since I sat pretty close to him. These days it’s a memory that brings a smile to my face.

I ponder how he no doubt still gets a lot of passionate looks from the ladies in high society, yet remains oblivious to them. As if I couldn’t do something about it if I wanted to.

“Hey, Nanalie, it’s been a while. How have you been?” says the prince as he enters the sorcerer reception area, currently devoid of sorcerers. He probably has to wait until Zozo gets his papers ready.

Holding her cheeks in her hands, Cheena *squeals* in apparent delight as he gets close. She mumbles “he’s here, he’s here!” over and over. Would you look at this antsy young lady?

“Thankfully, everything is well, as you can see. What about you, Your Highness?”

“My work is proceeding smoothly, owing to Alois’s assistance. Two days ago the MCFT in Sheera had to deal with a demon. Have you heard?”

The MCFT is a royal institution that examines all goods coming into the kingdom to determine their legality. Its full name is “Ministry of Customs and Foreign Trade.”

“Yes. I hear it was a shapeshifter,” I reply.

“Those things are trouble when they start using their heads...” says the prince and frowns, likely remembering Städal.

Two days ago we received a report that a demon was found on a transport wagon travelling from Orcinus to Sheera. And it was no stowaway; it had assumed human form. There's no precedent for this; it made me think of none other than Städal. When Zozo and the director heard the news, I could see the same vein stand out on both of their foreheads as they made plain their refusal to put up with yet another apocalypse. Naturally, I'm with them on the matter.

"Sorry it's me today," apologizes the prince.

"What? Why?" I reply.

"Do you even have to ask? I see you never change," he says with a cheerful smile.

He changes the subject while I'm still trying to untangle what's so strange about my question.

"Anyway, I have some good news. I've been invited to the fourth princess of Sheera's wedding. Word is the princess is particularly indebted to Doran, so I'm allowed to bring several friends with me. Mislina and Alois are going, and while I'm going to keep the former company, the latter doesn't have any yet, so I'm trying to find someone. What do you say, Nanalie?"

"Wh..."

What?

"Why are you sitting there with your mouth open? Are you hungry?"

"I'm not!"

"Keep Alois company that day if you can fit it into your schedule. Nobody would object to the presence of a hero who saved the world, and *yes,* I mean you."

This is so sudden... And besides, why me? Even setting aside the whole "hero" thing or whatever, I'm sure there's plenty of other candidates. I can't decide such a thing on the spot. And in any case, the fourth princess of Sheera, if I remember correctly... Yes, she's the one Rockmann was engaged to two years ago.

"I'm not saying you have to go. However, Alois and I will be staying in Sheera

for a while. Sorry about that."

"Why are you apologizing to me again?"

"You're hilarious, you know that?" says Zenon with a hearty laugh as he leaves to inspect the records Zozo prepared for him.

It's not that I don't know what he meant, but I never thought he would start teasing me like this.

"I wish I was that close with the prince," says Miss Harris behind me as I sit there, my face trembling in a light blush.

I don't mind her envying me, but I wish Zenon wouldn't make fun of me as much as he has today.

"And I wish I'd been in the same school year as you, Miss Hel," adds Cheena in a high-pitched tone, gazing at the prince so intently I can almost see her framed by a backdrop of flowers in bloom.

Zenon's approachable personality has always captured the hearts of women in his blast radius; it's no surprise to see Cheena like this.

"Just so you know, I fought and argued with my peers all the time," I reply.

Looking back on it, things were pretty hectic in my teen years. My friends have even said I'm "like a boy," as if that's not *incredibly rude*.

"You should be careful though, Miss Hel."

"About what?"

"I heard a weird rumor..." Cheena begins, lowering her voice and furrowing her brow, looking worried all of a sudden.

What rumor?

"They say there's a talking doll called the 'Time Keeper' on the market. You can use it to mess with time and go into the past or the future at will."

"It talks? Huh, now that's a curious device."

"It *is* curious, but I heard something weird the other day..." Cheena's eyebrows drop even further. "I overheard a noblewoman saying 'If only I were the one by Alois's side...' I was poking around in the black market—it was a

work thing, don't worry about it—and apparently that doll appeared on auction and got grabbed up by some aristocrat."

I'm familiar with magic circles that let you go to the past or the future, but naturally, you can't "mess" with time that way. But if this doll is anything to go by, causal immutability's not a hard and fast rule.

Cheena mirrors my frown.

"Mr. Alkes said the kingdom is planning to make it disappear. It sounds too dangerous," she adds.

"Because you could change history and the whole world in the present with it?"

"Yes."

It seems even without demons in play, this world's more than dangerous enough.

***

A pleasant smell wafts from the decorative plants mounted on the walls, lending a little outdoor charm to the indoor setting. The four-person table where we've encamped is just right for our group of three plus all the accoutrements we girls are obliged to haul around. Especially because we're about to order an *ungodly* amount of sweets. Having all taken the day off to spend it unwinding together, the three of us sip oolong tea from small cups here at the *White Nettle*, a café I've been frequenting with friends for ages now.

One of the waitresses I've come to know well got pregnant last year, and she's still waiting tables even though she looks like she's about to pop. Apparently it'll be one more week before she'll take her maternity leave.

"Would you like to touch it?" she asks, patting her belly.

I take her up on her generous offer and feel a kick against my hand coming from inside. The mystery of life makes me tear up. Make sure you come into this world healthy and sound, little one.

"Are you sure you don't want to rest today, Nikeh? You look so busy every day. Don't overwork yourself," I tell her.

“Listen to the girl. Are you staying healthy?” adds Benjamine.

Nodding to each other, the two of us try to discern the state of our friend Nikeh Brunel, who sips her tea in a most elegant way. It’s probably thanks to Maris that this once cute and pretty girl became such a refined and beautiful lady. From the way she carries herself, you would never think she was once a commoner.

“Wow...” whispers Benjamine into my ear, evidently thinking the same thing.

Wow indeed.

“I’m a little tired,” finally utters Nikeh.

“Hey, you’re back!”

“You were so close! Thirty seconds away from setting a new record,” says Benjamine.

Smiling and blinking her charming, catlike eyes as her wavy red hair rocks to the side, she shows Nikeh her watch.

I should mention this isn’t our first time checking Nikeh’s progress over tea. She even asked for it herself. It’s not like we’re poking fun at her here.

“You should let Prince Zenon see how far you’ve come!” suggests Benjamine.

“That would be just rude,” replies Nikeh in a firm tone. “His Highness is a busy man,” she adds to drive the point home. “For nobles in name only like myself, everything is stiff and uptight. The least a parvenu like me can do is have some pride.”

“I think being a baroness is prestigious enough...” says Benjamine, pouting.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m a baroness or a countess if my family has no real history to speak of. We used to be merchants, after all.”

“You still are, aren’t you?”

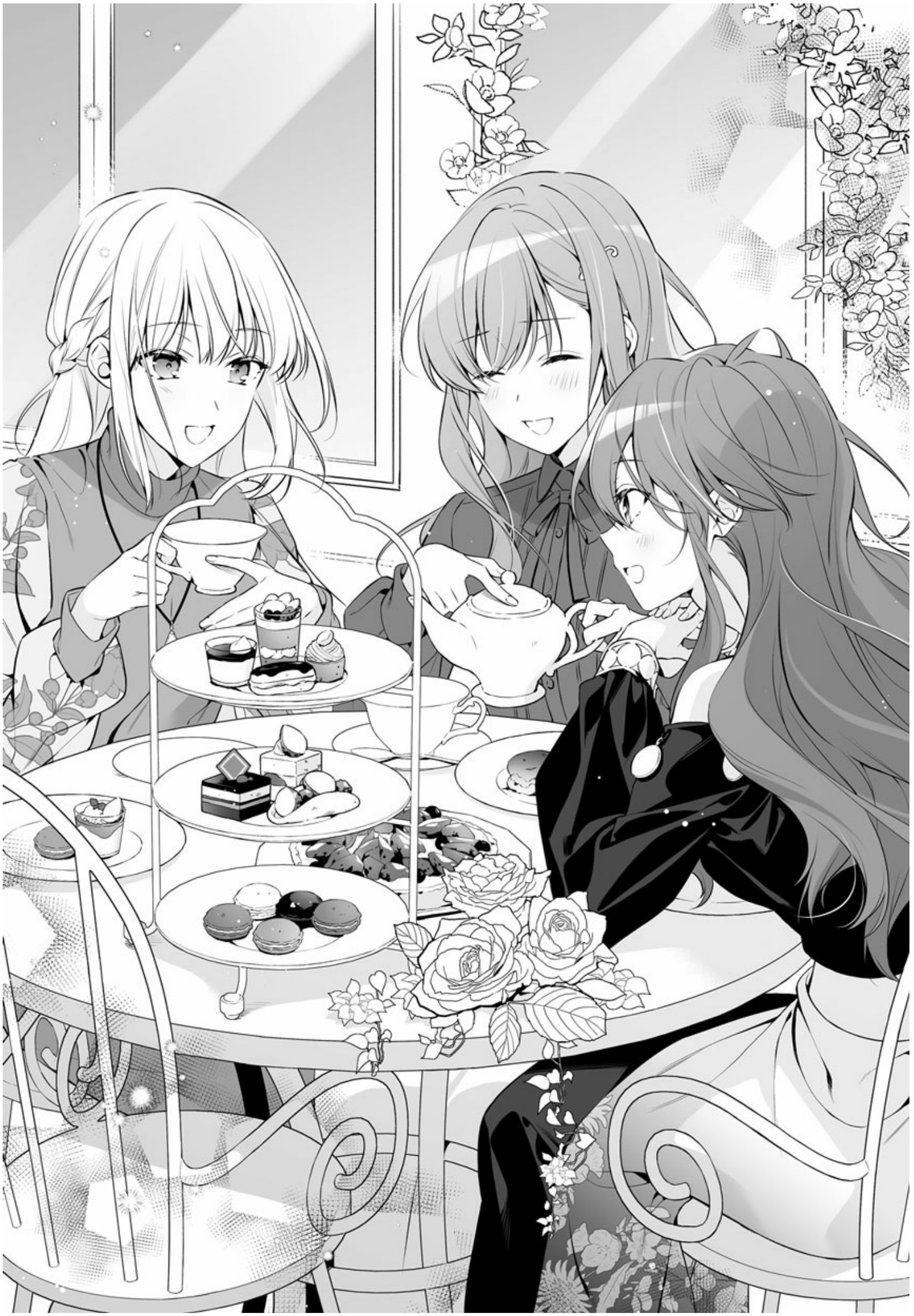
“Yeah.”

Her parents must have a lot on their plate, and it’s precisely for them that Nikeh asked the king to elevate her family’s class as her reward. Apparently they used to have to deal with suffocating competition from their noble peers,

and they’re happy to finally be able to fight back now that they’re nobles themselves.

Nikeh says she wishes she could keep living the life of a commoner, but at least this way she might not be forced into an arranged marriage—a fate she’d much rather avoid. It’s the only reason she became a baroness herself. That kind of bold decision is just like her—exactly the sort of thing that endeared her to me in the first place.

Nikeh sips her tea, breathes a sigh of relaxation, and reaches out for the sweets. She always ties her blonde hair back when working, but today she’s letting it loose.



“How’s work been treating you, Nanalie? Anything going on?” she asks.

“Same as always. You’ve got a lot more on your plate, I’m sure.”

“Hmm, do I...? Maybe I do... Those strange orders caused some chaos at headquarters...”

“What kind of strange orders?” ask Benjamine and I in unison.

“There’s this wax doll they call the ‘Time Keeper’...” begins Nikeh, lowering her voice and leaning closer to us.

Nikeh’s story matches up with Cheena’s—talking doll, total freedom across all time and space, mortal peril for all creation, black market deals and noble skulduggery, and now nobody can find the damn thing, but at least the royal psychometrists are on the case.

“This is hardly the first time I’ve heard about knight business likely well above my clearance or my pay grade, but are you sure you should be telling us?”

“Oh, but this is very much part of my work. Benjamine here is a sorcerer, and you’re a receptionist at Harré. You both hear things, don’t you? Let us know if someone out there finds the doll. This is what it looks like,” says Nikeh, producing a drawing for our reference.

It resembles a dwarfish, large-nosed old man in a pointy hat. It’s hardly an uncommon design, which is probably why they’re having trouble finding it.

“When did you start using your friends for your work?” remarks Benjamine with a smile, having failed to resist the temptation to poke fun at Nikeh.

Still, judging by the extreme means they’ve already employed to find that doll, it must be a huge problem for the knights.

I hold my hand over the steaming teapot, finding myself earnestly wishing that nothing disturbs these hard-won days of calm again, same as Zozo and the director.

“Such a nice breeze,” I say as a refreshing gust of wind coming from an open window toys with my hair.

Just a moment ago Nikeh was talking about something serious and Benjamine

was listening to her with a smile, but they both assume relaxed expressions in an instant and enjoy the breeze.

"Nice breeze, right?"

"Sure is."

"Things are so peaceful..."

"Yeah..."

"I might jinx it if I say things like that."

"Yeah..."

"Guess I'd better stop."

"Yeah, guess so."

"Pfft." I laugh; I can't help but be tickled by the two's natural rhythm.

***

I'm back home for the first time since before the thing with Städal, in part because my parents aren't back yet. I'd drawn a magic circle around the house to protect it from robbers while it stands vacant for months, but I find it concerning that there's still no end in sight to this situation.

My parents are currently abroad in the Land of the Sea for reasons that are *much* too involved to get into now. The only people who know about it other than me are the king, Alois Rockmann, and a scant few others. As far as the public knows, my mother was appointed ambassador to those lands for her distinguished work as an archaeologist.

It's not the most believable story, if you ask me, but people seem to buy it. Apparently my mother has made that big of a name for herself. I've no idea.

To be honest, all this talk of my mother's achievements has always gone in one ear and out the other for me. She's always avoided saying much about herself. At this point I'm tempted to give her a good talking-to. Granted, back then I was focused on my studies and didn't have much attention to spare for her.

We only had to concoct such a cockamamie alibi in the first place because

Rockmann cast a spell on almost everyone in the world, overwriting their memories to conceal my descent from the Sea King on my mother's side of the family. To be fair, that's the only reason I can live a normal life at all.

We few accomplices are the only ones who know the true reason the people of the sea came to our aid. Everyone else was told they came to help save topside because of their "old ties with the Kingdom of Seleina." In the same vein, officially my ancient-class ice magic is a gift from the heavens, and *not* something I inherited from my mother (deus ex machina much?).

It's as if our encounter with Prince Maiteiah practically never happened.

Sometimes my thoughts drift back to Rockmann's proud face the moment he cast that spell, and the technical genius of it all floors me. There's a lot of things I feel towards him, but there's no denying my frustration. I don't like how I end up a loser or generally inferior in everything. And besides, can you even say I won at love, or did I lose there too...?

Okay, I'd rather not go there. What does it matter "when" you fell in love? As my mother would say, the important thing is not how you met or what made you fall in love, but rather the path you have walked together, what you did after you fell in love, things like that.

"Come on, though, you're gonna make me cry if you don't come home soon..." I grumble.

Gazing at the moon outside the window by the kitchen table in my parents' currently-vacant home, I grab a bottle of my father's treasured alcohol and open it. I'll just help myself. As the cork pops free, I spread out a set of letters on the table, intending to sort them. These piled up in my room at Harré's dorm.

Before my eyes are envelopes of many colors: red, white, purple, brown. It's always exciting to receive a letter, no matter how old you get. Unfortunately, though, one or two of them are tax-related, and it's a bother to open those. I do have savings, but there's not much point in them if the two people that money is meant for aren't coming back.

I don't know how they would've felt about it, but I wanted to spend it on their wedding. They told me they never really had much of one because of financial

troubles in their youth, so I wanted to, well, not exactly repay them for the love they gave me every day, but rather to see their moment of glory with my own eyes—to give my blessings full of gratitude as their child while they stand surrounded by flowers in that popular wedding venue here in Doran.

And yet, they're not coming back at all. So here I am, brooding like this. I wonder what they're up to right now, in the Land of the Sea.

"Ah..."

As I work through the letters, one with a familiar name in familiar handwriting catches my eye. It's from Maris.

How has life been treating you, my dear? I have recently been spending my days engaging in physical activities. This fat I discovered on my waistline is such a bother. If you happen to know of any helpful exercise, please do share it with me. It is so difficult to search for a groom, you see. O-ho-ho! Why, I am most definitely not saying it is a certain someone's fault things have come to this. And though I am not asking for advice, there is a gentleman courting me lately... And what unsettles me is that he looks rather similar to him*. They are related by blood, too... I am rejecting his advances, for he is much too young for me. And the aforementioned similarity is another concern of mine. What do you think I should do?*

The letter ends there. "Gentleman courting me lately"? "Looks rather similar to *him*"? "Related by blood"? "Much too young"?

By "him," Maris could be referring either to Rockmann or to Prince Zenon. And she's dealing with that man's blood relative, perhaps a brother, who is younger than her. But considering the words "much too young," this can't be about Prince Zenon's brothers—the crown prince and the second prince—as the youngest in their family is the princess. Rockmann and the prince *are* related by blood, but if that similarity in looks is so troubling for Maris, then I'm guessing said gentleman has a face like Rockmann's. Who could it be?

"You have an eye for men whose distinction complements your own, so I think whoever you decide on will be a good match for you. I don't know... And I am most definitely not aiming this at a certain someone, but I'll do my best not to lose," I write on the stationery I've taken out of a drawer.

Whatever advice I may give wouldn't hold against Maris's own wishes. At the end of the day, this is completely her decision. Plus, we're still rivals in love, so I'm not about to go being particularly tactful with her. We're both as serious as can be about this, and that's all there is to it.

"All right, next one..." Continuing to sort the letters, I freeze up for a moment as my eyes land on a light blue envelope.

I grab it and check the name of the sender, then open it and unfold the letter inside while trying to steady my rising heartbeat.

No doubt you've opened this letter long after it reached you. I'm right, aren't I? Don't worry, I'll let that bit of negligence of yours slide.

"What...?"

After reading the first lines, I recheck the name of the sender on the envelope. The date on it is ten days ago. "Alois Hades Fodeuri Rockmann." Imagine how long it would be if he'd bothered to include "Arnold."

Recently I've been exchanging letters not only with Maris and my other friends, but with Rockmann as well, for some reason. He started it by sending me a letter two months ago, inviting me to eat with him. It was much easier to accept the invitation then, unlike every other time, when he would make one across the counter in Harré, prompting vicious ribbing from everyone around me. My reply was met with another letter, however—one in which he rattled off details of his daily life. He ended every letter on a question; I wound up replying just so I wouldn't leave him hanging, and then I would get another letter from him a week later.

Eventually I started ending my letters on questions too. Not out of stubbornness, but because I felt that running away from him wasn't like me. I still feel that way.

We've exchanged a fair few letters already. It was only recently, however, that I realized we are, in fact, exchanging letters on a regular basis. What a frightening man. As I stare daggers at the light blue envelope, I ponder how many women he's led by the nose through such means.

His words of "letting it slide" grate on my nerves, but since this is hardly the

first time we've exchanged deliberate insults, I let it slide as well and read on.

I know I should be saying this kind of thing in person instead, but give it some thought if you have time. Would you like to go somewhere together on the second month of distant skies?

My hand loses its grip, and the letter falls to the floor. It takes me a few seconds to pick it up again in a fluster.

This is so sudden I might die if I go, so let's not, I write back.

A few days later I get a reply from him, saying *don't you go dying on me now*.

Tale II

"'Catch a hundred monster bugs'? What kinda request is that?"

The sun sets early at this time of the year, and we're already close. As I offer a sorcerer several requests to choose from, he points at one of them and makes a fuss in a loud voice.

Catch a hundred monster bugs and bring them in alive. That's all the request says. I can't blame a sorcerer for freaking out about this, to be fair, because normally they're tasked with killing those things rather than catching them. Even I've never seen anyone in person who wants them alive. And this sorcerer looks like he's seen more than me over the years, so it must be a really unusual request if it surprises him *this* much.

Last year the bugs underwent a massive population explosion, and now the kingdom's requesting mass culls from the local sorcerers. Most folks are used to that type of request by now.

Monster bugs have white, elliptical, transparent bodies and are about the size of a man's foot. They're not the prettiest sight. They're basically docile, and though touching one with bare hands would give you a bad rash, they don't cause any direct, purposeful harm to humans.

However, they live in attics and in the grass, and if their population is left unchecked they appear to start sapping the life out of everyone around them—people in such neighborhoods fall ill at far greater rates, with unpredictable severity. And so, regardless of their benign behavior, they're still vermin. If only they didn't multiply so quickly...

"This request was filed by a doctor who appears interested in the potential healing properties of the monster bugs' transparent bodies," I explain.

"Oh, really?"

The client name field says "Petros." Indeed, he's the one who lodged this request. In the past he's relied on us at Harré to procure dragon scales and such for his medicines, and by now he's a regular who frequently makes new

requests.

“If this is from him, I’d better get on with it,” says the sorcerer enthusiastically as I inform him of the client’s name. He accepts the request and leaves.

Dr. Petros’s medicines are quite popular in town. The man himself is held in high regard by the townsfolk as a much better chemist and physician than those quacks that advertise themselves to nobles. What’s more, he gives generous rewards and he’s a pretty genial guy, which is why quite a few sorcerers accept his requests on the spot.

With the man gone, I get up from my seat to take the note regarding Mr. Petros’s request off the notice board. I’ll need to think up something new to put there instead. Now, how do I move this board so it’s not in the way...?

“Hey, would you mind taking my place as the secretary for the next meeting?” Zozo asks, putting her hands together in a pleading manner. She has just come back from her break.

Does she have plans?

“Sure, no big deal, I’ll take care of it.”

I don’t mind taking on a secretarial role in those meetings. I really like writing and summarizing things.

“Sorry! My father keeps pressing me into seeing partners for marriage, you see. I’ve been ignoring him on the matter until now, but then I told him I’ll go just once, and I forgot we have a meeting on the day!”

“Partners for marriage?!”

“Hey, keep it down!”

“I’m really sorry.” Seeing Zozo’s look of anger, I frantically apologize and cover my mouth with my hand.

They’re making her see partners for marriage? Didn’t she have someone she liked...? It’s just guesswork on my part, but having seen her care about Lady Merakisso’s love fortune-telling so much, I’d have a lot of questions if it turned out otherwise.

“It’s Alkes, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“The one you love.”

Dumbstruck, she blinks several times in rapid succession before her face turns *completely* red. She couldn’t make it more obvious.

Cheena, Miss Harris, and many other of my coworkers know too, by the way. Pretty much the only ones who don’t know are Alkes and the other male employees. The other women are evidently quick to pick up on such things, and Zozo being extra talkative with Alkes has been a heartwarming sight for us this whole time.

“We *all* know.”

“No way!”

Just how did she end up having to see strangers instead?

“Zozo says she’s being pressed into an arranged marriage,” I whisper into Miss Harris’s ear, having beckoned her over as she happened to be passing by.

Zozo apparently didn’t expect this of me, and she ends up standing there with her eyes wide open and her mouth agape.

“What?!”

“An arranged marriage?”

“Are you serious, Zozo?!”

Information spreads quickly among Harré’s female staff. Miss Harris immediately casts a spell to telepathically inform the ladies of an emergency meeting. Is that the best use of her magical powers that she’s found...?

“Why did you tell them, Nanalie?!”

“I’m sorry!”

“A ‘sorry’ is not gonna cut it!”

The two of us go running around the guild as Zozo chases me, and we both get a good scolding from the director later. When Miss Harris tells her about Zozo’s situation, she finally gives us the time of day and asks with sparkling eyes to join our meeting, but that’s a whole different story.

***

Thus begins the emergency meeting, a.k.a. “Operation Rescue Zozo,” held in Miss Harris’s dorm room. Due to space limitations, there’s only ten people participating—pretty much all of them experts on love. Having worn a blush from the start of this whole commotion, Zozo has the haggard look of someone utterly spent in body and mind.

I’m quite out of place here; I’m no expert on love, but my senior colleagues told me to come watch, so I figured I’d stick around. Curious about Zozo as I am, I have to wonder if there’s anything for me to learn by observing this meeting. *Just kidding.* I’m sure they have my relationship with *him* in mind. Why does *that* have to matter now, of all things?

“So why are you going to see some stranger for a marriage interview, again?”

“I just wanted to play along with my father for once and not think too much about it.”

For as much as the meeting’s about her, Zozo’s the least engaged person here. Watching ten people press her for answers like she’s being questioned by the authorities sure is something. It’s crazy how passionate they are about someone else’s love life.

“Your parents want you to marry, yes, but the most important thing for them is that you have a man of obvious quality in your life. I should know; I have a daughter of my own,” states one of the women.

“Exactly! Which is why you should just be more proactive with Alkes!” suggests another.

“How do you know about him, anyway?!” Zozo snaps back, getting beet-red again.

“When did you fall in love with him?”

“A-Again, how do you...?”

“He’s quite a lot older than you, you know? You’re into old men?”

“Age doesn’t matter!”

“Was it his magical prowess that drew you to him? It sure feels like there’s

nothing he can't do."

"He would be handsome even if he wasn't so good with magic!"

"Handsome now, is it? You've gotten honest, I see!"

Zozo's senior colleagues bear down on her with smug looks on their faces. She blushes even more, likely regretting her slip of the tongue.

Considering how she was constantly by his side during our preliminary investigations, the flower goddess's festival, and when we fought demons, it would take someone with a really thick skull not to notice she likes him to some degree.

"Recently I've started to think Alkes might have a thing for the director, though," utters Zozo.

Everyone freezes up at her words. Even Miss Harris, who was observing with a smile on her face, goes stiff, her smile still plastered on. Where did everyone's talkativeness go all of a sudden?

"See?" adds Zozo as the mood in the room changes, looking downcast with her blush gone.

"I-It's not like that! We just never thought of that, so we were surprised, that's all," says our coworker Cocone in panic, looking uneasy.

Alkes is into the director? I guess I see them together pretty often, but it didn't look that way at all to me. I can't help but feel it's just Zozo getting the wrong idea. But I don't get a say here, as the one with by far the least amount of life experience in this room.

"You're the only one who thinks Alkes is into the director, Zozo," says one of the women. "Don't get so pessimistic just because you see them together too often."

"Then why isn't the director here?" asks Zozo.

Everyone freezes up again. The director was rather enthusiastic about joining the meeting, but got shot down by Miss Harris with a "you aren't needed," leaving her to stew in her office. I can see how she could have been part of this conversation, so the fact she wasn't allowed in seems to indicate some bigger

issue, now that I think about it.

Miss Harris presses her index finger between her eyebrows and grumbles, deep in thought.

“Those of us who haven’t been here long enough probably don’t know this, but the director has someone special to her...sort of like a boyfriend.”

“What?! Really?!”

What?! Really?! echoes inside my head in time with Zozo’s own reaction. I guess Miss Harris would probably know things like that; she started working here around the same time as Director Locktiss. “Sort of like a boyfriend,” huh... The knight commander? Or someone else?

“Are you talking about the knight commander?” asks Zozo, evidently still on the same wavelength as me.

Seeing her press Miss Harris for answers like that, she’s made a complete one-eighty. The moment the subject isn’t herself, her interest shoots up.

Oddly enough, everyone else isn’t very talkative. Miss Harris gazes outside the window.

“It’s not him, and Alkes knows who it is,” she begins. “He’s actually quite supportive. So rest assured, Alkes is not in love with the director. I guarantee it.”

I have to say though, it’s a complete surprise that the director had someone like that the whole time, especially since it’s not the knight commander. They’ve had this back-and-forth for a long time where he pokes fun at her and she doesn’t seem to hate it despite saying otherwise.

“But don’t ask her about it.”

“Why not?” asks Zozo.

“She’ll really hate it, so don’t even think about it. If you do ask, expect to lose your job,” says Miss Harris, stressing the last part and shooting an intimidating glance at the whole room, not even skipping over *me*.

Okay, got it loud and clear. I definitely won’t ask.

Zozo makes the same oath.

Theodora and Grove

During late nights, when few sorcerers come to Harré, the guild is staffed in pairs. The canteen is closed at this time of day, so no sorcerers stick around longer than they have to. It's at this time deep in the night, when the guild is far quieter than it ever is during the day, that a pegasus comes descending from the sky.

Sulking after they refused to let me join their emergency meeting regarding Zozo, I'm working overtime to prepare a report compiling our total requests, as well as demon investigation reports to be submitted to the kingdom, when all of a sudden Alkes comes to tell me that the knight commander has arrived. With no other choice, I leave my office to see him. What brings him here so late at night?

My only source of comfort is that Alkes is here, staffing reception. I've been relying on him for things every now and then.

Grove Dalvesp... Truth be told, I'd rather avoid him if I can. It's too bad expressing that thought through my words and attitude has no effect on him whatsoever. I don't want to see him tête-à-tête, but it's not that bad when there's a third party present.

"Are you okay, Director?" asks Alkes with a smile, seeing my scowl.

"I'm fine. Thanks for letting me know."

I go to the guild's entrance, not bothering to hide my displeasure as I ask Grove what he's doing here, to which he replies he happened to be in the area and decided to drop by. Why couldn't he just continue on his way? He can't possibly have nothing better to do at this hour.

Stretching his large shoulders with a tired look, he tells me he's on his way back from Sheera, having made some progress investigating the shapeshifting demon on his visit to Orcinus together with Sheera's Knight Commander and deciding to make a temporary return. *Sigh... Seriously, if you're tired, just go straight to your barracks.*

I am, however, interested in that demon, so I lead him to the canteen and sit down at the opposite end of a large eight-person table with him, resting my chin on my hand. The chairs at this table are the only leather ones in the canteen, and are thus much softer and more comfortable than all the others. I'll put up with a headache or a backache, but not both—not now.

Basically, I took this here because I expect this to get long, and perhaps it's a testimony to me being okay with it taking long. A little surprised at my lack of intent to shoo him out as soon as I can, I end up scowling again.

"This is what you look like right now," says Grove, raising the outer corners of his eyes with his fingers to mimic me. What a nasty man.

"Rude. So, what did you find out in Orcinus?"

"Its new king has given me permission to investigate. So we're just getting started."

"What, you haven't made any progress at all yet?"

"Pretty much. Sheera wants to forge a military alliance, though."

"What? Are they planning to go to war?"

With whom? This is really out of the blue.

"Now, now, don't jump to conclusions," he chides.

I'm pretty sure news of an imminent military alliance would make *anyone*—okay, maybe not Alkes, but my point stands—jump in their seat a little.

"They simply want to hold joint military exercises to prepare for when the next demon kingpin threatens the world. They want to establish emergency communication channels, that sort of thing."

"Ohhh, I see. That makes sense."

The status quo changes day by day.

"Talk in Sheera is they're holding a big wedding for their princess soon. You'd think the whole nation was already mid-festival, looking at it."

"She's marrying her servant, right? They really made their love come true despite everything... Time sure flies."

At some point, all the employees except Alkes took their breaks. As I check on him at the counter, he does a slight bow in greeting. If it's only Alkes here, surely no one would mind if we had a more private conversation for a moment.

"I...haven't wanted to change. Ever since then," I say, changing the topic.

Things change as time moves on. There's no stopping it, and wishing for things to remain the same will only get you left behind. Ever since the day Eruve was murdered, I've resisted the ticking of the clock, but there's nothing I can do to halt or push back the hands of time—tempting as it always seems.

"But the seasons keep turning. I've grown older. All despite how I wish to remain my old self forever."

I don't want to change. I don't want to move on, leaving those radiant times behind. I'm a fair bit older than Eruve now, but I keep my hair as it was back then, cutting it every time it grows a little.

My feelings haven't changed either. And I still intend to catch the true Black Pegasi Slayer. The kingdom and the knights may have given up, but I'm never going to. I will find them and chase them to the ends of the earth. As long as I remain true to this goal, Eruve will never disappear from my heart.

"Have I...changed?"

My vision blurs; I feel something hot in my eyes. No matter how much I wish to remain the same, I can't stop my body from growing day by day, and everything and everyone around me has changed from back then. Fewer flowers show up on Eruve's grave compared to before. Even if *I* don't forget about him, others do. I don't want to live in such a world. I'm so tired of chasing after the idea of his lingering image and crying every time.

"I wish at least I could remain the same..."

I can't let my body or my feelings change from the time I loved him. I don't want to let such a thing come to pass. What kind of face is Grove making now? He might be exasperated with me for spouting nonsense all of a sudden.

"You've changed," he says at last after a pause, in a low voice that makes those words resonate in my ears.

Is that really the best thing he can say to a woman in these conditions? Looks like this man really *does* have no consideration for other people.

“You’ve become much more beautiful.”

The sound of the ceiling fan feels suddenly so much more obtrusive.

Though I’m not looking at Grove’s face, that voice of his brings to mind an awfully kind face he’s probably making right now, and it frustrates me. I can tell my cheeks are hot without even touching them, but pretend not to notice. I’m irritated with myself for shedding tears over his words.

“Why...won’t time...stop...?”

Maybe it’s my fault for working so late. Pressing my face into my tear-stained arm, I fall asleep.

***

Judging by her steady breathing, Theodora has fallen asleep, her face pressed into her arm.

I rest my chin on my hand. Theodora turns in her sleep, trying to find a more comfortable position, before eventually settling on facing left and forward. Her eyes are red, in part because of the tears, but likely also because she unconsciously rubbed them on her arm.

It’s been so long, and yet we haven’t grown up at all. Lifting her well-tended red-brown bangs, I see her childlike sleeping face that makes you forget her age.

“That’s enough, Grove,” says Alkes, who was supposed to be at reception.

“I wasn’t planning to do anything. But sometimes people need to change to remain the same.”

In Theodora’s wish to remain the same, I sense that she’s trying to escape her changing self. For more than ten years since that day now, I’ve been watching over her, albeit in a different way than Alkes. He quit the order. I suspect he felt responsible for what had happened. I never left her alone, no matter how much animosity she expressed towards me. Even if it has made reality all the more inescapable to her, I at least wanted to make sure she doesn’t end up driven

any further into a corner—to help her feel more than just grief and be able to share the full breadth of her feelings. Maybe I'm just doing this for my own satisfaction, but this is how I've acted towards her all along.

After spending so long with her like this, right by her side, there's something I've come to realize: she hates seeing my face. But when we banter, she may be facing away, yet she smiles from the bottom of her heart. Little by little, she regains the ability to do that.

"I'm well aware of Miss Locktiss's feelings. All this does is put her at her wit's end."

"I know," I utter quietly in reply to his admonition. "I keep beating myself up over the fact I wasn't the one to go in there that day. We may have the same face, but my death would never have weighed on her in quite the same way."

"Hey, that's not a healthy way of thinking."

"It's just... I'll never be as brave as him. He went in there without any hesitation."

The living can never surpass the sentiments and actions of the dead. No amount of effort will ever change that.

Alkes takes a seat beside Theodora and gazes at her face. I still can't tell if he looks at her with the same eyes as me or not.

"She still places white flowers near that wooden carving of a lykos every flower goddess festival."

That carving? She still has it? On second thought, I should've expected as much. She wouldn't just go and throw away a present from the man she loves. Eruve brought it from abroad as a gift, and though she felt awkwardly happy about my brother's choice of present, she still complained: "Should I be happy about a carving of a lykos?"

"If we don't finally leave that day behind, we'll never get anywhere. Not me, not her, not you." Alkes changes the topic. "Grove, who do you think made that Time Keeper doll?"

I've brought up the topic of the doll with him before. At first we were just

talking shop the other day about our assignment to search for it, but we ended up with a working theory of who could've come up with it in the first place.

"Not only is drawing those magic circles without anyone noticing very difficult, but no reports of suspicious activity came in at the time," I begin. "That craftsman who presumably had his memory wiped by the true culprit didn't remember *how* he had drawn those circles."

"If he used this Time Keeper, it's not exactly impossible."

"Indeed. He could find out the exact time those locations would be devoid of people and use it to prepare the circles. He could also travel years into the past, place magic circles in certain spots, and rig them to activate after a set period of time. It's plausible."

If the culprit is still alive, I'm certain Theodora will kill them as soon as she finds them. She'll show them no mercy, even should they beg her for their life. Till the moment blood stops coursing through their veins; till their body loses all value; till they are history. I wouldn't rule out the possibility of her being just as hell-bent on murder as the criminal she's chasing. Making sure she doesn't stain her hands is just one more reason to stick around.

Theodora. When you go for the killing blow, you won't be alone.

Tale III

A rainbow appears around the sun whenever good weather sticks around a while. Seeing it as a child, I always found it strange that a rainbow would appear without any rain preceding it. This rainbow is known as “sunsushy.”

It is primarily caused by the air temperature reaching a certain threshold, causing the heat of the sun and the mana in the natural world to clash. Apparently, depending on the amount of light, the human eye can perceive said clash as colors. The conditions have to be ideal for this to occur, which is why you’ll only see it on days with clear weather and a perfect balance of the sun’s heat and the air temperature. So rather than saying this rainbow appears “whenever good weather persists,” it is perhaps less misleading to say it only appears on days when all the conditions are perfect.

“...And that about sums it up. Was that clear?” I finish my explanation.

“Hmm... I dunno... So basically, when the sun shines bright?”

“That’s right.”

I find myself answering the question posed by a little girl brought to the guild by her sorcerer father. She’s evidently curious about sunsushy after it appeared yesterday. Children of sorcerers often come here, to the client reception area where I’m currently staffing a counter, to pass the time while their parents choose their assignment. And because the client area is unfortunately deserted today, it’s a good way of passing the time for me as well.

The girl looks about three years old. Her bangs leap up and down as she runs back to her father with a grin, holding her cheeks and exclaiming that she wants to see a rainbow. The father in question seems to have finished choosing his work—he pats the girl’s head and bows to me. I respond in kind and bid him farewell before returning to my work.

Figuring I could use the opportunity while there’s nobody on the other side of my counter to pick out the requests that need preliminary investigation, I begin sorting the pile of papers the director’s entrusted to me.

Also, I have to say... For a three-year-old to go asking grown-ups in detail about sunsushy? I predict she'll become a diligent student in the future. When I was little, sure, I would go "It's so pretty!" and I would want to see it again, but I never asked the adults *when* it could be seen.

As I sit there being impressed, suddenly, vibrations in the ground rock my counter. An earthquake?

"Yo yo yo yo Nanalie, this is real bad!!!" In comes Satanás at full tilt, his steps ringing out through the room.

So *that's* what was causing those vibrations. Has he no shame? I wish he wouldn't go running into my workplace shouting my name like that. Seeing his flustered state, I direct a chilly, questioning stare at him, but he doesn't seem to care at all as he approaches my counter.

"Wh-What is it?"

Waving off the sorcerers who came running to investigate all the racket, he brings his remarkably sweaty face close to mine, abruptly grabs me by the arm, and pulls me up on top of the counter.

"Stop that! What do you think you're doing?! Let me go!"

Owowow! What's come over him all of a sudden? I try to wriggle myself free, but he just goes and drags a helpless girl (me) off the counter, at which point I decide to break my old resolution not to use strength-enhancing spells on guild premises. I ready my finger, but he ever so slightly dislocates it before I can cast anything. What the hell?! How terrible can this man be?!

I cover my injured finger with my other hand and start blowing on it.

"Just come! You gotta come!"

"Don't you think you should at least apologize for this?! And hold on, I'm at work right now!"

In response to my complaint, Satanás thrusts his hand out towards my injured finger and casts a healing spell, then looks at me as if saying "happy now?" *What do you think? Of course not.*

My coworkers gather around us, saying he can't just go carrying me out of

here, but he pays them no heed and presses onward.

“You there, mind passing the word to the director that Nanalie will be leaving early today due to an emergency?”

“Don’t you go deciding things for me!”

Now he pulls an arm around my neck and starts dragging me that way. I can’t breathe! And while I wonder if he’s really gone and lost it, looking to kill me, I also start considering what put him in this state to begin with.

Satanás puts me astride his phoenix familiar waiting outside, mounts up, and instructs it to “quickly return to the forest,” patting it on the back. As it utters a cry and spreads its wings, I frantically cling to its neck. Riding it feels pretty different from riding Lala, and I struggle to position myself well as we soar higher and higher into the sky.

“I think we found that thing Noir and his buddies are looking for!”

Taken aback by the fact he still calls Prince Zenon “Noir,” I tilt my head in response to a different part of what he said.

“What thing?”

“The Time Keeper!”

“What?!”

If true, Satanás is the one who’ll get the credit for finding it, and I don’t understand why he went to me with this information ahead of the knights. I didn’t even know he knew about that doll. Benjamine must have told him, or more likely Prince Zenon himself, judging by what he said earlier.

“Why not just go straight to the knights?”

“There’s something I gotta check first!” he replies, sounding like he’s scolding me.

What did I ever do to him?

“You better be ready. It probably couldn’t get any worse for you,” warns Satanás, pushing up his hair and looking visibly frustrated.

Couldn’t get any worse for me? I’m left wondering what he means, scratching

my cheek and pouting.

***

“So how are you able to turn back time, sir?”

“Why, that is because I’m so great!”

“Wow! You must be the best magician in the world!”

“Heh heh heh heh!”

Brought deep into the forest by Satanás, I find myself near a clearing, where Benjamine fawns over a tiny old man in a pointy hat. A baffling sight.



A cry of “What the hell is she doing?” rings out from the bottom of my heart.

I couldn’t simply abandon my work duties like that, so I made an effort to get in touch with the director, and she replied right inside my head, at which point I brought her up to speed. I was sure she knew about the Time Keeper, and my assumption proved correct. I told her this looked like it’d keep me busy for a while, and she readily approved my early departure. In exchange, we are to report this finding to the knights ourselves.

Normally I’d expect her to give me hell (physically) for leaving on personal matters like that, and yet she didn’t scold me at all. That actually makes me *more* anxious. And it’s all because of this weird talking doll...

“So that’s the Time Keeper?” I ask.

The dwarfish old man with a long beard wriggles in response to Benjamine’s praise, looking rather pleased. Not only does this doll talk, but it also moves, apparently. It looks just like the drawing Nikeh showed me the other day—a decoration of a gnome found in house gardens. How peculiar.

“We were working another assignment in a forbidden part of the woods when we stumbled on him.”

“What was the request?”

“Catching red-nosed rats. I hate those things, they shoot blood from their noses at you.”

“Ah, those things. Their tails are good for something, right?”

Though I’m quite annoyed at being dragged away without prior notice, these two are still technically at work.

“Ah, you’re wonderful, sir!” exclaims Benjamine.

What’s she up to, anyway?

“How did it come to this...?” I ask Satanás. “Are you okay with your girlfriend being like that?”

O heavens, please don’t let my friend be brainwashed by that gnome.

“That old man looked just like Noir told me, so we went up to it, and it started attacking all of a sudden. Hella dangerous doll, that one. He shot spears at us! Freaked me out to no end.”

“*That* thing is dangerous...?”

“But when he saw Benjamine, he got super attached to her. We asked him why he was there, and he said a woman asked him to let her relive her school days, so he sent her into the past. Got really talkative and all.”

“So she’s sweet-talking him into saying more?”

“Yeah, as much as it pisses me off. So anyway, that woman he sent into the past? She said she wanted to get into a relationship with some man named Alois, according to that old man.”

“A...lo...?”

What did he just say?

“Who did you say she wanted a relationship with?”

“Some Alois.”

Calm down Nanalie, there’s no evidence it’s that *Alois. Stay cool. Even Satanás is smiling, see? Okay, I guess that smile of his is pretty forced.*

And then I remember what Cheena told me at reception when Prince Zenon came to Harré. The words she overheard some noble woman say: “If only I were the one by Alois’s side...” Could it be...?

“Remember Treyse—she was a count’s daughter?” asks Satanás.

“The girl from an adjacent classroom?”

I remember her. We didn’t talk much. Just like how I always held the second place in our year, she held the fifth. Focused as I was on knocking Rockmann out of his eternal first place, I was still afraid of other students overcoming me, and worked hard every day to prevent it.

“It’s her. Given that, only one Alois comes to mind, right?”

“I overheard a noblewoman saying ‘If only I were the one by Alois’s side...’ I

was poking around in the black market—it was a work thing, don't worry about it—and apparently that doll appeared on auction and got grabbed up by some aristocrat."

So Cheena wasn't kidding and she didn't mishear things! The shock of it all leaves me speechless.

According to what Benjamine managed to get out of the dwarf, Count Drenman bid for the Time Keeper on the black market for his daughter's sake and won, after which the dwarf sent his daughter, Treyse Drenman, into the past.

To go into the past or the future, you have to first tell the rotten little bastard the exact time and place you wish to visit, then place him somewhere where people from *your time* won't come into contact with him or see him at all; then he sends you where you asked to go.

To return to the time you came from, you have to face the sky and say "O handsome Time Keeper, I am thy slave." How humiliating.

Apparently, this is how one goes about borrowing his powers. However, if the doll is found, you end up stuck in your destination for eternity, never to return, unless somebody goes looking for you. Which means that, since we've found the doll, Treyse is never coming back if we don't go after her. Why did she just leave it here like this, completely unprotected, anyway?

"Were there any traps around when you found it?" I ask Satanás.

"Now that you mention it, I was flicking my fingers as I walked and there was this feeling of something getting dispelled. That's when the Time Keeper appeared."

Must've been an invisibility veil.

"The count probably knows I dispelled it; he might be on his way here already."

"Aren't we in trouble, then?!"

"Hey. Old man." Satanás addresses the doll.

“Don’t ‘old man’ me! I’m still in my prime!”

“What happens when you change the past?”

“Who can say?”

Looking unwilling to listen to his questions, the rotten old gnome starts ogling Benjamine again, as if we’re not here at all.

“I’m so done with this old fart!” exclaims Satanás, his nostrils swollen and his face red. I suspect these two just hate each other because deep down, they’re identical.

“O Elder of Time, what happens when you change the past?”

Elder of Time?

Paying no heed to Satanás’s troubles, Benjamine makes eyes at the dwarf, shooting metaphorical radiant beams out of hers and into his. Next, she brings her hands together and leans her head on them, then kneels in front of the Time Keeper and gazes at him with upturned eyes. Man, a knockout like her could wrap just about any man alive around her finger with an act like this.

“Ah, my little Benjamine, you know I cannot resist that!” says the Time K...Elder of Time, I guess? He shuts his eyes. “Ahem. Very well, I shall answer,” he finally says, straightening his back and assuming a gallant look. “Time is a straight line with no branches. Destiny is singular. Changing the present by going into the past is possible to a degree, but no major changes shall occur. Attempting to save someone destined to die is but an exercise in futility.”

“So if you travel to the past and turn white to black, it will remain white?”

“Indeed. On rare occasions, however, those who have been interacted with too much in the past may succumb to fractured memories in the present. It will depend on how much that woman does to the man she’s after.”

Treyse went into the past to become Rockmann’s girlfriend. And Satanás said this development couldn’t get any worse for me. What am I supposed to do? Do I go and drag her out of the past so she can’t do anything about Rockmann, or...?

“We’re following her into the past,” says Satanás in a spirited voice. “But I

don’t feel safe going with only the three of us!”

Could you not say “I don’t feel safe” with such pride?

“It is for emergencies like these that Alois made this,” he continues. “Ta-dah!”

Looking proud of himself, he takes a small sloppily-gilded wooden box out of the bag strapped to his waist. Its name: “Device for Direct Address of His Highness.” What in the world?

“This awesome little thing lets you talk straight into Noir’s brain, no letters needed.” He giggles. “You can use it when he sleeps, too.”

“I honestly think one good neck-wringing from the prince would do you some good.”

It must be really inconvenient for Prince Zenon for such a device to exist. Apparently they even actually used it once in the past, and received a tongue-lashing for their trouble. What do they think they’re doing to a prince of all people? Imagine the consequences if it was a foreign prince... Though it’s just as bad with a local one, really. In fact, I think it’s fair to say they got away lightly; this *is* Prince Zenon we’re talking about.

Transmitting a voice directly into the brain is a special kind of magic unique to the lightning school—it is capable of delivering electrical impulses into the target’s brain. It probably works on the prince because his elemental affinity is lightning. Still, what did Rockmann make such a thing for? Wasn’t he the prince’s personal guard?

“Such a lame name.” Even Benjamine, who’s normally soft on Satanás, is astonished enough to stand there with her mouth hanging open.

***

After opening the box, Satanás calls out into it. Benjamine and I watch on in silence, when suddenly, a low groan comes from inside. What was that...? It sounded like a demon; Benjamine seems to have had the same thought as we exchange glances, blinking in surprise. Wait, was that Prince Zenon’s voice...?

Benjamine looks at the box once more.

“I believe I’ve told you never to use this again.”

From the bottom of the box comes a very displeased voice conveying equally displeased words. It really is the prince.

The prince sure has some happy-go-lucky friends. As far as I'm familiar with his circle, Prince Zenon actually considers Satanás one of his best buddies, despite how he may act. They're kind of like brothers who fight all the time. Rockmann's relationship with Satanás, on the other hand, is the complete opposite of the one they both have with the prince. They're like partners in crime—they just bring out the worst in each other, you could say.

Judging by the prince's tone, he's contemplating his retaliation for this disturbance. I should help him get his revenge if I get the chance. Still, we're talking about Prince Zenon—he must be completely used to the rolling garbage fire that is Satanás, so I can just imagine him forgiving the man despite his anger. *Good for you, Satanás, that the prince is so merciful.*

"Look, it's an emergency, okay?"

"Emergency, you say?"

"We've found that doll."

"Are you serious?" asks the prince after a pause.

"A woman used it to go into the past, and she might make contact with us there. Would you mind helping us out before the order seizes this thing?"

"I'm in the middle of a military exercise."

Turns out, the prince is in fact busy with a mock battle at the moment. *Sorry to have bothered you at such an important time, Your Highness.*

"Dude, our future is more important than some training drill!"

Satanás explains everything from the start. I'm sure the prince is confused to hear all this out of the blue, and it's not like he's not busy. I didn't exactly understand everything right away either, and the prince isn't even here, so I imagine he'll have even more trouble than I did.

Despite the fact that the prince can't see him, Satanás gesticulates wildly as he relays the situation in detail.

"Man, long explanations always wear me out," he says at the end as he wipes

his forehead, out of breath.

“I understand. If I am able to gain permission from the commander, I will head there with Alois.”

“Great. We’ll be waiting.”

Satanás moves his face away from the box and gives me a thumbs up, as if to say now we’ll be ready. It’s a bit late to say this, but he probably shows far more initiative than anyone else in my circle of friends, including me. And though he doesn’t go showing it off, his magic is above average too. He should be able to advance from the rank of expert to master at Harré soon. As I look at Benjamine gazing at Satanás with a smile on her face, I sense that her falling in love with him probably has something to do with aspects of him most people can’t see from the outside.

“Alois!” comes the prince’s loud voice from the box.

The three of us turn our attention to it again.

“What’s going on, Noir?” calls out Satanás after a brief moment.

“Alois collapsed.”

“What?”

“He seems to be feeling a sharp pain in his brain...? Hey, healers, over here!”

The three of us don’t doubt what happened. It’s not like any of us speak out. We don’t discuss it at all. But each of us recalls what the dwarfish old man said: “It will depend on how much that woman does to the man she’s after.”

Benjamine knits her brows as she looks at us.

***

“I’ll bring Nikeh instead of Alois. Wait there.”

Why did he collapse? Is he going to be all right? Isn’t the brain pretty much the worst place you could be feeling a sharp, stabbing pain? Did something really happen to him in the past? No way, right? And is it so strange for me to panic just because Rockmann collapsed?

Indescribable fears appear in my mind. Wait, I mean, *fear* is a word for it, but,

you know, there are different kinds of fears, and like, if something happens to Rockmann, how will that affect our group of friends? And even if that alone isn't enough to shake it, I don't know if that extends to the kind of situation where Rockmann collapses...

As I stand there making excuses inside my mind to no one in particular and holding my hands over my stomach, playing with my fingers in a fluster, something bluish purple starts twisting at the edge of my vision. Is that some creature's tail?

"Are you okay, Nanalie?"

Facing the source of the voice, I realize that the tail from earlier belongs to Nikeh's serpentine familiar—her ophis. Riding on top of it, she makes a landing nearby, a bitter expression on her face. Naturally, she's wearing her uniform, as she was in a military exercise until now. On dismount, she takes off her coat and vest, leaving just her long-sleeved shirt.

"You got here quick!" I exclaim, slightly recoiling in surprise.

"Of course I would."

I don't think much time has passed since Satanás contacted the prince.

"It's an emergency, after all," Nikeh adds, bringing her hand to her cheek. "Are you okay?" she asks once more, seeing me frozen up.

Right, I forgot to reply to that.

"Sure."

Though I say the word clearly and without wavering, I have to ask myself—in what way exactly am I "okay," and why do I insist on claiming to be that way? Completely losing the ability to think properly is not normal. As I stand there, considering my current mental state as if looking at myself from above, Prince Zenon comes flying in next. He raises his hand to us from atop his phoenix, then makes a landing in front of us, his jet-black cloak fluttering in the wind.

"You got here fast! Sure you weren't just killing time over there?" asks Satanás.

"I told you I was in an exercise." Prince Zenon approaches me. "I'm sorry

about what happened," he says with a stern expression.

"See, His Highness was worried about you too," says Nikeh with a smile.

"I-I don't know if I'd make such a big deal out of it..." I reply.

I'm well aware everyone considers this a big disaster for me and expresses their concern, but it's kinda embarrassing. I feel pathetic having Satanás and the prince worry about me this much when Rockmann should be a close friend of theirs too. It's twice as embarrassing, because it's almost like they're saying the things I feel towards him are plain as day. But this is no time for feeling embarrassed about such things. I'm worried about Rockmann.

"So the doll really exists. Honestly, I didn't really believe it until now," says the prince, flicking his head with mild irritation to get his apparently overgrown bangs out of his eyes and making a difficult face at the dwarfish old man.

I've never heard of magic or artifacts that let one impact the past. If there was ever a magician who invented such a thing, they should've become famous a very long time ago. The fact that they haven't announced themselves kind of proves this Time Keeper is inherently dangerous. I was told Benjamine tried to ask in a roundabout way who made him, but didn't manage to get a clear answer.

"The Time Keeper has grown attached to Benjamine, so he's being extremely cooperative," I explain.

"That's good to hear," replies Prince Zenon. "Oh, I should mention Alois said he had a headache and a really bad case of nausea. He's rarely fallen ill before, though."

"Did healing magic do any good?"

"Not really. If what Satanás said is true and something from the past is affecting Alois in the present, we must hurry and make our way there to stop Lady Treyse."

"Ideally we could've gone back to the day she got her hands on the Time Keeper, but apparently we won't find her in any other time unless we pull her out of that particular time in the past first."

“The mechanism of time travel is pretty contrived, I see,” says the prince with a sigh.

I nod in agreement.

“If everyone is here, then I’d say it is high time we got to it.” The Time Keeper, who was watching our exchange from afar, claps his hands to gather us around him. “There are several things you must keep in mind when traveling to the past. Listen closely.”

Though it sounds like he’s about to say something important, it’s a bit hard to take him seriously when he sits on Benjamine’s lap and has her arms around him. As I watch him rattle on breathily and at length as he leans the back of his head on Benjamine’s soft chest every now and then, I have half a mind to shout and call him a pervert. Satanás quietly listening beside me seems to have trouble containing his anger too, huffing and puffing as he glares at the doll.

“There is no harm in making contact with yourself in the past—your old self shall quickly forget it. And while there are no particular things you should not change, refrain from conceiving children in the past or the future. It creates heaps of trouble later.”

“Who the hell would do that?!” exclaims Satanás.

The two perverts lash out at each other for a bit, after which the Time Keeper snaps his fingers and we disappear from the forest.

Tale IV

It feels like I'm floating. My hair flutters, my bangs stand up, and a loud sound like that of a mighty gust of wind right next to my ears makes them hurt. I guess going back to the past feels like flying through the air. I can even breathe somewh—

"We're falling!"

"Ahhh!!!"

If this is what feeling "head over heels" is supposed to be like, the world's romance novelists are sorely in need of correcting. As I am right now, there's a beautiful clear sky below me, and I can see the ground above. It becomes apparent that I am plummeting headfirst through the air. I hurry to hold down my skirt. It's not like I'd hate to have someone see my underwear, but I feel like it would bother anyone who did. Mainly the prince.

"Wait, are we really meant to be time traveling this way?!" I exclaim.

Isn't there a safer way? At least everyone else is still by my side. It's pretty cliché in stories to get separated at times like these.

"You folks really thought it would be so easy?!"

Suddenly, I hear the voice of someone who shouldn't be here. As I turn to look beside me, my eyes meet with those of a gnome in a red hat.

The Time Keeper is just as I last saw him, being hugged by Benjamine. What's more, there's a pink bubble around them, and they look to be completely prepared for the fall. It's actually refreshing to see such brazen favoritism.

When did he sneak his way into our midst, anyway?

"You're here, Keeper?!"

"Why the hell are you coming with us?!" asks Satanás at the same time as me.

Seeing our confusion, the Time Keeper smirks, still wrapped tightly in Benjamine's arms. This guy...

“Whoever said you get to travel safely? Did I ever say such a thing, my little Benjamine?”

“You damn old pervert!” exclaims Satanás.

Forget what I said about this journey feeling like flying through the air. I can’t believe this old bastard would make us go through something like this. Where exactly are we, geographically, anyway?

Naturally assuming a ring formation with the five of us as we fall, we exchange glances.

“Do you guys even remember you are magicians?”

Suddenly, my body flips upside down and I find myself floating. Holding my head due to feeling a little dizzy, I gaze with respect at Prince Zenon, who has his arms folded and looks like he can’t believe us. He looks gallant as he slowly manipulates us with an idle flick of his hand, despite his bangs going up and leaving his forehead in full view.

“Thank you, Your Highness!”

Right, we could use magic. I forgot. I’m angry at myself for having degraded into the kind of klutz who’d let her worries turn her around so bad she’d forget basic facts. And I even took it out on the gnome for no good reason.

As land approaches, I can clearly see the Royal Isle with Doran’s castle and the magic school. Looks like we’re falling from right above it. The prince says we’ll have to start by visiting the school anyway, and makes us float toward the Isle’s landing zone. This spot is the official entrance of the Isle—landing anywhere else without making a stop here first would get you arrested on grounds of trespassing. It’s like the gates of a school.

There’s no point hashing out our plan any further—we all figure Treyse must have gone straight to the school. And according to what we managed to get out of the gnome, she chose to travel to the day of the school entrance ceremony. Looks like she plans to approach Rockmann starting from this day. I’m conflicted on how I want to proceed: on the one hand, I want to stop her; on the other, I feel like I shouldn’t get in their way if Rockmann and Treyse do end up in a relationship.

Though when she heard about my internal conflict, Benjamine snapped and scolded me with a raised eyebrow. “Hold on, you can’t be serious! No matter how you think about it, *she’s* the one who’s getting in *your* way and trying to undo things by changing the past!”

“She went back to the day we entered school, right?” asks the prince again.

“That’s correct,” replies the Time Keeper.

Eventually, we arrive at the landing zone, slowly touching down. Nikeh is the first to set foot on the ground, followed by Benjamine, then Satanás. When my heels finally rest firmly on a solid surface, I am at last able to make a mental switch from our at once too long and blessedly short flight.

“We’ll have to get through here first,” says Prince Zenon.

He suddenly snaps his fingers and turns into a young boy shorter than me. What did he mean by “getting through?” As the rest of us follow his line of sight, we see a knight approach from far away. I recall that when I arrived here on the day I entered school, a knight led me there from this place.

That’s not all, though. There are guards here who ensure no suspicious individuals enter the Isle. If we look like this, they’ll probably start questioning us, and because we don’t have any kind of valid ID, they might even arrest us if worse comes to worst. Sneaking past them doesn’t seem like a good idea, since for all I know they could have traps laid for those who try. It seems wise to change our appearances to match how we were at the age of twelve, when we entered school, just like the prince just did.

“You’re adorable, Your Highness,” says Nikeh.

“Ah, you’re so cute!” adds Benjamine.

Those childish cheeks of his that no doubt stretch so much if you pinch them... It’s so adorable how they turn a bit red at the girls’ words. And that cute sullen look on his face...

Following the prince’s example, the rest of us shapeshift too. The technique, like any other form of magic, calls for a strong imagination. Those who fall short have to describe the person whose form they want to assume in detail (such as

their date of birth, where they live, their build, etc.) before saying the incantation.

"*Prinaade*," says Nikeh, becoming a young girl in a lovely yellow outfit.

Her faintly blonde hair remains the same length. Remembering how she used to tie her hair in pigtails makes me nostalgic. I plead for her to tie it in pigtails again and her cheeks turn red, just like with the prince. She's barely ever done her hair that way since graduation.

"Try not to look too much, okay?"

As she reluctantly fulfills my request, I tightly embrace her little figure.

"Oh, come on! My chest got so tiny!" complains Benjamine in the meantime.

I've always thought she looked mature for her age, but looking at her twelve-year-old figure now, as a grown-up, I realize how much that impression was rooted in my being a child myself at the time. She looks like an ordinary cute little girl. Benjamine simply radiates loveliness with those large, catlike eyes and well-grown eyelashes. And with that red hair and good complexion, she gives off the impression of a young girl brimming with health. It's probably because of Satanás that so few guys have ever confessed to her. I'm certain of it, in fact. I keep wondering, but... *Are you sure you've made a good choice of partner, Benjamine?*

I don't have anything particular to say about Satanás's own twelve-year-old figure as he stands there picking his nose.

"That dark brown hair doesn't look right on you at all," says Nikeh, staring at my now shoulder-length hair once I snap my fingers and turn small in an instant.

"I was born with this color, though..."

By now I'm completely used to my blue hair; it gives me peace of mind, as opposed to my old hair color. Reverting like this feels like visiting a stranger's home; even if you know the etiquette inside and out, you can't help feeling awkward.

About a minute after everyone's done shapeshifting the knight finally reaches

us.

“How strange... Did you see any adults here?”

“Huh? There aren’t any,” replies Nikeh, bringing her index finger to her lower lip and tilting her head. How exquisitely lovable.

The knight looks like a decent man. He wears a white uniform and has freckles on the tip of his nose.

“Your Highness? What brings you here?”

“My friends got lost and I brought them here. I’ll return to school at once.”

“Ah, you have already made friends? There isn’t much time until the entrance ceremony—shall I ready a coach for you?”

“Don’t bother. We’ll make it if we run.”

Checking the clock tower at the landing zone, I see that the ceremony will start in thirty minutes.

The knight makes way for us without any trouble.

“Please hurry,” he says, lightly pushing our little backs.

As we run to the school, I look back and see him waving a hand to us. Given how easily he let us through, I have to wonder if the security of this island is too lax. It’s kind of anticlimactic.

“I’ve known that knight since I was little. His name is Jute. Even back then we talked sometimes, and I found him to be a reasonable, good-natured man. He didn’t reproach me when I was tired of my studies and came to talk to him for a change of pace,” the prince explains while we run.

For a child to think of someone much older than him as “reasonable” is bold, to put it lightly. Add to that his current cute appearance, and you’ve got an incredible combination.

“Good thing I called Noir over, right?”

“Don’t even think of ever using that device again. You’re bothering His Highness,” replies Nikeh behind me.

“What are you, his mom?”

“’His mom’?! I don’t remember giving birth to anyone!”

The two start bickering behind me. Nikeh only ever gets like this with Satanás. They probably don’t think of each other as members of the opposite sex. It just looks like two kids having a fight.

***

Once the school comes into view, I find the outside completely devoid of people. Everyone is probably inside. The five of us look up at the towering brick gate.

“I sense that lady in this building,” says the Time Keeper.

“You do?” I ask.

“Of course. I sent her here. There’s some strange magic imbued in this gate, though. And not just this gate. It seems the entire school grounds are surrounded with some sort of a protective spell.”

Just as the gnome says, this school’s security makes use of numerous spells. There are countless spots enchanted to deal with intruders from the outside. The teachers used to tell us we weren’t in danger ourselves, but that we should tell our parents to be careful.

“Alright, leave this to me!” exclaims Satanás in high spirits, rolling up his sleeves.

“What are you planning?” I ask.

“Hey, Principal!”

What?! Why are you calling the most powerful person in the whole school?! That’s just asking for trouble!

“Hey,” says Zenon, “be quiet.”

“But...”

“Keep your voice down!” Nikeh chimes in.

“But he’s right there...”

The principal is, in fact, standing right there. The four of us freeze up, blinking away the shock. Satanás points at the school building.

“Oh, you’re right.”

Despite the fact the entrance ceremony is about to start, the principal is sweeping the school grounds.

***

The principal’s position is the highest post any teacher can earn here. My impression of him is not only that he’s at the top of the food chain relative to everyone else in school, but he’s also strong, old, and number one in everything. If I remember correctly, when I first saw him at the entrance ceremony, I thought he was a lovable old man with gray hair who didn’t seem very strict. When I gained first place among girls in that tournament during my fifth year and he summoned me to his office to commend me, our height was practically the same. Rockmann was summoned too, and he had to literally look down on the principal.

The principal always wore an oversized black robe. I don’t know if the choice of size was intentional or he just didn’t care, but it always dragged behind him as he walked. His hair had lost so much color that people called him “the white magician.”

As a pretty small, slightly-built guy with such long hair, he’d be kind of hard to classify gender-wise in the absence of his voluminous beard—even then, I’m mostly just guessing the principal’s a “he.”.

Weeding the school’s perimeter is his daily routine. It’s possible to do it with magic, yet he did it by hand every day back then. He would often gaze at the students playing outside, though he didn’t come talk to them. When students saw him and waved to him, he only reacted with a smile, and usually just kept watching unless we went to talk to him of our own accord. According to Mr. Bordon, one of my old teachers, the principal refrains from approaching us so he doesn’t spoil our fun.

I had no idea that he was here, sweeping, when the entrance ceremony was about to start. He diligently sweeps the fallen leaves scattered on the ground.

“Mr. Bu!!!” shouts Satanás.

This “Mr. Bu” is like a nickname he’s made up for the principal over the

numerous times he got summoned to his office—which is more times than anyone else in the whole school. The nickname's an egregious and self-explanatory contraction of the principal's last name, Sophocles Burbudo; not long after Satanás started using it, it spread to much of the student body. Not that the poor man's had the chance to go through all of that yet.

"'Bu'?" the principal responds, in an uncharacteristically high-pitched voice.

He starts searching for the source and locks eyes with us at the gate. He then approaches, broom in hand.

"Are you all entering school today? Oh, is that His Highness Prince Zenon I spot in your ranks?"

He looks surprised at the fact we're still out here despite the upcoming ceremony.



“I’m sorry, sir. We’re late to the ceremony,” replies the prince.

“Hm... I must say, ‘tis most strange... I had the impression Your Highness was making an address as the representative of this year’s freshmen at this very moment. Was it but my imagination?”

Silence falls for a moment. Right, I forgot...

“Yeah, dude, you looked totally full of yourself giving that speech!” exclaims Satanás.

I remember now how he went up on the stage in the great hall and gave a speech when we were freshmen. I stared at him in disbelief, surprised by the fact I entered school at the same time as a prince. And I never imagined we’d be in the same class, too.

Faced with the principal’s smile, Prince Zenon looks like he’s given up and snaps his fingers.

“Wait, no, Your Highness!”

Nikeh and Benjamine shriek as the prince breaks his disguise. Can’t blame them. We didn’t have much of a plan, but we’ve definitely failed in whatever we were trying to do.

“Sir, please hear me out,” says the prince.

Looks like he’s resorted to a direct approach. Having changed his appearance back, he stands in front of us in our twelve-year-old forms as if shielding us. Satanás doesn’t seem very fond of that, however, and steps in front of him with a huff. What is he contending for here?

I’m sure it’s far more credible if a prince of Doran talks to the principal rather than the rest of us trying it. And most importantly, he’s an actual prince. Not many people would risk shapeshifting into one, which should make him more persuasive.

“Well, look how you’ve grown!” says the principal with a smile, remaining completely calm. Looks like he’s accepted this development.

“Would you believe it if I told you I am Zenon Doran—not the one you know, but his future self?”

Since we don’t know the number and location of the traps laid around the school, the risk of triggering one and getting thrown in jail or elsewhere is too high. It should be a valid strategy to try to gain entry fair and square. If we get chased out, we can plan a new approach from there.

The rest of us snap our fingers and undo the shapeshifting. I don’t bother to hide my blue hair.

“Sir, we’ve come from the future too! I’m a graduate of this school, Nanalie Hel!”

Since the people of this time apparently won’t remember us, it should be fine.

“Same here! My name is Naru Satanás!”

We introduce ourselves one by one. The principal doesn’t look dubious of us at all, and simply watches in silence.

“Well, well, then I suppose it has been a while. I see, I see. Once you pass through the gate, it will become clear if you have come from the future as you say. Please, go ahead,” says the principal, beckoning us with his hand.

Is this the part where he does the cliché “old man laugh”? No?

“Are you sure this isn’t a trap?” quietly utters Nikeh, slightly ducking her head.

I’m tempted to suspect something too, given how the other party doesn’t suspect us at all. Like, we’ve just told him we’re graduates from the future. I’d expect him to question our sanity. Hmm...

“Are you, perhaps, afraid of the gate? ‘Tis enchanted with magic that repels those who bear ill will, do not belong, aren’t graduates, aren’t teachers, and some other types of people.” The principal smiles, playing with his long beard. “Since the entrance ceremony is today, the gate’s ability to recognize organisms might be functioning. If you have passed through it before, there should not be any issue. Shapeshifting accurately enough is only possible if you are assuming a form that belongs to you, as you would not be able to get the little details—say, the lines on your hands—otherwise.”

“For real?” asks Satanás.

“As real as can be.”

“Alright, we’ll be going, then!”

With Satanás leading the charge, we decide to just go for it and take the principal up on his offer. As we pass through the gate, I feel something like electricity pass through me. Nothing else happens, however, and we all manage to pass through just fine. Makes you wonder what we were so scared of.

“See? What did I tell you?”

“Anyone would lose their cool, okay?” replies Satanás. “And I gotta say, I had no idea you were out here sweeping during the entrance ceremony.”

“Good things are bound to come when you keep the place clean. Such as how I met you, visitors from the future, just now.”

While Satanás has always been awfully casual with his seniors, it’s pretty unusual how the principal doesn’t say anything about it. I guess he’s just very tolerant like that. Was it like this every time Satanás got summoned to the principal’s office?

Anyway, good thing we ran into the principal before anyone else. It should be easier to get around with the approval of the most powerful person in the school.

“It’s great that we ran into him first,” says Benjamine. Looks like she was thinking the same thing.

“Yeah,” I reply.

“So, what brings you here today?” asks the principal. “I believe your story, but I still don’t know why you would come here from the future.”

I guess he won’t let us in if we don’t give him a reason. If we were to tell him we’re here to see a teacher, I can’t imagine he would accept it unless said teacher was no longer alive in our time (and I’d hate to give such a reason, even if it’s a lie). Saying I’m here because someone wants to take my seat in class by my loved one’s side (even though back then I didn’t love him and, in fact, hated him) and I want to stop that—now that’s just disgraceful.

“Someone came to this time period to change the past. That individual is here in this school,” explains Nikeh as I stand there in search of what to say.

“Yes, and we’re here to stran... Ahem, to bring that individual back,” continues Benjamine.

That’s right, we have something of a home-wrecker on our hands. We need to teach her a lesson.

I can almost see flames raging behind Nikeh and Benjamine. *You’re scaring me, girls.* Seeing them like that, the principal cracks a smile.

“I must ask, has magic that allows one to affect the past appeared in your age?”

“I don’t know when it became possible, but there’s an artifact apparently sold on the black market that allows it. This doll right here,” I explain.

He *should* quickly forget about the Time Keeper in Benjamine’s arms, but it’s probably best not to say too much here regardless. That’s just how dangerous this artifact is.

“So you used it to come here... By the way, you said your name was Nanalie Hel, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I believe Mr. Bordon told me a Nanalie Hel passed this year’s entrance exam, attaining second place. In first place was a child named Arnold.”

In first place was a child named Arnold.

“Kgh...”

Now hold on a second, this is the first I’ve heard of this. What, are you telling me I had a lower score than him even at the entrance exam?! I’ve really been a loser my whole life, haven’t I?! And in this world where falling in love counts as a loss, I’m most definitely a loser on that front as well! Give me a break...

Two of my friends support me from both sides as I nearly fall over.

“Yes, and sitting next to that Alois Hades Arnold Rockmann was none other than her!”

“There’s a woman who’s come here to change that and become his girlfriend! Please do something about it, sir!”

“It’s very, veeery important for our friendship!”

Once again it’s Benjamine and Nikeh who do the talking for me, and more passionately than I would. Becoming friends with these two in the future might have nothing to do with Rockmann, but I hate the idea of having things I remember being unwritten from history.

I hold my head to steady my wavering mind.

“I see, I see. The seating order hasn’t been decided on yet, so I shall keep that in mind.”

“It’s not enough to just keep it in your mind!”

We’ve made it inside the school, but what about Treyse? How did she get in? It’s possible she knew beforehand she could simply walk through the gate and acted like a regular student. Is she currently in her child form or the adult one? Perhaps she’s assumed someone else’s form instead? According to the principal, you can shapeshift freely after getting in.

“Just like the principal said, anyone bearing ill will should trigger one of the traps around school. The fact that she didn’t probably means she doesn’t consider what she’s doing ‘bad,’” Prince Zenon infers, folding his arms. He hasn’t said much during this conversation.

“What?! That’s the nastiest kind of woman!” says Nikeh, shaking her head so strongly that her pigtails hit the prince.

“There is only the ceremony today, after which the students go to their dorms,” says the principal. “What do you say to working as substitute teachers? It would give you access to the school.”

Thrown off by his suggestion, we freeze up with our mouths hanging open. In the meantime, he does a hearty cliché old man laugh.

***

We follow the principal, who seems to be taking us to the staff room. With the ceremony in progress, the hallways and classrooms are currently devoid of students. We look around as we walk. This place smells so nostalgic...

“I forgot how lovely that garden fountain was!” Benjamine exclaims, pointing

at the fountain of the Goddess outside the window.

Standing beside her, Satanás looks awkward. We (Nikeh and I) know why.

“It’s where Benjamine invited him for a dance,” says Nikeh.

“Yep,” I reply.

It’s safe to say that place was a turning point in their lives. If back then, at the pre-graduation dance party, he hadn’t accepted her invitation, things could’ve gone very differently. Though it’s not like she wouldn’t have been able to handle a rejection. Knowing her, she wouldn’t have given up so easily, so I’m not particularly worried. Still, that place definitely holds an important memory for them.

“Maybe it’s rash to feel this way, but I’m having fun,” Prince Zenon mutters behind us as we walk with grins on our faces.

“Come again?” I reply.

“Walking the hallways with my friends like this. Though I know I can’t keep feeling this way forever—like I’ve come back to my childhood.”

Looking behind me, I see him staring at the ceiling and smiling.

“I’ve never had the opportunity to walk the hallways with you, Your Highness, so this is new to me,” says Nikeh, falling a step behind to align herself with the prince.

“Right, you were in the next class.”

“That’s right. Though maybe I would’ve felt too awed by your presence to approach you even had we been in the same class.”

“Really? You’ve got a steely disposition, so I doubt it would go that way...”

“Is that supposed to mean I’m frigid and inflexible?” replies Nikeh, extreme discontent written on her face as she thrusts out her lower lip.

Seeing that, the prince presses the back of his hand to his mouth and holds back his laughter.

Frankly, I think Nikeh would’ve been fine being by his side as a friend. She’s pretty resilient, mentally speaking. Back in those days I had to deal with the

stares of the prince's fan club pricking at my back like countless invisible needles, so it wasn't often I managed to go up to the prince and speak to him. Even so, I think we were close enough friends back then. Rockmann's fan club was pretty different in that its members were far more aggressive (causing me overwhelming stress)—they had a way of filling my school life with terror.

"We're here," announces the principal.

We come upon a single-board door, no different from those leading to classrooms. The stone sign on the wall says "Staff room."

"The teachers aren't here yet, so take a seat wherever you like."

As he says, the room's deserted.

"I intend to briefly introduce you to the teachers. You will have to use different names. Do you plan to keep your looks?"

"I don't know..." I reply.

It doesn't seem like such a good idea to walk around as I am. I'm still wearing my white Harré uniform, so I snap my fingers to change into a green dress.

"I think it'll be easier to get Treyse to show herself if we stay like this," states the prince. "Nanalie, keep your hair color."

"What? Why?"

"It's the best way of provoking her. I'm sure she'll immediately panic once she sees your blue hair."

He's right—it would be a good way of luring her into the open. It's tiring to keep magical effects on yourself anyway, so that makes things easier for me.

Still, I don't know where Treyse is right now, but if I go in front of everyone like this, wouldn't my twelve-year-old self realize I'm her from the future when she sees that we're like two peas in a pod? The only difference between us is my hair color, and even that difference will disappear eventually. Well, I guess it'll be half a year until that happens, so maybe it'll be fine... Or not...

There's a few remaining concerns, but we're here to catch Treyse, so I can't afford to hesitate now.

“Say, will they really all forget about us? Even the principal?” quietly asks Benjamine, facing the Time Keeper in her arms.

“Well, not completely. Everything new will be something that actually happened, but something they will find very hard to remember.”

That’s pretty complicated. The fact they’ll be able to remember us at all is worrying enough.

“There are no classes specific to magic types yet, so you may spread out over the three classrooms and act as assistant teachers there. Hel, you will assist Mr. Bordon. Brunel and Satanás, you will assist Mr. Bevrio. Feltina and Your Highness, assist Mr. Chute.”

“You want me to help Bevrio?! That guy’s such a tightass!” complains Satanás, frowning deeply.

This “Bevrio” is popular with the female students. Though an adult, he’s a bit of a gaudy-looking flirt with his hairdo characterized by a long hairline at the nape, as well as his crisp-looking brows and the several earrings he wears. Despite his appearance, however, he’s a surprisingly ardent teacher who patiently helps his students get the hang of magic.

Other teachers would pretty much leave Satanás alone if, during class, they woke him up a few times and he just kept going back to sleep (Mr. Bordon never woke him up or said anything at all), but Mr. Bevrio was different. Until Satanás managed to stay awake, he would keep poking the top of his head, and sometimes even use magic to make Satanás float. If you ask me, Mr. Bevrio’s teaching style is completely sensible—hardly strict at all. The weird one is this guy in front of me.

“Don’t you go telling the teachers you have come from the future. Remember, you are assistants I have brought in on my own authority.”

“Yes, sir!” I reply.

As we wait in the staff room, the teachers return from the entrance ceremony. Before I know it, the principal has sold the other teachers on his story, which they readily accepted pretty much on blind faith. It’s decided; we start teaching tomorrow.

“Looking forward to working with you,” says Mr. Bordon, his appearance rather young for someone I haven’t seen in years.

***

“Is this your first time teaching children, Miss Natolie?”

“Yes, sir. I’m nervous.”

I spent the night in the teachers’ dorm and headed to the classroom come morning. Mr. Bordon keeps talking to me on the way, seeming intent on helping me relax. These hallways are so long you get tired just from walking, which also gives him plenty of time to burn through a lot of conversational material.

Our cover story goes like this: we’re five students of the royal teaching school who have come for our internship with the principal’s approval. The principal came up with all the fine details himself, and he’s also the one who came up with our aliases. Impressive, considering he did it all overnight. He was trembling with excitement when he told us about it in the morning—perhaps he’s the sort of guy who loves this cloak and dagger business.

“Oho ho ho, I am.”

...Is what he was clearly thinking inside his mind, but instead, he simply said “I am” with a gentle expression. Truly, he’s a mystery wrapped in an enigma (I’d wager good money he’s an elderly fairy in human guise).

My alias is Natolie Proserpina. Nikeh’s is Yuno Ortega. The prince became Jupiter Torseter. Satanás is now Perseus Gallo, and Benjamine goes by Andromeda Boyes. The principal even went so far as to come up with our hometowns and academic history. All this makes me slightly suspicious of him having done this kind of fabrication before, and on more than one occasion, without batting an eye.

“’Tis not something I do on a regular basis,” he’d said with a smile, apparently sensing my doubts about him.

I decide to set aside these inappropriate thoughts.

Parting with my friends was disheartening and put me on the verge of tears, but visiting a place that used to be so familiar has a way of quickly releasing your tension.

Mr. Bordon’s class is the one *I* am in. Rockmann is there too, of course. And

the old Satanás and Maris. If nothing's changed yet, Treyse should be in an adjacent class, the one headed by Mr. Bevrio.

"My class has many noble children, so it might be difficult for you to handle them, but remember: we are the mentors here on school grounds. Act confident."

"Yes, sir!"

Mr. Bordon has the level of composure required of someone entrusted with our class. He has always brought us a sense of security.

"There are also only two commoners in my class, so you have to be careful to maintain the mood. Some will no doubt act high-handed, and I imagine giving them a good scolding would only make things worse. Let us treat the nobles and the commoners equally and lead by example, showing that one isn't superior to the other."

"...Thank you kindly."

"Hm? What are you thanking me for?"

"Nothing, never mind! You're right, let's do that."

So that was his way of thinking... I find myself deeply touched by his words.

"I keep wondering why the principal decided on such imbalanced groups of students. I am told he only made the decision yesterday. It just doesn't make any sense to me."

Mr. Bordon holds his head, looking troubled. As I thought, it seems he finds it strange too. The wrinkles around his eyes appear to grow in size.

***

Shortly after that, we reach the classroom. I take a deep breath and follow Mr. Bordon into that nostalgic place. The moment we enter, the clamor inside completely dies down. I can sense everyone focusing their attention on us.

"My name is Leonidas Bordon. I will be in charge of this class till the day you graduate. Pleased to meet you. Also, for a week starting from today, an intern will be assisting me. Please introduce yourself, Miss Natolie."

I step onto the podium.

“My name is Natolie Proserpina. Pleased to meet you.”

“Whoa! Hey, Miss Natolie, why is your hair blue?” exclaims the still-very-young Maris (her innocent “Whoa!” is simply precious).

“It really is!”

“Is there a spell that can change the color of your hair? I’d love to know!”

Their cheeks red, the female students begin to chatter, expressing their drive for self-improvement. This side of them was cute from the very start. If they’d directed even a little bit of these carefree smiles and readiness for compromise at me, we might’ve started to get along sooner. Though, on the other hand, things worked out the way they did because of how it all started, so maybe I don’t mind how everything went, in the end.

I can’t help but notice that the number of female students staring at me is about the same as at a certain other point in the room.

“Now, I’m going to take attendance...”

“Would you stop bothering me? If you so strongly insist on playing with me, quickly say ‘Imagine an imaginary menagerie manager managing an imaginary menagerie.’”

“And what makes you think I want to play with you?! Hmph, I’ll say your tongue twister, but you’ll prostrate yourself before me if I manage it!”

“Do your best.”

“Imagine an imaginary manager managing maginary managery manag... Aaaaahhh!”

A blond boy and a girl with dark brown hair at the very back of the classroom interrupt Mr. Bordon with some kind of loud dispute. The boy is wearing clothes that look rather expensive, while the girl has a simple blue dress on.

“What’s the matter with them...?” utters Mr. Bordon as I take in the awfully familiar scene.

I feel a stinging sensation at his words. *What you’re looking at, Mr. Bordon,*

is... Well...

"This is part of your learning experience, Miss Natolie."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Go find out what's going on." Mr. Bordon's smile says he won't take no for an answer.

As I stand there, unable to say anything, he pushes me on the back towards the stairs.

Why me?! You're in charge of this class! Wait, was it Mr. Bordon who stopped us back then? I try to recall it, but it's all fuzzy. It kinda feels like it was him, but also like it was someone else. I'm pretty confident in my memory, though...

I ascend the stairs, my steps clattering. On my way up I reply to a girl who wanted to know about hair-dying magic.

"Umm... You two, what's wrong? Are you having a fight?"

You know full well what this is about, Nanalie—I quip on the inside.

Once I call out to them, the blond boy turns to me. His red eyes are like baubles of polished glass. His cheeks are faintly round, his short hair looks a little disheveled, and his brows are knitted in displeasure.

"It's not me, it's this stupidface making a fuss."

"Who're you calling stupidface?! Say that again, you slick head!"

"Huh? 'Slick head'?"

"It's totally slick. A slick and glistening head of blond hair. You're definitely going bald in the future."

"Look at you with your broad forehead. I'm pretty sure you're the one who's going to go bald, starting from there. You poor little thing. I can already see you in the future."

The future me is standing right here, though...

An awkward smile surfaces on my face. Looking at the battle unfolding before me, I'm part astonished and part frustrated by the absurdity of it all. I'm utterly disappointed in myself. To think these fights were so trifling and I was no better

than my opponent...

Watching the two quarrel with their foreheads pressed nearly flush, at just the right distance for the one party's spit to fly directly into the other's face, I finally have a realization. At the end of the day, this was just a pissing contest. Anyone around could see it was completely pointless. That's why Mr. Bordon would always tell me to "keep it in moderation" when I thought I was having a serious argument. I didn't want to know this.

"Imagine a manager magine menager mag..."

Still, to these two, it's a very serious conversation. I should know; I was part of it.

My eyes meet those of my younger self. In an instant, her frown is replaced with a smile.

"Wow, Miss Natolie, your hair is so pretty!"

"R-Really?"

That carefree smile of hers is like a once-wilted flower bud blooming once more.

I sure didn't expect to get a compliment from myself. I hold my cheeks and smile too. She probably really meant what she said (not to brag, but she's me). Why did I hate my blue hair so much at first if I don't have trouble recognizing its beauty when someone else has it? Sure, by now I know it's gorgeous, but it looks like in my younger days I had no end of ways to stay obstinate.

"I'm going to take attendance," Mr. Bordon calls out, "so put your argument on hold until break time. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir! Sorry," replies my younger self.

"Yes, sir," adds Rockmann.

Despite everything, they do as their teacher says. We were relatively obedient children, independent and cooperative at the same time.

Now, then. With the fight broken up, I go back down the stairs. I make sure to reply with a wave to a girl who reminds me about her interest in my hair color.

“How did it go? Should I be concerned about them?” asks Mr. Bordon once I reach the teacher’s podium.

“Looks like there’s no problem, sir.”

Indeed, there’s no problem. I’m here to stop whatever Treyse is up to, and the fact it’s still me, Nanalie Hel, in the seat next to Rockmann, as well as the fact Treyse didn’t end up in this class, is already a relief. All that’s left is to find her—I’d better focus on that soon.

Recollecting himself, Mr. Bordon starts to take attendance, going from the front row to the back as he calls out the students’ names. Once he’s done, he places a box on his desk—one he had as we walked in the hallways—and starts handing out textbooks from inside.

The door creaks open.

“Excuse me, Mr. Bordon, may I have you for a minute?” says Mr. Bevrio, the teacher of an adjacent class, peeking through the door and beckoning our teacher. He looks troubled.

As I look his way, Mr. Bevrio notices it and winks at me. He really is a flirt.

Mr. Bordon steps outside the classroom. When he comes back a minute or two later, he has a female student with him.

“Okay, Miss Drenman, you’ll be in this class for a while.”

The girl has long blonde, almost white chest-length hair. Her green dress is the kind nobles wear casually—far from a flashy choice. Her fairly short, pretty bangs don’t go over her eyebrows. The blue pupils of her gentle-looking eyes nervously waver as they face my way.

In front of me stands the young Treyse Drenman.

***

My heartbeat picks up. Why is she in her younger form? How did she get transferred to this class?

“Due to some extenuating circumstances, she’ll taking lessons in this class for a while. Welcome, Treyse Drenman,” says Mr. Bordon.

“Cough, cough... Thank you, sir,” says Treyse with teary eyes, lowering her head.

“Are you okay?” I ask, still shaken by her appearance.

“I’ve always had this, so I’m used to it,” she replies.

According to Mr. Bordon, her teary eyes are the result of her coughing too much.

“Now... Where did he say to seat you...? Oh, right, was it by the farthest window?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The air should be good there. Everyone,” says Mr. Bordon, addressing the class, “Drenman has a somewhat weak constitution. The air isn’t very good in her own class, which triggers her coughing. She’ll spend a week here and we’ll see how it goes. Her class could use better ventilation, really.”

Treyse Drenman... I don’t know much about her, but if she really does have a weak constitution, then that’s pretty bad. She’s a smart girl, so it must’ve been harsh for her to have to show up to a school where her first priority was not asphyxiating, as opposed to doing her work. I’ve heard that people born with disorders that can’t be cured through magic or medicine are encouraged to spend time in a different environment for their treatment—one with clean air and good ventilation. Looks like that applies to Treyse here too.

The adjacent classroom has windows opening straight onto a wall of the school, which probably leads to poor ventilation. It’ll be great if she gets better in this one. But wait... Did this happen when I entered school...?

“Hm, the two closest seats to that window are taken by Hel and Rockmann,” says Mr. Bordon. “Would you two mind moving over to the side?”

“No problem, sir!” vigorously replies my young self, raising her hand in an instant.

“It’s okay, sir, there’s no need to make them move away. Is it okay if I sit between them?”

“Are you sure?”

Wait... *between?*

“Yes, sir.”

As Treyse walks by, she whispers “Stay out of my way, Hel,” startling me. I look at her back in disbelief as she goes up the stairs. On the spur of the moment I also hold my ears, wondering if I misheard what she said. This cannot be...

Treyse Drenman. Though she has the appearance of a twelve-year-old, this is her future self.

***

It’s the first break period after Mr. Bordon took attendance.

“Why are there only two commoners in our class?”

“They should’ve just made it an all-noble class at that point.”

“I know, right?”

As I leave the classroom and walk through the hallway, I hear the big cliques of noble girls from my teen years talking amidst each other.

“Ah! Miss Natolie, please tell me how to change my hair color!”

When I pass by them, feeling nostalgic about the sight, they call out to stop me. Right, I forgot they asked me about that earlier.

Seeing the noble girls lean forward, their eyes sparkling with interest, I deeply feel that it’s this cute side of theirs that prevented me from hating them and eventually allowed us to become friends. Of course, let’s not forget how much they tested my patience.

“Ookay... Ahem. Right, that spell...” I bring my hands together and start snapping my fingers. “*Color, color, give thy blessing, grant the wish I am expressing.*”

Puff!

I wave my finger at the end of the incantation, and my hair turns black. Then I make it blue again.

“That’s an interesting incantation!”

“There are incantations like that?”

I was genuinely surprised too when I discovered it back in the day, wondering who’d conjured up such a daft phrase to hang a spell on.

“This will let you change your hair color for an hour. You might have trouble getting it to work at first, but try to start by dyeing single strands or ends of your hair instead of going straight for the whole thing.”

“Aaahhh!” the girl squeals. “Thank you, Miss Natolie!”

“Let’s go to the dorm and practice!” says another girl.

Ah, so adorable. As the group of girls starts another spirited conversation, I head away from the classroom.

I decide to rest in the school’s small library until the afternoon’s classes. The other four were given something to do by the teachers and couldn’t join me. Mr. Bordon didn’t really tell me to do anything—I asked him a few times if he needed any help and he just insisted I rest. Which is why I’m here, in this quiet place. School breaks are fairly long, and I would often come study here back in the day.

Earlier, when I came in, I saw *myself* sitting at the corner table despite the fact it’s her first day at school. She looked to be lost in her work, so I didn’t go talk to her. Seeing my young self like that brings a smile to my face.

“Wait, forget about that. What should I do...?”

Who could’ve thought...? *Who could’ve thought* that *this* is how she would get to sit by his side? And if that really was the Treyse from the future, then where has her current-day self gone? Did Treyse possess her? Did she hide her somewhere? Regardless, nothing changes the fact there’s a lot of things to worry about here. I need to let everyone know first. Ah, what am I going to do...?

Wait... Does this really bother me so much? I rest my chin on my hand and look up at the gray ceiling. It looks old and spotted with pale yellow-brown stains—there must have been a leak here, once. It catches shafts of sunlight pouring in through the window. The dust hanging in the air looks to me like drops of ice. The ceiling-high bookshelf has a wide selection of manuals,

specialized grimoires, novels, books on embroidery and other hobbies, and a heaping menagerie of more general antiquated reading.

“You’re gross, Nanalie,” slips from my mouth.

I feel disgusted, seeing myself so in the throes of love like some swooning ingenue. I’m not saying I find people who are in love disgusting, it’s just that I can’t endure myself being like that. Maybe that’s what I get for having taken so long to bother with it.

“Are you feeling unwell?”

“No, not at a...ll?”

I look beside me to get a fix on my sudden conversation partner and, once I process what I’m seeing, my elbow resting on the table slips and my tender chin slams into the table with a dull sound. *Ow.*

“Aaaaalois Rockmann!” I address him, rubbing my wounded chin with my fingertips.

“That was quite the sound... Ah, never mind. I’m glad you’ve memorized my name.”

He briefly shoots me a suspicious look before putting on a good-natured smile and tilting his head.

In front of me stands Alois Rockmann, aged sixteen. He freaked me out. I never thought he would come talk to me—I haven’t even learned to act like a teacher yet! As I am right now, it’s more difficult for me to deal with him than with all the other problems ahead of me. Can you blame me? He’s still the cheeky Rockmann I remember from those days, and of course he’s still mean towards my twelve-year-old self. Okay, maybe not exactly *mean*, but all of our interactions just looked like regular fights between two children, and yet here he is, starting a conversation with me like it’s the most natural thing in the world. How am I supposed to deal with this?

“That’s a lot of books. Are you studying?” I ask, still flustered, when I see what he’s holding. I count seven from a quick look.

“I had to wait an extra four years before entering school, so I’m obliged to

know the curriculum better than my peers. I'm not allowed to make mistakes," he says with a humorless smile.

Listening to that, all I can do is seal my lips and blink again and again. What is this feeling I get from him...?

"Um..."

Though I try to say something, I can't find the words. I can't help but feel I've come to understand him ever so slightly better—the way he was back in those days.

I remember our conversation when I found out about the age gap between us during Wall Helenus.

"Why do I have to lose to you even when it comes to age?!"

"Here we go again."

Frankly, it got under my skin something fierce. He'd become an adult earlier than me! I was a child compared to him! It irritated me to no end. Now that I think about it, however, I probably couldn't handle the fact there was a distance between us I had no way of closing.

"I just never told you because you never asked."

"Physically speaking, I don't think I'm any older than you or Satanás."

At the time, I was furious at his shameless attitude, but perhaps I was seeing things that weren't there. Looking at the sixteen-year-old Rockmann now, I can't help sensing that the age gap with his peers bothers him more than anyone—surely it leaves him feeling kind of inferior. Why does he have this kind of smile on his face? It's not like he's done anything bad. Why do I sense immeasurable loneliness from this boy, like all his studying is just a way to fill some great bottomless hole in his life?

“Have you, perhaps, not heard?” asks Rockmann, looking uncomfortable.

“I was informed, don’t worry,” I reply, hiding my internal turmoil.

To gather myself, I ask him a question that’s started bugging me.

“Remember Nanalie Hel, the girl sitting next to you? She’s sitting over there. You aren’t going to talk to her?”

Can’t believe I’m asking something like that. It’s just that I was expecting him to, at the very least, go up to my young self and make some nasty comment, and he’s not doing that.

Rockmann looks up at her, then closes his eyes and frowns. What’s that look supposed to mean?

“She would distract me, so I’d rather not.”

“Huh.”

He stares at me as if to ask why I would suggest such a thing. I pretend not to notice it and look away, smiling for politeness’s sake.

“Okay, I should do some studying too!” I say through a fake grin to end the conversation.

As I was well aware, Rockmann is highly accommodating, gentle, sincere, and never disagreeable—with everyone except for me. But I don’t remember him ever *ignoring* me. In part due to my magical powers, our fights would eventually get physical. But why did he avoid me like this before that?

Though I ended the conversation myself, I’m too curious not to shoot him another question.

“Umm... Why did you tease her earlier?”

“Who knows?” he replies after a pause. “I don’t know it myself.” He looks away from me.

I pout at the fact I can’t figure him out at all. But look at me, asking one blunt question after another because I’m talking to someone younger than myself. I’m such an idiot. If only I could act this way with his grown-up version. It’s so silly that I can only talk to him normally when he’s a literal child. It feels like

cheating, and not in a fun way.

“Say, Miss Natolie, do you happen to have an older sister?” asks Rockmann all of a sudden, a smile on his face.

“I have an older cousin, but that’s it. I’m an only child.”

“I see.”

“Why do you ask?”

Rockmann seems lost in thought for a moment. A few seconds later he looks up at me again like there was no particular meaning to that pause.

“No reason in particular. You’re very pretty, so I was just wondering.”

There it is. *There* it is!

“I-Is that so.”

These words he says so smoothly, without changing his expression, as though he doesn’t even consider it flattery! It’s this part of him! What’s wrong with this sixteen-year-old?! He may be twelve in terms of physical development if what he said is true, but *this* is how he is on the inside!

I’ve spent years wondering how he’s managed to enamor countless women, as was rumored, and I’ve just experienced his lady-killing prowess firsthand.

***

With the mood persisting, I find myself looking around, trying not to look at the young Rockmann across the table who has started reading one of the books he had with him. I worry he might think I’m avoiding him if I just get up right away, and so I remain in place for the time being. Not that it’s such a big problem if he does get that idea... Still, it would probably bother me if I were in his shoes.

Let’s try to bail out as naturally as possible.

“Miss Natolie, do you happen to know anything about Treyse?”

“Huh?” I abruptly raise my head, my focus on the book in front of me broken.

“What? I thought you noticed something about her.”

I blink in response. For a while we stare at each other in silence, unmoving. I'm sure we have the same Treyse in mind here, but what is it he expects me to have noticed? Why is he asking, anyway? He hasn't realized who we really are, has he? Surely...

Bringing up Treyse now goes beyond perceptive—it's way too scary. Still, I can't allow myself to be intimidated by the young Rockmann. He's just Alois Rockmann. That's it. Tempted as I am to avoid his red eyes that feel like they see through everything, I can't falter now.

"Noticed what?" I ask, playing dumb.

Here I go again, hiding things from Rockmann (his child form, anyway). And sure, I'm forced to, given the situation, but I'm not so certain I'll really be able to look him in the eye again after returning to my time if things keep going this way.

"I can sense things through my skin. For example, when a demon is nearby, I get goose bumps. And Treyse, it feels like she has a curse of sorts placed on her. It's a bit of an exaggeration, but I suspect she might be possessed by something like a demon," says the young Rockmann, looking at nothing in particular as he probably recalls his new neighbor in class.

"Surely you got the wrong idea," I reply, feeling bad for Treyse.

"I don't know about that," says Rockmann and returns his gaze to his book.

According to him, he's met her at parties several times before and she gave off a very different impression from today. He also finds it suspicious that he can't recall his conversations with her at said parties. And he noticed that I stared at her too much and looked odd when she went up the stairs in the classroom, which was why he thought I knew something.

"It might just be my imagination. I apologize for saying something so strange," he says at the end.

"It's not strange, what you said..."

As the young Rockmann shoots me a questioning look, I consider his words. Assuming the Treyse we've encountered has the personality of the one from the future, then she's either magically shapeshifting into a young form or she's

possessed her child self. If it's the former, she must be extremely good at shapeshifting magic, because most people can't maintain it even for ten minutes. There are some who can keep it up for a whole day, but even they still put up with the occasional spell failure. For the purpose of long-term infiltration, it's definitely dangerous. And it would be one thing if she only made simpler changes to her appearance, but changing her height so much should be taxing on her body.

There's also the matter of what she's done to the young Treyse from this age. Did she hide her? Maybe she told her everything and persuaded her to cooperate? Whichever it was, it's going to be a real pain to deal with.

Going by the young Rockmann's account, it's more plausible that she's been possessed. I'm almost certain of it, in fact.

"I just remembered something! I have to go!"

I rush to the third bookshelf from the wall, the one with books on psychology, and look for books on possession. Earlier I found a specialized book on the lightning school of magic called "Lightning Blood"—I take it with me under my arm too. Finding an open spot in the library, I flip through the books, scanning them for information. Possession spells are a specialty of the lightning school of magic, and if I remember correctly, Treyse was a lightning type too.

"Nana... Uhh, Miss Natolie! So that's where you were."

Feeling a pat on my shoulder, I turn around to find Benjamine standing with a textbook in hand. She has her red, waist-long hair tied into a ponytail.

I return the books to the shelf in a fluster.

"You're just in time," I tell her. "Where's His Highness?"

"He's carrying teaching materials to the staff room. Heh heh, it's funny how we have an actual prince running errands," says Benjamine quietly with a playful smile, tilting her head, her large jade earrings swaying. She's noticed that my young self and the young Rockmann are in the room. "Is there something you want to ask His Highness?"

"Yeah."

We keep our voices down as we sneak out of the library and quickly walk to the staff room.

“Rockmann... I mean, the Rockmann you saw in that room...” I begin.

“Come on, I know who you’re talking about.”

“He said Treyse is acting strange, and I realized he must be right.”

“Huh? Wait, hold on a minute, did something happen in class?”

Oh, right, I still haven’t told her that the Treyse that came to my class is the one from the future. Once I tell Benjamine what Treyse said to me an hour ago, she looks surprised at first; then her surprise turns to anger.

“What in the world...?” she says with a frown on her face. “If she’s so desperate to change the future that she chose to *literally physically regress*, she should’ve put in more effort from the start!”

Her steps in the hallway grow louder.

“Calm down, my friend,” I tell her and pull on her hand.

She breathes a deep sigh and faces me, her eyes as blue as a deep ocean slowly closing, then reopening.

“Regardless of whether Treyse is possessed or shapeshifting, our goal doesn’t change,” she says. “If it’s the former, we free her, and otherwise we bring her back.”

“Yeah...”

“First we need to go see His Highness and... Ah, hey! Over here!” exclaims Benjamine, waving to someone walking behind me.

Turning to the source of the footsteps, I find Prince Zenon, in neither a knight’s uniform nor a military one but clad in simple commoner’s garb, carrying class materials in his hand, just like Benjamine. He’s heading this way.

“We were just making our way to you,” says Benjamine.

“Did you find anything out?” asks the prince with a serious expression on his face as he approaches a hallway window.

Once I tell him what I heard from the young Rockmann, as well as what

happened in class, Prince Zenon brings his hand to his chin and closes his eyes.

“He said something like that?”

“Has he always been like that?” asks Benjamine, looking towards the library.

“Yes, pretty much. He’s apparently sensitive to such things. Especially when it comes to demons. He claims to get goose bumps when one is around.”

“Is that something he was born with?”

“It’s unclear whether it’s caused by his excessive magical powers, but that’s surely related. Which seems to have made it all the more difficult for him to bear what happened to Count Huey.”

This is the first I’ve heard of any of this. Looks like there’s a lot I don’t know about Rockmann. It feels kinda sad, but in a way that kinda makes me hate myself for feeling bad in the first place; I can’t decide. I’m such a mess on the inside lately.

***

Vaguely reflecting on my feelings as we talk about Rockmann, I suddenly realize something is missing. That source of all of the recent trouble—the doll that brought us here. The last time I saw it was when we went to our rooms at the staff dormitory (which is located between the gender-separated student dormitories) and Benjamine went to bed with him in her arms. I haven't seen hide nor hair of him since.

I don't particularly mind some old man clinging to my friend (her chest, especially) disappearing, to be honest, but the fact is the Time Keeper was the most knowledgeable among us in regards to this past world, even if he was a vile little pervert. Maybe he just doesn't want to deal with any of us but Benjamine and decided to hole up at the dorm.

"Where's the Time Keeper?" I ask Benjamine.

"Oh, you want to speak to the Elder of Time?"

Looking used to the process, she sticks a hand into the cleavage of her white shirt and pulls out a brown string necklace.

What the...? What's she got there? Oh no no, don't tell me...

"Here I am!"

"Just how low can you *sink*, you awful little man?!"

Out hops the Time Keeper from a small bag tied to the string, his size reduced to that of a thumb. Rubbing his reddish round nose, he rests his chin on the edge of the bag and assumes an awfully relaxed pose as if it's only natural.

"Don't be so harsh on him," says Benjamine as I flip out at the doll, jabbing an accusatory finger at it. "He's forced to live in *such* discomfort."

Discomfort? Between Benjamine's breasts? There's no way this guy sees it that way. Evidently noticing me thinking something rude, she brings the gray gunny sack with the gnome closer to me, saying he doesn't bother her at all because he stays inside the bag while he's in her cleavage.

I know that, and it's obvious. That's not the problem here.

“Good for you that Benjamine has such a big heart.”

“’Tis only that yours is so small, dear.”

What was that, Time Gramps?

I grind my teeth in anger.

“Anyway, who was that?” asks the Time Keeper, the bag he’s in swaying from side to side as he turns to face the library.

He tells me to go back, but I refuse, since people might find it suspicious if I return so quickly. I’ve already had the young Rockmann ask me if I’ve noticed anything strange about Treyse, and he’s not even supposed to know who we are and what we’re here for. It’s not that I suspect he’s figured out the former, but I can’t so easily rub elbows with someone so perceptive.

The Time Keeper folded his tiny arms and gave a thoughtful grunt.

“Perhaps he is already under the effects of some sort of time magic,” he says.

He?

“Who is ‘he’?” I ask him.

“The blond.”

Blond... So, Rockmann?

“There are faint traces left on his body.”

The Time Keeper gazes with half-open eyes towards the library. He appears to be so curious about Rockmann that he sways from side to side, making the bag he’s in swing like a pendulum. Why doesn’t he just get out of that bag and go there himself if it bothers him so much? Doesn’t look like he has such plans, though.

“Hey, you; you noticed anything about him?” he asks Prince Zenon.

Manners! You don’t just “hey, you” a prince.

Said prince, however, doesn’t seem to mind his attitude and bends down to the gnome’s level, giving a sincere reply.

“No, I haven’t.”

His plain robe's ankle-length hem and tight neckline make him look like a real teacher.

"The air around him is most curious," continues the gnome. "What spell must one be on the receiving end of to end up like that? He has broken the rules of time. My senses would run wild were I to find myself near him. How did you manage to sit by his side for so long? 'Tis honestly impressive."

I can't tell if he's praising or disparaging me.

Looks like he really can't handle Rockmann, despite being so curious about him. Maybe it's just because they're both womanizers. How unlucky for the gnome.

I don't know what this "air around Rockmann" he's talking about is, so all I can reply with is "if you say so."

Wait, forget all this, I still haven't asked the prince the thing that's been eating me. He's observing the shrunk Time Keeper with keen interest.

Facing him, I bend forward and pleadingly bring my hands together.

"Your Highness. Um... I have a big favor to ask..."

He gives me a questioning look.

"Could you cast a spell on me that would let me see anything possessing someone?"

His eyes scan the room for a moment before settling on me again.

"Are you talking about Necromancy?"

***

In the next class, students are to introduce themselves one by one, giving them an opportunity to interact with their classmates and the teacher. I remember now that we did this too, shortly after I entered this school. I'm pretty sure after said class we were told to explore the school—not tour it with the teacher's supervision, but use a map each of us was given and move on our own.

"Commoners..." says a female student. Another one simply giggles.

The children introduce themselves; it's only during Satanás's and my younger self's turns that you can hear anybody stifling a laugh. But in both cases Mr. Bordon directs a withering stare towards the students responsible, bringing the snickering to an abrupt halt. As I stand beside him, I look at his profile and hold the roll book tight with both arms. I never noticed it in the past, but apparently he'd helped me out a lot back then.

"She's there in her seat, all right," says Prince Zenon beside me, having magically concealed himself.

"Um... Are you sure about this?"

"I am. *You* don't need to use Necromancy."

We talk in hushed voices.

Necromancy is a spell restricted to the lightning school of magic. It allows you to look at a possessed individual and see who exactly is possessing them, regardless of whether it's a human or a demon holding the reins. It also makes you see spirits for the duration of the spell, both those who are currently away from their living body, and those of the dead.

It's mentally taxing and has been known to cause mental illness, so not many people use it unless it's absolutely necessary. The prince is here to use it in my stead, so that I don't have to. I really didn't want to ask this of him, since he'd be seeing not just whatever's possessing Treyse, but everything else as well—however, he flatly refused to cast the spell on me, so I gave in and accepted his offer. It's awfully gentlemanly of our prince, but also oh so stubborn.

Benjamine told the teacher in charge of the class where Prince Zenon was assigned that he's laid up in the infirmary with some yet-undiagnosed crud.

"My name is Treyse Drenman. I look forward to studying with everyone," begins Treyse, blinking, her eyes drawn to the floor.

It's finally her turn to introduce herself. She bows, swaying her lustrous white hair, then awkwardly smooths down her unruly bangs.

"I'm so jealous you get to sit by Alois's side!" says one of the girls.

"Oh, but this is only a temporary arrangement, so there may come a time I

shall get such an opportunity as well."

"Please, Miss Maris, you should know full well that that is out of the question!"

"You just laughed, did you not?!"

Treyse's bombarded with envy from the other girls once she sits back down. At first I wonder what's there to be so jealous about, but then I remember I'm in quite the panic myself over her sitting by Rockmann's side. Don't get me wrong, it's not the proximity of the seats I'm so jealous about—I'm just worried our current relationship might change. Because of our memories together and stuff. And so I don't actually care where she sits, or so I tell myself.

At the end of the day, though, I'm trying to protect my place there. So I guess it's a problem for me if my seat isn't by his side? Even if, back then, I didn't think that way at all.

My little self sitting next to Treyse talks to her pretty often, likely because she doesn't know much about her. What are they even talking about? Treyse doesn't look annoyed in the slightest as she listens to "me." Then she laughs gracefully, bringing her hand to her mouth. What goes through her mind as she engages in this ordinary conversation? I can only imagine.

I'm the type that doesn't like thinking the worst of folks (Rockmann is an exception), but shouldn't her first priority be closing the distance with Rockmann rather than "me"? Is she looking to get rid of the obstacles in her way first?

As I look on in distress, Rockmann strikes up a conversation with Treyse. My little self looks extremely displeased at that, a huge frown appearing on her face.

Ah... She just clicked her tongue.

"Now that we have the introductions out of the way, it's time to explore the school," announces Mr. Bordon. "Everyone, use these maps and go get acquainted with the grounds."

"How strange," says the prince, placing a hand on my shoulder as soon as the teacher starts handing out the maps.

“Huh?”

“Someone is definitely possessing her, but I can’t see who it is. There’s something black near her head—that’s all I can see.”

“What does that mean?”

“Are you sure it’s Treyse who’s possessing her?”

What in the world is going on?

According to the prince, if it was “our” Treyse possessing her younger self, he should be able to see two of them, and yet he can only see some vague dark presence. The Time Keeper said it was Treyse who had come here, however, so all things considered, it has to be her. So is “our” Treyse shapeshifting, after all?

“I can sense things through my skin.”

“For example, when a demon is nearby, I get goose bumps.”

“...I suspect she might be possessed...”

Perhaps there *is* something in Rockmann’s words that I can’t afford to miss.

Tale of a self-centered girl

Duke Rockmann's mansion has seen many visitors of late.

"Please, do come in. Thank you for coming to see Alois, Miss Treyse."

"Oh, but it's the only thing I can do. I was simply hoping to see his face for but a moment."

"It's very rare for him to be laid up. Seeing his friends and subordinates visit him makes even me happy. How curious," says Rockmann's mother, Norweira Arnold Rockmann, deep emotion in her voice.

For a wife of a duke, her dress is markedly understated. It flutters as she walks to the door leading out of her sleeping son's room and slowly closes it, leaving just a small gap.

According to her, the news of Rockmann collapsing during exercise traveled through the castle and eventually reached his family home. It would be one thing if it was related to his excess magical powers seen in his childhood or a wound sustained in combat—but this time, something was destroying him from the inside, and the whole mansion was in an uproar about it for a time.

Norweira had said he was brought to the mansion once his condition had stabilized, and things have been hectic ever since. Bill Arnold, the eldest of the Rockmann sons, came from his own domain to visit together with his wife. A few hours later, the parents of Sir Alois's stepsister, Melly Arnold, came for a visit, bringing flowers. Tafnas Bunachiel Accardo, the heir to House Bunachiel—one of the Three Great Houses and the family of the queen consort—brought tender fruits from abroad rumored to possess migraine-curing properties. A messenger from another of the Three Great Houses, House Mozfalt, came knocking on the door with a fruit basket of their own. A small procession is steadily forming.

Information travels incredibly fast between nobles, especially those related by blood.

I close my eyes, listening to footsteps diminishing into the distance. Opening

them just a little bit, I see some light through the gap in the lace curtains. The sun is setting outside; it looks like a dazzling gemstone. At the same time, my dark dress appears in the window's reflection, so I quickly look away.

This filthy color is just like me.

The walls of Sir Alois's bedroom are completely lined with bookshelves. It's not a surprise to me—I've always known him to be diligent. The decorations of the room are minimal, and there's not much color.

And yet, this room looks dazzling in my eyes because of the man lying on the bed before me.

His forehead, white and smooth like porcelain, peeks through his blond hair. His well-shaped, faintly colored lips are slightly open. His eyelids are closed. His long eyelashes appear to twinkle like stars in the sun, perhaps due to bits of dirt on them.

I caress his golden hair resting on his white pajamas. It's incredibly soft.

"Sir Alois..."

I stick my hand inside my chest and draw my hidden dagger. Seven gemstones glisten on its haft: carnelian, aquamarine, citrine, emerald, celestine, diamond, and black onyx. Their cold stings my tender palm.

Holding the dagger, I bring my hands to my shoulders to suppress my trembling. I don't want anyone to see me in such a shameful state.

It feels like there's always something invisible watching me, pressuring me with its gaze. It's suffocating. I must do this before the sun sets. There's no turning back. I've made a pact.

Reminding myself of the fact, I resolve myself and raise my dagger.

"Al..."

I've had my eyes on you for so long—much longer than she did. Ever since that time we met and spoke in the courtyard of the royal palace.

I am Treyse Drenman, the third daughter of House Jogsedd. Though this house is not one of the "three greats," its deep relations with other houses stemming from its long history give it a standing high enough to be right next to

the three; the kingdom of Doran places great value on history. In this world, where blood is believed to be more valuable than anything, there is no greater point of pride than a family's endurance through the long ages.

This family won't share any of its fortune with me. All I can do is study. To them, I'm simply a tool, someone to marry off. The ball I was forced to attend was pure agony for me. I loathed the marquis who found me, still very much a child, and extended a hand to me. I shuddered when he caressed my hand, saying I'm his future spouse.

No matter how much I studied, I could never hope to escape this world.

"Leave me alone!"

That day, in spite of all I already knew, I wished to escape from that ball. I shook off the marquis's hand and ran to the courtyard of the palace.

"What are you doing here? Are you crying?"

Whether it was pure fate or some other force's machination, *he* found me there and gently embraced me. I didn't know who he was at first; I was stuck in my own little world. But when he wiped my tears away and said he found the ball tedious as well, I became convinced that he was my fated companion.

When that marquis was charged with corruption several days later and the marriage talks came to an end, I believed it was fate arranging my eventual marriage with *him*.

I wanted to be by his side, both then and in the future. I wanted to be his number one.

"Today is the day, Rockmann! You're finally going down!"

Nanalie Hel, the girl that's always been by his side, is nothing but an obstacle to me. Why did it have to be her—a commoner, at that? The question's run through my head time and time again as I gazed at *his* back ever since I entered magic school.

It has been heartbreaking to hear the rumors surrounding him, circulating

high society since that demon, Städal, was slain. People suspect he wishes to marry a commoner, a girl with blue hair, and they say the two are a good match, since “both are heroes who saved the world.”

She should just disappear. Just let her die already.

But even if that happened, Hel wouldn’t vanish from Sir Alois’s heart. Which is why I wish to erase her from his mind, including all their memories together.

I detest her. But I detest *him* even more. Why didn’t he choose me?

Tears start falling from my eyes onto the sheets as I stifle my sobs. The cold, hard tool in my hands starts to shake. I’m still unable to take it where it needs to go. I have to thrust it into the heart of the man in front of me, and do it quickly, yet what little conscience remains in me keeps getting in the way.

“Are you crying?”

I’m startled by the voice coming from below. Cold sweat seizes me. Thinking *he* knows what I’m up to, I peek at his face, only to find him with his eyes closed. Thank goodness, he’s still asleep. However, my relief lasts but a moment.

“You’ve always been such a crybaby...”

Is he half-asleep? Is he fully awake? I can’t tell.

I gaze at him as he speaks with his eyes closed. Looking at his peaceful expression, anyone would think he’s asleep if he didn’t use his voice.

“You were crying the first time I met you at the castle too, right?”

I strain my ears to listen to his disconnected words. They cause my hands holding the dagger to shake.

“You can’t kill me with that dagger.”

Just how much does he know?

“You’re likely after my memories, not my life. And it looks like I’m not even your target.” Gradually, his speech becomes more coherent. “It was either you who made me drink a potion of confusion, or an accomplice of yours... One must be quite skilled to manipulate a knight.”

He even realized that I'd ensorcelled a knight to make him lace Sir Alois's food with the mixture.

"I wonder who's found their way into your heart?" He slowly raises his heavy eyelids. "Now tell me."

By the time I drop the dagger on the floor...

"About the one who cursed you."

...His red eyes are already fixed on me.

Tale V

“Something’s off about this.”

It’s the last thing I hear from Prince Zenon before I sense him moving away from me. The air shakes around him—perhaps he crouched. After a couple seconds, I hear his muffled voice. Did he happen to see one of those things? Things not of this world? I can sense he’s not feeling well.

“Your Highness, Your Highness? Are you okay?”

I say it in a husky voice, so I can’t be sure he hears it. What should I do...? I should’ve insisted he use the spell on me instead, even against his wishes. I really regret letting him do this.

“Everyone, make sure you’re back to class by lunch. We can’t go to the dining hall otherwise,” says Mr. Bordon, gathering class materials as everyone starts talking loudly and prepares to leave. “Miss Natolie, you may join them,” he adds with a smile.

Still focusing on the prince, I flash a smile not to raise any suspicion.

“It’s okay for me to go too?”

“You didn’t graduate from here, so please go take a look around so you don’t get lost in the future.”

Oh, right, part of our cover stories is that we’re not graduates of this school. There are several other schools in Doran, and we’re supposed to have graduated from the royal school right under the Royal Isle.

“The teachers from the other classes will probably join in, so you should go too.”

“Thank you, sir!”

It’s a perfect opportunity to get out of here and meet up with everyone. And I need to get the prince out first and foremost.

“This is my first time exploring!”

“Shall we start with the first floor, Miss Maris?”

“Why not?”

It’s adorable how happy the children appear when told to look around freely, with their natural adventurous spirit all stirred up. The boys run out of the classroom, their usual composure nowhere to be seen. This school building is as big as Castle Shuzelk, and is full of mysteries—no wonder they start to feel adventurous.

In the midst of all this, my younger self steps out of the classroom all on her own, obviously having made no friends yet. She looks lonely, but resolute too. Even from here I can see her eyes sparkling. She must be just as excited as the boys in her class.

I remember running about the school on that day. It was my first time in such a spacious building, so I went around opening every door in view and taking my time checking what’s behind them.

Rockmann, in the meantime, accompanies the young Prince Zenon, and a group of girls surround the two of them, which is the state I see them all leave the classroom in. Oddly enough, even though the noble girls still surround them when Rockmann has the prince nearby, they grow quiet, rarely striking up conversations with him. They just stay at a distance and watch their backs, perhaps being considerate of the prince. It’s a sight that still puzzles me. Are they showing restraint to avoid provoking the prince’s fan club?

As for Treyse, I spot her walking behind Rockmann together with the other girls. The transient and meek impression she gives off conflicts with her vague determination. Just what is she planning?

Finally, Mr. Bordon heads for the staff room, leaving me alone in the classroom.

“You can reveal yourself now.”

“Right.”

After waiting for everyone else to leave, the prince snaps his fingers, dispelling his invisibility. As I thought, he was crouched. He has his hand on his forehead and sighs as he stares at the floor, looking anguished. I’ve never seen

him like this before—looks like he's going through even more than I thought he was.

"Are you okay?" I ask again.

"I'm fine," he replies, though he keeps staring at the floor.

I wish I would stop thinking what Rockmann would do at times like these. What's he got to do with it? I'm not him.

"Your Highness, take a look at my hand, please." I crouch beside him, going low enough to drop below his gaze. "Pardon me for a moment."

I cover his eyes with my right hand; then, after making sure there are no gaps through which he can see, speak an incantation.

"Sunlight reflecting on flowers, wind flowing along the plains, drops of morning dew, pulsation of leaf veins, odor of the whitebloom..." I concentrate on my palm. "Wings of a butterfly, murmuring of a stream, crystals of snow, twinkling of a shooting star..."

As I keep covering Prince Zenon's eyes, I see his expression gradually going softer over time. His lips, previously tinged with blue, have returned to their healthy, reddish color. The prince places his hand over mine covering his eyes, slowly removes it, and smiles at me.

"That was a beautiful spell. You're incredible," says the prince in a quiet voice devoid of intonation, but a kind one nonetheless. He smiles at me.

The spell I cast on the prince is known as Solace. It's technically not a healing spell, as it treats symptoms of mental illnesses and other conditions—the kind of stuff that your conventional healing spell is too brute-force or too literal to interface with. The target of the spell witnesses a beautiful scene one cannot find in this world, one that enfolds the full scope of human sensation. I'm told there's a faint but enchanting aroma to it.

I've no idea what exactly the prince saw, but judging by how relieved he looks, it must've been something nice.

"Nanalie, Your Highness!"

As I finally relax, Nikeh appears at the door.

“Mr. Bevrio finally let us go. He really gives us guys a hard time,” says Satanás, appearing together with Benjamine behind Nikeh.

Apparently they were allowed to go look around the school as they pleased, just like Mr. Bordon said would happen.

***

“So you’re saying the Treyse from this time might be possessed by someone other than the one from ours?” says Nikeh, quite agitated.

“That would certainly complicate things,” Prince Zenon adds calmly, shutting his eyes.

We’re “exploring” the hallways as a full group. Back in the day I used to worry I might cross paths with a ghost here, given how dim they are.

“Is the woman we’re dealing with really Treyse, or someone else taking her form? If it’s the latter, our shapeshifter is implausibly skilled. It’s eerie to remain in another’s form for so long, too,” theorizes the prince. “Was it really Treyse who asked the Time Keeper to send her here? I think *that* needs further investigation.”

“Hey, old man, answer his question and tell the truth,” presses Satanás.

I definitely see the prince’s point. Even with the help of his magic, he couldn’t see what exactly is possessing Treyse. Normally, one would be able to see it, and the fact he couldn’t would mean there’s no possessor. But he did see a black haze. So there was *something*. There’s no doubt that something’s possessing her.

The Time Keeper pops out of Benjamine’s cleavage, tilts his head in contemplation, and starts mumbling.

“Oh, please, you’re expecting too much of me. It was my first time in a long while sending a human into the past. Didn’t bother to check who it really was.”

“What the hell? So, what, you’re saying you’d send just anyone if they asked?”

“Hmph.”

The Time Keeper’s lips twist, his face taking on a sour expression. He looks

away to escape from Satanás's cold stare. This guy's *definitely* guilty.

***

We press the Time Keeper for answers as the five of us walk the empty hallways. Quietly, of course.

“Look, either you come clean about this, or it’s going to hurt,” threatens Nikeh, keeping a tight grip with both hands on the gnome after pulling him out of Benjamine’s chest.

“Hmph. Think I’m scared of you?”

The other students have classes at this very moment, so we mind our surroundings as we walk.

“So what exactly happened? And keep it brief,” she continues.

Before, he would say things like “I don’t have any business with you people” and “be more broad-minded” and “talk to me when you have a bigger butt, girl” to us (with the exception of Benjamine, of course), but he’s turned meek all of a sudden. His eyes wander all over the place as cold sweat beads on his face.

See? That’s what you get when Nikeh’s on the case. This beauty may not look like it, but she’s an actual knight. Even in a quiet voice she can pressure someone better than your average bruiser.

“I-It’s true that it was some high-class lady who brought me out of that freak show...”

By “freak show,” he must mean the black market.

“I simply don’t care to know more about these people. Not like she would tell me anything if I tried. You young’uns wouldn’t understand.”

“Drop the cliché old man talk, would you?” retorts Nikeh.

Maybe he finds it cute, but he’s just being obnoxious.

“I’m surprised you’ve managed to stay out of trouble, if anything.”

I was just thinking the same thing. Being so careless and indiscriminate, he’d end up in jail, or even erased from existence if he was any less lucky. Being a doll wouldn’t save him.

“So you really didn’t try to find anything out about her?” adds Nikeh.

It seems he only finds out who you are by asking. If he asked me who I am, I could say I'm Nikeh Brunel and he'd buy it. I'd expected a being with the power to bend time itself to be better disciplined, but the truth has turned out to be pretty scary. What if the past has already been changed without our knowing? It's terrifying to think about.

It's great that we happened to find him this time, though it was only by chance. And while he said you can't change the past too much, we still would've had our memories overwritten had we not found out about this. Looking back on it, it was actually pretty crazy how Rockmann magically overwrote the memories of everyone in the world to grant my wish for a normal life.

Seeing me looking away from the Time Keeper with worry written on my face, Benjamine gives me a look that plainly says *What's wrong?*

"It's nothing," I reply and clear my throat.

Still, Rockmann wasn't being a nuisance to everyone—he had the king's permission, and his spell didn't change the future of those who had nothing to do with me. Unlike what this Time Keeper has been doing, Rockmann didn't endanger people's lives. It's rude to compare such a menace to what Rockmann did.

"How many have you already—"

"Oh, you're exploring too?"

As I start to ask him how many he's already sent into the past or the future, a female student calls out to us from afar. Nikeh quickly hides the Time Keeper in her pocket and sneaks behind us.

Turning back, I spot three noble girls, including Maris, who I thought were trailing behind Rockmann and the prince right about now. I'd found it unusual when Maris didn't follow him as he left the classroom, but when I went out into the hallway myself, I heard her say, "On second thought, I'll go to Sir Alois after all!" and assumed she'd be with him by now. Each of the three girls is looking our way, maps in hand.

"Were you with him?" I ask.

"We got separated." The three of them stare at the floor in dejection.

Some corridors split, and there's a lot of corners to turn, so it's not that hard to get lost in this place.

Maris's large reddish-brown eyes waver.

"Worry not, Miss Maris! Sir Alois is sure to find us!" says one of the girls all of a sudden.

That's Sally, a good friend of Maris—her (by my understanding) close confidant and most committed cheerleader. As she speaks, she clenches a fist in front of her face.

"One must be patient in awaiting one's prince. Shall we head to the top floor? Let us savor the mood of a princess waiting in a small room atop a tower!"

Her sorrowful expression gone in an instant, Sally starts appealing to the two other girls. Perhaps she's trying to cheer Maris up, seeing her about to cry. She's such a nice girl. That sort of mature thinking makes a child like her adorable.

"Y-You're right!"

Sally's words gradually stoking a fire under them, the two's eyes change from "almost crying" to sparkling with excitement. That's the Alois Rockmann I know—the guy trusted so much by so many girls. They put more faith in him than some gods.

Seeing all this is a real prince, a teacher by the name of Jupiter Torseter, a.k.a. Prince Zenon.

"Your prince is most likely in the art room on the second floor," he says to them amicably, bending at the waist.

He probably remembers going there with him at the time.

"Thank you, sir!"

"Then let us head out at once!"

The three of them raise the hems of their skirts.

"What route shall we take? It would be most regrettable to encounter him on the way..." utters one of them.

At some point they forgot their original objective and are now planning their route to the top floor, making sure not to run into Rockmann. *Hey, you three.*

“I suggest you take this staircase. They’re far in the back and are rarely used.”

“Really? Thank you, Miss!”

I watch their backs disappear into the distance.

“Why do you know a place like that?”

“I often used it to ambush Satanás,” replies Benjamine, answering my belated question.

Hearing that, Satanás covers his face with both hands.

***

Since people were having lunch at the dining hall just a while ago, the smell wafting through the adjacent hallway stirs our appetite. Now I’m hungry. Come to think of it, I haven’t eaten anything since morning.

But wait, I must find Treyse first. It seems more promising to just go after her directly rather than try to get anything out of the Time Keeper.

“I’ve taken a sample of Treyse’s hair,” I say to everyone, showing a strand of soft, white hair while pressing on my stomach in the hopes it’ll stop it from rumbling. “Think we can use it somehow?”

I considered using a magic circle to teleport to her directly, but if it turned out anyone was with her, they would grow suspicious of us, and that would jeopardize the whole operation. Even if we teleported after turning invisible by casting the Coat of Many Colors on ourselves, magical effects get dispelled once you teleport to your destination, so that wouldn’t work either.

This is the past. We must remain cautious and avoid disturbing the peace. Which brings us back to the object in my hands.

“When did you get that?” asks Prince Zenon, blinking in surprise as I twirl the strand of hair between my thumb and index finger.

“I went to her desk before we left the classroom and found it lying there.

Figured it would come in handy. I considered performing psychometry on it, but there was the risk of someone seeing me do it."

The prince felt unwell at the time, so I'm not surprised he didn't notice.

"Blood calls to blood; return whence you came!"

I blow on the strand of hair in my hand and speak the incantation. It is believed that objects containing at least some components of human blood are generally inclined to find their way back to their source. Any such object is perfect for searching for people, and hair is particularly easy to work with.

One might wonder why this spell isn't commonly used if it makes looking for missing people so easy, and there's a reason for it.

"Will it actually lead us, or...?"

"These tend to be rather ineffective..."

Nikeh and Benjamine look worried as they gaze at the strand of hair.

The efficacy of this spell depends on the condition of the hair it's cast on. If the strand of hair is thin, damaged, curled, or short, it's not very effective. It's hard to trace people with unruly hair this way: usually either the spell won't activate, or the strand simply won't lead you anywhere.

Additionally, the spell won't work on hair that fell out too long ago, as well as any hair that was ripped out. As convenient as it is, it comes with a lot of limitations. My dad once told me I should consider myself lucky if I find a workable strand of hair. Showing concern for the top of his head, he said "my hair is straight, so I should still be fine," then brought what appeared to be his longest strand of hair from the toilet and tried casting the spell on it. In the end it had no effect and my mom laughed at him.

You get the picture.

And so, some time after casting the spell, Treyse's hair starts to tremble and points upward. Looks like she's on a higher floor. It seems my worry was for nothing and it worked out after all. That's a relief.

Meanwhile, after Nikeh let him go, the Time Keeper found a moment to get back between Benjamine's breasts; he's making a *vile* expression. Damn it...

Couldn’t Nikeh chew him out for a little longer?

Feeling angry at the gnome, I cast the Coat of Many Colors on everyone and we head to the back staircase Benjamine brought up earlier. Once we get to the second floor, the strand of hair stops pointing up and returns to its natural behavior, so I recast the spell. Treyse’s hair, if anything, can be classified as unruly, so it’s no wonder the effect doesn’t last. We’re lucky it works at all.

Unlike last time, the strand of hair now moves slowly, and points to the left.

“All right,” I say.

As I exchange glances with Benjamine beside me, we begin walking, keeping our guard up. The large, old hallways carry the sound of our footsteps far away. Luckily, the third-year students using the second-floor classrooms are currently out for extracurricular lessons, so there’s not many people around. We only run into the occasional freshman exploring the school.

The only rooms ahead are the laboratory, the herb drying room, and the room used by student representatives. Incidentally, these representatives are selected in pairs from each class to manage the whole cohort. Our cohort had three classes, so there were six representatives in total. They aren’t chosen by their grades—an important factor taken into consideration is how reliable they are, since the position comes with serious responsibilities. Despite my good grades, I made commotion after commotion by fighting Rockmann all the time, so obviously I wasn’t chosen, and neither was Rockmann. I’m sure had that guy been chosen, I would’ve cried into my pillow every night out of frustration.

Oh hey, I feel like it’s been a while since the last time I called him “that guy” (even if it’s just inside my mind). I’ve been consciously avoiding referring to him that way, but it looks like old habits die hard. At this point it’s rude to use those words for him, but I suspect it’ll probably happen again, so at least look the other way when it’s inside my mind.

“Looks like she’s not in the representatives’ room, either,” reports Satanás, having scouted the room after checking where the white strand pointed. He was a representative from his third year to the sixth.

As we proceed further, watching the strand’s behavior, we arrive at the laboratory. The hallway ends here, so the strand must be pointing at this room.

I grab the handle and strain my ears before opening the door, but no sound comes from the inside. Remaining watchful, I open the door—shame about the clinking of the handle—and enter. It's dim inside, despite the open curtains.

"Hey, wait!" says Nikeh.

Suddenly, the strand of hair shoots out of my hand. When did it get so animated? Flustered by the unexpected turn of events, I try to catch it, to no avail, as the strand flies deeper into the room. It's hard to keep your eyes on a moving strand of hair from a distance, especially in a dim room like this one.

"Did it wig out because it's close to its source?" The prince brings his hand to his forehead, sending his long robe aflutter. "I don't sense anyone's presence," he utters quietly, straining his eyes like me to find the white strand.

I snap my fingers and illuminate the room to make the search easier.

"Let's see... There it is!"

Gazing around the room with my brow deeply furrowed, I finally manage to find what I'm looking for. It's standing upright in front of a wooden box in the corner of the room. Once I run over to it, the strand falls down and no longer reacts to the spell.

"Thank you, strand," says Satanás, who's apparently developed some attachment to our little hair guide. He picks it up from the floor and places it on a nearby desk.

Before long, we're all staring at the old-looking box. It's taller than our knees and looks a little dusty.

"There's no way, right?" says the prince.

"The strand stopped here, though," replies Nikeh.

Doesn't look like it's locked... Nikeh to my left gets on her knees and places her hands on the wooden box.

"I'm opening it."

"Wait, Nikeh," I stop her.

Feeling something off about the box, I put my hands on the Cudgel of the

Goddess I've been carrying on my waist—just like when I'm at work—extend it, and tap the box with the tip.

"There's probably a spell on it. Maybe a magic circle."

Most likely a magical lock. As I continue to tap the box for a while, an image of vines in a bowknot appears on the lid. If we don't do something about this first, we could be triggering any sort of trap when opening the box.

"Way to go, Nanalie!" Nikeh chimes in.

"Eh heh heh... Well, what can I say? It's all thanks to this cudgel of mine."

I realized something was up with the box, because the cudgel was shaking. It didn't have such a function before, but ever since the whole thing with Städal, the Cudgel of the Goddess started to react to things like this. I guess weapons grow up too?

As I think these thoughts, I use the tip of the cudgel to reshape the image of the bowknot. This should do it.

"*Now* let's open it," I propose.

"Wait, I'll do it. You guys stand back," argues Satanás.

"It's fine, I'll handle it."

"Just do as I say." He makes us stand behind him and reaches out to the lid of the box. "A little further back, would you?"

We do as he says. I guess he's *that* worried about what's going to happen when he opens it. It's not exactly a good time, and this is Satanás we're talking about, but he still makes me flustered with that gallant side of his. Benjamine looks on at him with swaying eyes and her hands clenched together.

As we put some distance between ourselves and the box, I feel a soft breeze on my cheek—all the windows seem to be closed, though.

With the sound of a strong gale, Satanás forces a wind blade between the box and its old-looking lid, blowing the latter off into a corner of the room. A few seconds later, Satanás draws closer to the open box.

"What the hell is this?" he utters.

“What’s wrong?” I reply.

We come closer too, drawn in by his reaction. Inside, clad in white pajamas and hugging her knees, sleeps the young Treyse.

“What...? What’s the meaning of this?!” yells Nikeh, knitting her brows and twisting the corners of her mouth in bewilderment.

“There’s nothing around her head, unlike earlier,” says Prince Zenon, referring to Treyse’s possessor. “Alois said something about her being connected to demons, though, right?”

The prince checks it with magic just to be sure, then turns to look at me.

I can only muster a “Huh?” in reply. Then how...?

“You know, I’m pretty sure I told you to stay out of my way,” rings an indistinct voice throughout the room.

We shift our focus away from Treyse and turn to look back at the door.

“Oh no, it’s Nanalie!” shouts Benjamine.

There, dragging my apparently-unconscious young self by the neck, walks in a student with an eerie smile on his face, and glaring, bewitching red eyes—Alois Rockmann. With his fluttering, long golden hair, he licks his lips like a wolf eyeing a delicious meal. It truly makes him look like a savage beast.

I feel a shiver crawl up my spine. The two of us may have fought all the time, but I never thought I’d find him so repulsive. I can tell at a glance—what I’m looking at is both Rockmann and something else entirely.

The creepy thing in his guise approaches, dragging my little self. With every step, the chill I feel grows stronger, giving me goose bumps.

“That should be the same thing that was possessing Treyse,” theorizes the prince, gazing at the possessed Rockmann with the aid of Necromancy.

“Why is it on Rockmann now?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Perhaps... But wait, is such a thing even possible...?”

What’s got him hesitating like that? I can’t begin to imagine.

The voice we heard a moment ago was nothing like the one we heard from the possessed Treyse. It wasn't Rockmann's own voice either. It was completely different, something...wicked.

There's a sinister magical power surrounding Rockmann. We magicians know of only one creature with just that sort of power. I'm sure Prince Zenon had the same thought as me.

"Who in the world are you?" I ask, holding down my shivering arm.

I must look pathetic right now, shivering like this... At least the real Rockmann isn't here. He would no doubt make fun of me, saying I look like a newborn bunny-bird or something. Recalling the countless times Rockmann laughed at me with that "I'm so clever" mug of his, I face our unsettling visitor once more.

This thing in human skin can't possibly be Rockmann or Treyse. As we stare "Rockmann" down, he laughs, a devilish look on his face.

How did it manage to possess him? He may be young, but he's wary of dangers. It's hard to believe it would work on him so easily.

A lot of other things don't make sense either. It's highly likely it wasn't the real Treyse who made contact with the Time Keeper—but if so, why did that person claim to be Treyse and have the gnome send them to this time in the past?

"If I said I'm a part of Städal, would that answer your question?" he says with a grin.

Absent-minded thoughts like "Where have I heard that name before...?" don't cross my mind even for an instant. We all unconsciously take a step back.

"Why would that name come up here, of all places...?" utters Nikeh, hand over her mouth.

"I'm sure you remember a certain black demon you hate so much, mwah ha ha!"

The possessed Rockmann roars with laughter, seeming to find something genuinely funny. As his blond hair shakes around, he twists the corners of his mouth, holding his stomach and laughing. How repugnant. I can't tolerate

someone being made to laugh in such a grotesque way against their will, whether it's Rockmann or not.

"As I thought. But aren't you a little too eerie for a demon?" asks Prince Zenon, despite knowing who he's talking to.

We're dealing with a demon. That sinister magical power is no different from the kind observed in one. It was just a faint notion tickling the back of my mind. However, the demons we're used to dealing with don't possess much intelligence; special cases like Städal, whom you can actually talk to, are extremely rare.

Which makes this all the more weird. Is this demon an equal of Städal? How dangerous is it, exactly?

It takes another step towards us.

"You are responsible for the demise of our king, Ice," it says, sneering and pointing at me as I back off. "All our brethren are Städal's memories, incarnations, and fragments of his power. Had it not been for you, this world would've become his paradise. That's what was meant to happen."

The "fragments of his power" part makes me recall the words of the Ice Ancient.

"Despite my efforts, however, he was not utterly defeated. Years later, the shards that had been scattered across this wide world became conscious..."

Those scattered shards she mentioned... Maybe what we're looking at is a demon born out of one of those shards Städal shattered into after the Ice Ancient and I froze him on that day. That would explain quite a lot.

"I tried to go back in time and kill you, but tragically, I found that the flow of time is protecting your life."

So it tried to erase me from this world by going into the past and killing me before I defeated Städal.

"See for yourself. You won't die no matter what I do."

With that, the demon begins to choke my young self using Rockmann's hand. The whole thing about the flow of time protecting my life does align with what the Time Keeper said. You can't save someone destined to die. The opposite is also true.

"If you travel to the past and turn white to black, it will remain white."

You can't kill someone in the past.

"Stop it! This is so cruel!" shouts Benjamine as she lunges for the demon, flame in hand.

I hurriedly reach out to stop her, but don't make it in time.

"Benjamine!"

"You can have her if you want her so badly. I came here after finally finding such a compatible soul, but in the end it was a waste of time. I can't even bring this useless twerp back with me."

The demon hurls my young self at Benjamine. She stumbles from the impact after suddenly having to make the catch, but before I can do anything, Satanás leaps to her side using his wind magic and props her up. The two quickly distance themselves from the demon and cast a healing spell on my young self to heal the injury on her neck.

"'A compatible soul'? Are you talking about Treyse? What did you do to her?"

"Something not too different from what my king did with his own puppet. Oh, how pleasant are those who fall easily to temptation."

By "puppet" it probably means Dr. Aristo.

"Keeper, what did Treyse look like when she went back in time?" I ask the gnome poking his head out from Benjamine's cleavage.

"Why, she was a charming young lady. 'Twas no demon, rest assured."

"Because she sold her soul to me. I'm sure you saw me as a charming woman."

From what it's saying, it sounds like it wasn't the real Treyse who came to the Time Keeper, but this demon in her guise. The real Treyse never came to this past world.

"And now, at long last, this man too has become an obedient vessel for me. Mwah ha ha!" After continuing its ominous laugh for a while, the demon sighs and stares at us with Rockmann's red eyes. "However, it seems even his powers won't allow me to kill her... But wait... I see now! If I can't kill the one protected by time, why not simply kill the one who isn't?! I must get rid of this threat to prepare for the day my king awakens!"

It summons an enormous, sinister flame in his hand. Apparently being in Rockmann's body gives it the ability to use his magic.

Now wait just a moment... Isn't this pretty bad? I don't know how much exactly he had to suppress his powers at the time, but I'm not sure I can handle him if he goes all out.

"Hmph! I'm not scared of you!" I exclaim, slapping my cheeks to psych myself up.

Stop being so pathetic inside your mind, Nanalie. Being so negative won't get you through this. I can't afford to lose when his powers are being used by some foreign presence. And besides, I take pride in my track record fighting that flame on equal footing for years. So I really *don't* feel like I'm going to lose, as a matter of fact. I've gotta figure out how to leave Rockmann's body pristine while slaying what's on the inside.

"Huh...?"

As I ready myself and assume combat stance, the demon suddenly comes to a halt. I see its arm shaking as it tries to move it, but it looks like Rockmann's body won't listen to the demon's commands. It seems to be at a loss as to what's going on as well.

We raise our eyebrows at the demon.

"Agh... Ugh... Argh..." it groans.

After a while, something like an arm starts growing out of his—the young Rockmann's—chest with a squishy sound. It resembles plant seeds sprouting

from the ground, and evokes an entirely different kind of revulsion from the demon's puppeteer act. What's happening to his body...?

***

"What's going on *now*?"

"What *is* that?"

Nikeh and Prince Zenon lean forward and open their eyes wide in astonishment at the strange arm growing out of Rockmann's chest. I look equally astounded.

"You really...thought you could...do as you please with me...?" comes a deep voice from somewhere. Not one of a youth, but one of a grown man. The voice of the future Rockmann that we know.

Is he here, in this classroom...? I look around, but can't see anyone other than my friends and the demon.

I call out to him in blind hope and hear the voice come from the young Rockmann's chest, the part where the new arm grows out of it.

"You were able to possess me because Treyse stuck that dagger into my chest, you cowardly scum," comes the voice, full of bite and irritation. "I had the commander and the director at Harré look into it a short while ago. We're most likely dealing with a dream demon."

"A dream demon?" I ask as the voice becomes slightly softer.

"Apparently some demons are evolving. Gaining a degree of intelligence. That includes the stowaway on the Orcinus transport wagon, and, in all likelihood, this demon as well."

"Hold on. You can see us?"

It's definitely his voice, but... This is the past, and the only way of getting here is with the Time Keeper's magic. Even the principal was surprised to learn about the Time Keeper. Just how is he using his young self's body to talk to us? Not to mention, last I heard, he had collapsed in "our" time.

"I've been able to see through its eyes ever since we became connected. I can read all its thoughts too. It took me some time to take control of this body,

however. Sorry I'm late."

"Ugghh... Aghhh..." groans the demon as the arm growing from the young Rockmann's chest latches onto his own neck.

It's come up in the relevant literature of late that the weak spot of dream demons is the neck of the possessed. Putting pressure on it prevents the incorporeal demon from escaping into the air.

Wait, that's not what's important right now. Okay, I guess it's pretty important, but that's not what's bothering me most...

"You read its thoughts?" asks Prince Zenon.

There's a bunch of things I want to ask, and the prince's question is one of them. Let's have Rockmann answer that first.

According to him, this dream demon has been going around possessing lots of people seeking wisdom, as well as ways to kill me, ever since Städal's demise. Through mind-reading it has absorbed the knowledge of all sorts of people, and after reading the mind of someone on the black market, it learned about the Time Keeper. At one point it also ran into Treyse Drenman. Possessing her and looking for information like usual, it rejoiced at its unexpected discovery. By coincidence, they both wished to travel to the same point in the past.

"It had Treyse act in our time," continues Rockmann, "while it perfectly assumed her form and asked the Time Keeper to send it into the past. For that to be possible, Treyse and the demon's souls must be connected."

"So you're saying it needed power to take human form because in its demon one the Time Keeper wouldn't have sent it into the past?"

Rockmann explains that the demon enticed Treyse with the promise of granting her wish—a trap she completely fell for, leading her to make a pact to bind her soul to the demon's, becoming its servant and source of power. As a medium, it must be similar to other magical pacts like the Blood Oath.

As fate would have it, Treyse's wish to erase my existence coincided with the demon's objective. Basically, it just reached for the most convenient pawn available.

“Is Treyse herself okay?” I ask. Shaken as I am to learn she’s resented me so much all this time, I still hope she’s fine now.

“She’s fulfilled her part of the pact by sticking a dagger in my heart, so she’s fine. She probably would’ve died otherwise... Though it might still have impacted her life span a little.”

“Mm?”

Wait. Wait wait wait wait wait. Did he just say something crazy like it was nothing? Sure, it’s also concerning that Treyse’s lifespan might be affected, but first things first...

“She stabbed you in the *heart?!* You okay there?!”

I’m pretty sure that kills people! Come to think of it, he did say “Treyse stuck that dagger into my chest” at the very start. There was too much happening at the time and I couldn’t keep up.

“I’ll live. And that dagger...”

He’ll live?! After *that?!* Is he immortal or something?!

Seeing me dumbfounded, Rockmann continues. He says it turned out that him collapsing had nothing to do with the past being changed, and was the result of Treyse and the demon’s scheme using another knight. And when the dream demon went into the past, Treyse abided by the pact and stabbed Rockmann with the dagger imbued with the demon’s power. This was meant to, if only temporarily, keep Rockmann in check both in the past and in the future, as well as potentially use his past self to kill mine.

As for the whole thing with the stabbing, it was apparently a ritual to connect the senses of the past and future Rockmann to let the demon possess his past self (since the demon probably figured it would be too difficult otherwise given Rockmann’s power even at a young age). It required a hole in the body—in the heart. The dagger was a tool that poured the demon’s powers into Rockmann to make it possible for the incorporeal dream demon to possess him.

What’s this about connecting the senses of the past and future Rockmann...?

“Did it have demonite?” utters the Time Keeper, causing the rest of us to prick

up our ears.

“What’s that, Elder?” asks Benjamine.

“Manipulating time is a forbidden form of magic not possible with regular magical powers or spells. I’m a doll created by an ancient magician, you see. In my core is a piece of demonite, a stone believed to be the source of demons—or so I was told a long time ago.”

“Demons come from stones?”

“’Tis highly unlikely any of them would grant one the same powers as mine. However, if one was to embed them in a weapon, it may be possible to use magic across space-time like this.”

“Can a regular demon make—or steal—weapons like that?” asks Benjamine in a confused frown.

My heartbeat intensifies as I realize we’re now dealing with far smarter demons than before.

***

Honestly, ever since I saw Städal, I've been worried a demon like this might appear one day. Even before we traveled to the past, I had heard about the demon in human guise caught in Sheera. There can be no doubt that some individuals among them are evolving.

"Are you there, Satanás?" asks Rockmann's voice.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"After I chase it out of this body, it will no doubt try to run somewhere. Catch it with your wind magic before it does. I'll keep it in until then."

"You sure we shouldn't just slay it here and now?"

"No, take it alive. Would someone else mind purging it from this body?"

A dream demon has no corporeal form. It's like a black haze. Up until three or four years ago, it was thought dream demons couldn't leave the bodies they possessed before fully consuming them, and that exorcising such demons was the only way of purging them from the body. But with every year it became more and more difficult to catch them, and though dealing with dream demons is still not too common, when one *does* appear, often enough the sorcerer on the job finds that the demon is already gone from the body by the time they arrive, and these days we assign a lot of this sort of job to teams of two.

"I'll take care of that," announces Prince Zenon.

"Wait!" I stop him.

"What?"

I bring my hands together and crack my knuckles.

"I'll do it," I say firmly as the prince looks on in surprise.

"O-Okay."

Seeing my enthusiasm, he looks at me like he's a bit concerned whether it's okay to entrust this to me. Maybe I was making a scary face, like I was going to completely exorcise the demon rather than simply purge it from the body.

It's just that I've been waiting for this moment.

I stand in front of the prince and extend my hand to the petrified young Rockmann.

“Here goes nothing...”

Approaching directly from the side, I embrace his shoulders, more slender than my own, and hold my hand to the back of his head. He’s too small for a sixteen-year-old, and his tiny head feels like it would break if I was just a little rough with it.



How could this demon do such a thing to such a child...?

“Hey, don’t go killing it now,” reproaches Rockmann, still holding his younger self by the neck.

“I know, it’s just... I only have to make sure it doesn’t disappear, right?” I ask, totally deadpan.

I feel everyone behind me jolt. Why would he assume I’m planning to kill it? I’ll help capture it as I’m told, but nobody said it should be captured unharmed.

Rockmann doesn’t reply. Evidently, he doesn’t mind.

I’ve been through a lot because of this thing. Treyse may have lost some lifespan. Rockmann had a dagger thrust into his chest and has been possessed and controlled, and my young self was choked. How could I let it get away with all this? For better or worse, women don’t let go of grudges so easily.

I cast a purging spell that won’t cause the young Rockmann any pain, focusing only on the demon’s presence. Rockmann doesn’t show pain on his face or in his voice.

“Gohswes deaeir, eradicate the source of evil and turn it to ash.”

White light envelops the youth’s body as I finish speaking the incantation. Hopefully this will bring the whole incident to a close. While I’m standing there, feeling relieved, I recall Städal’s parting cries.

“Ice, darling Ice of mine—let us rule this world, you and I!”

“Ahhh, what sacred bliss...!”

I ponder his words as I watch the white light flicker. All that’s left is to return to the future and hand this demon over.

Still... This demon used to be part of Städal. It said it had Städal’s memories. Doesn’t that mean it has memories of its time with the ancients?

“Curse you, Ice! Curse you!” exclaims the dream demon.

Städal grew so resentful of the world because of the five ancients who gave

birth to him, and because the Ice Ancient didn't return his affections. That is surely why, even now that he's been broken and scattered across the world, his shards still spawn demons *ad infinitum*, and he keeps eventually coming back and doing the same thing he tried last time. I suspect it will happen over and over, until there's only one fragment of him left after he's slain.

The world will remain this way until he can be brought to a permanent end. The chain will continue even if we stop this demon here. I can already see similar events happening in the future. Städal will pour his hate into the world forever, for that is the only thing he feels towards it.

This demon here is no exception. After suffering through my spiteful magic, it will no doubt be interrogated and experimented on by the knights. And sure, it's more than earned such treatment. I certainly don't feel like forgiving it.

"This is your fault!" exclaims the demon again.

Still, if this demon really is a part of Städal, doesn't that mean it's not to blame for what happened here? And if so, what if, next time, it's reborn as something other than a demon?

"Do us all a favor and find a better love next time, okay?" I say to it.

Snapping my fingers, I change the spell to a painless one, meant only to purge the demon from the body. Then, I pat the youth on his small back. If the source of evil is hatred, perhaps it's not great power that will save the world, but something different, something rather trivial.

***

With a scream, the dream demon flees Rockmann's body, at which point Satanás catches it with his wind magic and seals it in a box enchanted with Prince Zenon's lightning spell. The box's strong electromagnetic field will make sure it's not going anywhere—and, to be on the safe side, we lock the box with a magic circle as well.

The box is the one we found Treyse in. We put the lid back after Satanás blew it off.

For a short while, the demon makes a lot of noise inside, trying to get out, but then either gives up or gets tired. It really is a waste of effort. Hopefully it will

learn and give up on the idea of killing me. Though I don't imagine such a pigheaded spirit to change quite so easily. In a way, I'm no less stubborn; I can see where it's coming from. Not that I'm saying it's okay to kill me, and again, I'm definitely not going to forgive it. Next time a demon like this appears, I'm going to beat it to a pulp and lecture it afterwards.

Satanás shrinks the now-still box to the size of a palm and picks it up.

"Zenon, mind calling the principal here?" he asks.

"If memory serves me right, he was a lightning-type too. Just a moment," replies the prince.

He holds his index finger to his ear and closes his eyes—another clever lightning-type trick that lets them talk with each other over great distances. It's a solid plan: we've already spilled the beans to the principal, so there can't be much harm in roping him in to help with this last part..

I'm not sure we should be casually summoning him like he's a magical beast, though, but let's pretend I'm not getting that impression here. We should just take advantage of things. Above all, it's reassuring to have the most important person in the school on our side, so there's no reason to hesitate.

"It's okay now," I tell the young Rockmann.

As he lies limp in my arms, I lay him on the floor, careful not to wake him. The arm growing out of his chest is gone, as seems to be the connection with his adult self—I'm guessing it was severed when the demon left his body and he wasn't under the effect of any more spells. Now he's just sleeping calmly. If only he was this adorable in the future... Wait, I'm not sure I want that. Like, you know... It would just be *weird* if the Rockmann I knew became adorable too.

I gently brush the messy hair out of this sixteen-year-old's unfittingly youthful, innocent face.

***

A few minutes later, the principal enters the laboratory, looking cool as a cucumber and completely unhurried.

"Now what happened here...?"

Stroking his beard in thought, he looks over the disaster in the room, then peers at the three students on the floor—including Treyse. His lack of surprise surprises me in turn. How can he have such presence of mind? Sure, the prince brought him up to speed when he called him over, but he's as calm as an old man coming to see a neighbor's cat.

"A demon was here, sir."

The prince describes what has transpired in this room, leaving out the fact the demon was after my past self. It would needlessly complicate things if we told him. Instead, we simply say the incident involved a demon who couldn't control its romantic feelings. It's pretty implausible if I say so myself, so I was worried the principal wouldn't buy it (plus we didn't reveal the whole thing), but he doesn't show any sign of doubt whatsoever.

"I see. Must've been hard on you," he says and goes around patting our heads like we're little children.

I'm sure we all think the same thing in the process—our principal doesn't happen to be a *huge sucker*, does he?

"Worry not, I'll handle the rest. You folks should hurry back to your time."

"But sir, won't people find it suspicious if we vanish all of a sudden?" I ask.

"The magic of that doll of yours will ensure it doesn't happen, correct? It sounds like the things you didn't wish to change will remain the same in the future." Disregarding our concerns, he adds, in a louder voice, "Oho ho, why, I see you're good friends who help each other out!" He smiles.

Well, looks like we have no reason left to stay.

I recall what the Time Keeper told us in regards to doing things in the past. He said you can't undo something that was done, but you *can* muddle the memories of those you made contact with to prevent them from remembering it in order to correct history as you return to the future. No matter how much I think about it, it's too complicated to wrap my mind around.

Well, as long as our future is safe. I should look into time-manipulation magic and the Time Keeper once I'm back.

“I’ll ask *you*,” utters the dwarfish old man in Benjamine’s arms, facing my way. “Where do you wish to return?”

Apparently it doesn’t have to be that forest, since the Time Keeper is with us. And it also looks like we don’t have to say that ludicrous line to return. The “O handsome Time Keeper, I am thy slave” one. Thank goodness. I’d hate to say something so humiliating, even if I didn’t mean it.

But why *me?* I give the gnome a quizzical look, as if to ask why he’s asking me and not Benjamine, and what he’s scheming.

“I feel guilty for what I’ve done to you. I apologize,” he says, looking disheartened.

It’s true that none of this would’ve happened had he been careful about whom he sends to the past. He needs a good scolding even more than the demon. Still, he didn’t mean to do something bad, I suppose. Even if I’m rather uncomfortable with what he’s been doing until now.

“So, where do you wish to return?”

“Where I want to be now is obviously...”

...by Rockmann’s side in our time.

As we huddle together and hold each other’s hands as instructed by the gnome, a whirlwind quickly forms around us.

“Thank you for everything, sir!” I exclaim.

“Let us meet again in the future,” replies the principal in a kind voice.

As light envelops us, I see the principal waving our way.

To the Young

After sending off the group that claimed to be his students from the future, Sophocles escorted the children who'd collapsed in the laboratory to the infirmary.

"A prycle has run away? Why didn't you report it at once, sir?" asks Krios Cagle, the vice-principal. He's come running to the principal's office after finding out about the students in the infirmary.

Entertained by the vice-principal appearing in a flustered state to complain, the principal clears his throat to hide that fact.

"You see, Krios, I was utterly focused on weeding."

"Sir, I've been told three students have come to harm!"

"They have simply been shown some nightmares. 'Tis nothing to worry about."

Prycles are large cats that inflict dreams, both good and bad, on the people and animals they bite. Two are kept at the Royal Magic School of Doran, and students take turns feeding them. Their bites don't leave marks and don't even hurt or itch, so it's hardly dangerous. They've been known to grab sleeping animals in their mouths and carry them off elsewhere, but as the prycles can't leave the school, managing them isn't all that difficult.

Sophocles has claimed this incident is a prycle's doing.

"'Tis most surprising one should manage to escape," says the principal. "Should we make the fences taller?"

"Forget about the cat for a moment!" replies Krios. "I was told it was Mr. Bordon's students who got hurt in all this. I must ask you, sir: why did you change the class compositions and put two commoners in a class full of noble girls? I'm sure you're aware of the controversy—why do this in the midst of a push to split commoners and nobles into separate classes? Didn't you say you wanted to experiment by forming a class solely made up of nobles?"

“Well...”

Sophocles folds his arms as he looks over the portraits of his predecessors. This is an old school with a long history. Its ideology isn’t as stiff as it once was, regardless of how many might complain.

“I saw a dream of a future, you see. A future where friendships form across the bounds of class, and children on either side learn to serve others to their utmost ability, regardless of the other party’s prestige or heritage. I think I’d rather like to see it come to pass.”

Sophocles ponders the possibility that a commoner boy might one day bicker with a prince like it’s the most natural thing in the world. While not ideal, the notion of such mutual care stirs Sophocles’s heart.

“A dream? There you go with your abstract conceits again, sir,” complains Krios, sighing.

The principal smiles at the sight of his consternation. “Wouldn’t you say you find it a relief as well? I suspect you felt as though your long-held friendships had been crossed out when it was decided to assemble a class with nobles alone.”

Though Krios sighs again, his expression relaxes ever so slightly.

“By the way, Krios. Do you remember the names of the assistant teachers?”

“What are you talking about? What assistant teachers?”

“Never mind, I had the wrong idea. Forget I said anything.”

No doubt the principal’s own memory will fade as well, before long.

He closes his eyes as he recalls the ray of light that shone from the future. He believes that *some* things will remain, even should they be forgotten.

Tale VI

I feel a sudden pull of gravity.

“Wh-Whoa!”

“Agh...”

We’re back from the past. Where are we? Wherever this is, the five of us are piled up on something soft. There’s a pleasant smell... Did we land in a bed?

I’m pretty sure I asked the Time Keeper to take us to Rockmann. Is this really the place?

Since I landed first, I’m struggling to breathe with the weight of four people on top of me. Then, I notice a slight warmth beneath the sheets, and turn my eyes upwards without moving my head.

“You’re heavy... I’m going to puke...”

“Rockmann!”

“Get off me already.”

He’s pale enough on a *good* day, and now his face looks downright haggard. He’s trembling underneath our weight, as the five of us seem to have fallen right on top of his bed, where he’s resting. His long hair is down, he has white pajamas on, and he’s gesturing at us to move, a listless look on his face. Rockmann looks really fed up with us.

Am I just cursed to land in his lap every time I teleport? The same thing happened that other time a long while ago with the failed magic circle. Like, at this point it *can’t* just be a fluke.

I hurry to roll to the side, together with the four on top of me, and tumble onto the carpeted floor. Nikeh cries out in a high-pitched voice as she lands on Prince Zenon’s stomach butt-first. I’d probably shriek too if I did something so disrespectful.

In the meantime, a dull pain rings in my hips, meaning I probably didn’t stick the landing.

Everyone starts getting up, one by one. I hurry to my feet too, with no attention to spare for the pain in my hips, and rush to Rockmann's side, who's now sat up in bed.

"Hey, y-you're Rockmann, right...?" I ask as I grab his shoulders and peer into his eyes.

"Yeah. Welcome back."

First I draw close enough to tell the hairs of his long eyelashes apart; then I pull away and stare at his whole body for a while.



He’s as beautiful as ever—a fact I can’t help but resent, and one other women likely envy him for. It’s pissing me off how there’s not a crease on his face. That’s not the problem here, though...

“That’s all you have to say?” I ask. “How about you explain *that!*”

His eyes and hair have turned black. His blond, sweetly fragrant hair, reminiscent of the color of honey and shining like gold, is nowhere to be seen. Instead, there’s only deep black, like that of the depths of the earth. It makes the paleness of his skin stand out even more.

Gazing at his eyes, I realize they’re not completely black and still have a trace of red in them—as if something clouded over the original color with ink.

Rockmann rubs his eyes and yawns, staring at us. Looking at his small and quiet figure as he sits in bed, you might think of him as a frail, handsome youth if you didn’t know what he’s really like.

I let go of his shoulders, worried I’ll start to hurt him, and move away a little. But as the two of us are being rather easy-going about the situation, my friends finally speak up.

“Was it the dagger that did this to you?!” exclaims Nikeh.

“Was it the demon?!” adds Satanás.

The two of them approach the bed, leaning forward and pressing Rockmann for answers.

“Hey, wait, calm down.” Rockmann raises his hands and closes his eyes. “Hel, you know how your hair turned blue? It’s the same thing,” he states, nonchalantly deflecting our questions.

Look at him, bringing up my past without actually answering. He has no idea how I feel.

And in my case it was because my blood awakened to its powers, so clearly it’s not the same thing. His blood was already imbued with fire all the way back then, so he’d better not go acting like he was just trying out some new color-changing magic.

I consider what Nikeh brought up—the dagger. I always thought his

womanizing ways might get him shanked one day, but to think it would actually happen...

A fairy tale about a “little mermaid” from a distant country springs to my mind—the heroine, left with the choice to cut out the heart of the prince she loves or turn to sea-foam, chooses to spare him at the last minute and succumb to her fate.

I’m not a fan of tragedies like that (they always stick with me longer than I like); that one in particular is one of the scant few I bothered to read from start to finish before I learned how to sniff out and decide against an unhappy ending ahead of time.

Yet here we are, in a reality where the prince sure as hell gets stabbed.

“I really need some sleep. Let’s talk later,” says Rockmann, then grabs his blanket and plops his head onto the pillow.

His breathing assumes an even rhythm almost immediately. Did he fall asleep in just a few seconds?

As we exchange glances, wondering what to do about the man deep in his Zs, the door creaks open.

“Is somebody here?”

Peeking from behind the door is a beautiful woman with blonde hair, her face much like Rockmann’s.

***

After the Time Keeper sent us back to our time, we ended up in Duke Rockmann’s mansion. The junior Rockmann was taken here after he collapsed, where he’s been treated by royal doctors and healers.

After hearing from the servants about all the noise in Rockmann’s room, the Duke’s wife, Norweira Rockmann, led us to the parlor on the first floor and told us how things got to this point.

I can see a starry sky and the Isle of Doran outside the parlor’s large window. It’s already night outside. Looks like there’s a full moon tonight.

“It’s my fault for feeling so safe about letting her into his room. It’s all because

I've always relied on his magic..."

As Duchess Norweira hangs her head, her neatly-made hair falls over her shoulders.

"I see now. You don't need to regret it so much," consoles Prince Zenon, sitting beside her on the sofa across from me. "He likes it when people rely on him. He must've let her into his room knowing what was coming. You're not to blame here."

Having her nephew do the talking is sure to cheer her up more than if it were any of the rest of us.

Of course she couldn't have imagined her son's childhood friend who had come to check up on him was intent on stabbing her son's heart, especially because she didn't trigger Rockmann's protective spells on the mansion. It's not so much that the duchess was too reliant on Rockmann and more that he decided it was okay to let Treyse in. His mother hasn't done anything wrong at all.

"It was a most peculiar sight," continues Duchess Norweira.

Apparently, she heard Treyse's cries and shouts and realized something was up in the mansion, and by the time she got to Rockmann's room, he already looked different from usual. Though what she found rather more off-putting was the fact her son seemed wholly unbothered with the huge ornate dagger sticking out of his chest. She turns pale as she recalls it.

Rockmann told her he'll live and asked her to call his commander and the director at Harré, which she promptly did. She tried to get a coherent account out of Treyse, who'd taken up a spot by his bed to have a bit of a breakdown, but she kept talking about the past and it served only to confuse the duchess, which just made her feel more pathetic. A look of anguish appears on her face as she recalls it.

"Your involvement still made a big difference, believe me," consoled the prince once more.

A male servant of the house had offered him a large chair, but he insisted on sitting by the duchess's side instead, and it was probably so he could gently pat

her on the back as he's doing now.

She cries for a while, then wipes her cheeks with a handkerchief.

The master of the mansion, Duke Rockmann, isn't around. We're told he's off to the castle.

The knight commander and Director Locktiss apparently left a few hours ago as well, headed in different directions—the former to the castle, and the latter to Harré. The knight commander also took Treyse with him. The only people left in the mansion are Duchess Norweira, her fourth son Kees, the laid-up Rockmann, and the servants.

"Alois, he... Is something wrong with his magic?" asks the prince with hesitation, folding his arms, leaning forward, and turning his eyes to the duchess.

According to him, the duchess is particularly talented in healing magic, which is uncommon for daughters of dukes. She especially shines in her knowledge of human illnesses and poisonings.

She clenches her fists resting on her knees and faces forward.

"The spell on him couldn't be more sinister," she begins, knitting her brows. "I asked him to try speaking a few simple incantations to check if he can still use his magic, and he couldn't even manage a basic cantrip, to say nothing of his fire magic." She casts her eyes down and clenches her fists again. "Then I asked him what in the world had he done. And he said he 'simply altered the curse.'"

"The curse?"

"I should show you," she replies.

A male servant hands the duchess an object wrapped in cloth, which she lays out on the table. She unwraps it, laying bare a dagger with gemstones embedded in its haft.

"It appears to be enchanted. He said it was meant to destroy his memories, but he didn't like that, so he altered the curse to temporarily sever him from his magic instead."

"So his powers will be gone for a while...? But being without one's magic is no

different from death," replies Prince Zenon. "Remember how it was when we dealt with Städal. There are only two cases when your magic disappears: when you die, or when you're somewhere like the Land of the Sea where your magic is blocked out by external influence. When Nanalie vitality was drained, she slept through a whole month."

"But hey," adds Satanás, "doesn't that mean he can sleep for a month or so like Nanalie and he'll be back to normal? It's no big deal, ma'am."

"I hope so..." replies Norweira. "What bothers me is the nature of the magic flowing through his body. It's like there's a demon inside him. How did it become that way?"

We can't simply go ask him about it, since he's asleep. Treyse, probably doesn't know much either, and she's not here anyway. If she did know, I'm sure the duchess wouldn't be here racking her brains about what's happened. And there's only so much psychometry can do. I imagine it would be difficult to have the Time Keeper help with this, either. It's a dangerous artifact, and I'd rather not use it without a good reason. Which leaves only one other related party.

"Is asking the demon our only option?" I wonder.

"What demon?" asks Duchess Norweira, puzzled.

I point at the small box in Satanás's hand and give the duchess the short version of the story.

"You can talk to it and it will understand," I explain. "I don't know if it'll give us the time of day, but it's the thing that cursed Treyse in the first place, so maybe we'll get something out of it if they do a good job interrogating it at the order. Roc—I mean, Sir Alois told me he can read its thoughts. In all likelihood, it goes both ways. There may be a weird sort of pact sealed between him and the demon."

"Guess we could interrogate it, then," utters Nikeh, nodding as she sips her tea.

I doubt it will tell us much, but given that we can't ask Rockmann directly, it seems to be our only option.

"Say, O Elder of Time," Benjamine, who's sitting at the edge of the sofa, asks

the doll in her lap. “You said you’re made of demonite, right? Would you happen to know much about demons?”

Everyone directs their gaze to the Time Keeper. The duchess blinks in confusion, as this is the first time she’s heard about the demonite in the doll.

“Wait,” interrupts Prince Zenon and raises his hand, looking around the room. “Given the state Alois is in, the mansion’s protective magic must be disabled at the moment.”

“Yes,” replies the duchess. “Michael set up a new protective spell and a mirror charm, but they’re not as sophisticated as Alois’s. Though I’m sure he’d get angry if he heard me say this.”

“I see. Then we had best stop here. Nikeh, let us return to the dormitory at once.”

“Right now?”

“That’s right.”

I guess he’s intent on preventing any leakage of information. If someone happened to overhear us talking here, we’d be in for far more trouble than what the Time Keeper has caused us. I’d rather not deal with another crisis.

“Can the order have this dagger?” asks the prince.

“Yes, please take it,” replies the duchess.

As Prince Zenon takes possession of the dagger, he performs a slight bow to her in gratitude and starts to give us instructions.

“I want to question the Time Keeper too. Since you guys found him first, I’d like Benjamine to come with us as well. Nanalie, you should stop by Harré for now. You had to leave work without prior notice, right?”

“Yes. I have to report to the director.”

I left work just like that, and it’s already night. It hasn’t even been a day since Rockmann collapsed, in spite of the multiple days we spent in the past.

What kind of a working adult would disappear for a whole day without a word, regardless of reasons?

“We’ll go normally, but Nanalie, you should teleport with a magic circle,” continues the prince. “Simply to be on the safe side, since we’ve just seen a demon who was after you. Not that I expect them to get you so easily, but just in case.”

“I’ll be on my guard for a while,” I reply.

We all get up from the sofas and get ready to leave. I thank Duchess Norweira for the tea, bid her goodbye, and put on a robe.

As we head outside and my friends mount their familiars, I extend my Cudgel of the Goddess and deploy the magic circle. It won’t take long to get to the director’s office from Harré’s backyard.

“Miss Nanalie!” calls the duchess from the entrance, waving me down emphatically.

“Yes?”

Judging by the male servant running behind her in a fluster, I take it she came running as well.

We’ve only met a few times, counting today, but I’m surprised she already remembers my name. Or maybe it’s only to be expected, since Prince Zenon mentioned it in our conversation a few times.

She looks perplexed and desperate, unfittingly for her pretty face.

“Please, —— him!”

“Duchess Norweira?”

She seems to be telling me something, but I can’t hear her well; the teleport spell’s already half-cast. With reluctance, I return to Harré.

***

I arrive on a lawn. My surroundings are completely dark, but I can see the ground below me thanks to the faint light leaking from the windows. I hurry from Harré’s backyard to the director’s office.

My clothing had already changed back to my uniform by the time I arrived at the duke’s mansion. Must be another part of the Time Keeper’s magic. He may

be a rude geezer, but he's definitely powerful.

"Nanalie?"

"Hey, Hel."

I run into a few coworkers who are surprised to see me back all of a sudden. It's no doubt pretty weird, considering how I got dragged away from work like that and didn't show myself for the rest of the day.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble," I humbly apologize.

As I go around bowing to everyone and hearing what they have to say, I learn that, apparently, the director has treated my absence as "outside work." Which is why my coworkers ask me if I was okay going on such a sudden assignment and thank me for my efforts. They seem to all be thinking I was sent on an unforeseen errand related to the director's visit to Duke Rockmann's mansion.

Well, we did catch that demon and all, but this kind of treatment makes me want to get out of here as soon as I can. Embarrassing as it is to admit, I acted purely in my own interests at first. Though it's not like I can just up and say the truth here, so all I can do is force a smile and keep my mouth *shut*.

I get to the front of Director Locktiss's office and knock on the door.

"Come in," I hear from inside.

The moment I enter, I bow with vigor.

"I'm back, ma'am! I'm so, so sorry! I'll go back to do whatever odd duties you give me, so please let me keep working here!"

I keep bowing over and over, wondering if my head might come off.

"Oh, stop that, Nanalie! Hush, hush! You're being too loud! And you don't have to apologize! Oh, what shall I do with you...? Quiet, I said! Be quiet!"

The director looks flustered as she presses a thumb to my lips and quickly rubs it on them horizontally—she cast Silence on me! My lips are *literally* sealed!

Watching me struggle to eke out the faintest syllable in my defense, the director wipes her forehead.

“It’s all right, okay? I’ve heard about the doll, and you’ve caught a dream demon, haven’t you? It’s just outside work.” She then swells her cheeks and folds her arms as she adds, “Who would fire you for something like this? You make me sound like some kind of monster.”

Frankly, I can’t shrug off the feeling that she’s indulging me, between my quarrels with Rockmann inside the guild and now this. The only time she’s ever gotten angry at me was when Zozo and I ran around Harré. She’ll make a bum out of me at this rate.

“Why aren’t you angry with me?” I ask as Silence comes off, which takes but a few moments.

“I *would* get angry if you didn’t get anything done, of course.” She laughs mockingly.

That’s unexpectedly calculating of her.

The director’s desk is littered with papers and books. I’m a little amazed at the sight, considering how she normally keeps things orderly.

The covers of the books read *Black Creatures*, *Fruits of the Devil*, *Evolution and History*. There’s also the book of recorded demon sightings, the last month’s updates to which we copy and give to the knight order every month.

“The captain told me that demon was after your ice powers. They really don’t know when to give up... I dug up whatever I could get my hands on and did some research, and only a dream demon fit the description.” She brings a hand to her cheek, a grim look in her eye.

Oh yeah, Rockmann did say he had the director look into this.

“Hold on, I’m going to contact the order using the Morgue Mirror.”

With that, she extends her hand towards a wardrobe standing beside a bookshelf and speaks an incantation. The wardrobe’s double doors open, and an elliptical mirror comes into view. Its silver rim is finely decorated and engraved with writing.

This is my first time seeing the real thing. It floats up and turns on its axis three times before slowly landing on the floor. After the director extends her

hand again and speaks another incantation, its surface sways like ripples on water, then shows the knight commander.

Morgue Mirrors are special mirrors serving as a means of remote communication, created in ancient times. The other party can be anywhere in the world, so long as they have another such mirror. They're extraordinarily rare and extremely valuable.

At present, there're five in the kingdom: one in Shuzelk, the king's castle; one in the knight order; one at Harré; and the remaining two are held by House Bunachiel and House Mozfalt each—two of the Three Great Houses.

"So she's back at Harré. The rest got here a short while earlier," says the knight commander.

Behind him stand my friends. Benjamine and Nikeh do a little wave at me, and I wave back. There's Prince Zenon and Satanás too.

"Once we've run a complete medical check-up on Count Drenman's daughter, we'll thoroughly investigate her. Some of my men are already interrogating the demon. We'll figure out what to do with Alois afterwards. It's a debacle, with the court magician laid up like that..."

"You're right about that," replies the director with a humorless smile.

Having a powerful magician in your country is a strong deterrent to the neighboring states. Take Bolizree from Vestanu, for example. If, for example, word got out that he collapsed, there'd be no end of rival nations and individual schemers who'd jump on the opportunity. If, on the other hand, he's known to be well, nobody would dare try anything.

In Doran we have the director, who was chosen as one of the top one hundred magicians, but it's not so much about her magical powers as it is about her skilfull management of a sorcerers' guild at a young age. That talent of hers is what people give her credit for, and not really her skill as a mage. Plus, I hear she played a part in stopping the Black Pegasi Slayer, and people recognize her intelligence as a result.

Still, if we're talking powerful magicians, the director doesn't fit that mold. In fact, for ten years we didn't have anyone in Doran who could become such a

deterrent for evildoers, which was why, until recently, Orcinus kept meddling in our affairs and we were a little short-handed in defending our borders.

As incredibly vexing as it is to admit, it was none other than Alois Rockmann who would show sufficient prowess. I'll keep saying it as many times as I have to: it frustrates me to no end that it's him, of all people.

Soon after he became court magician, he got attacked by agents of Orcinus. It left him badly wounded for a time, but the incident ended up demonstrating his powers to foreign nations (according to Nikeh), and it earned him a *killer* rep. So if people were to find out he's currently out of commission, some might try to take advantage of it.

At this point it doesn't matter how much his success frustrates me or how "he's all the way up there and I'm stuck down here." Also, it's not like I want to be a powerful magician. At the end of the day, I just want to be a wonderful receptionist like the director. I'd be barking up the wrong tree if I tried to compete with Rockmann in magical prowess.

Anyway, point is, we're in a tight spot.

"As for the Time Keeper, we'll decide what to do with him later. Zenon tells me that doll's made of demonite, however. I hear these stones are the source of demons. Would you happen to know anything about this?"

"Demonite...?" replies the director. "That's the first I've heard of it. Is it true?"

"Yes. According to the Time Keeper, the black gemstone embedded in this dagger is another specimen."

On the other side of the mirror, the knight commander shows us the dagger we got from the duchess. It's a beautiful weapon with seven differently-colored gemstones in its haft.

The director and I fix our gazes on the black gemstone. So that's demonite... It just looks like a gorgeous, lustrous, jet-black gemstone. Its deep blackness, however, reminds me of something—Rockmann's new hair color.

It's always been a mystery how demons appear around the world. Dr. Aristo tried to research it, and he got consumed by a demon instead. He's currently in prison.

A conviction forms in my mind. Uncertain and vague as it is, I decide to tell the director and knight commander about it.

“Hey, um...”

“Nanalie?” asks the director.

“What is it?” adds the knight commander.

I recall the fight with Städal.

“I’ve spoken with an ice mage from the distant past inside my mind, probably the one known as the Ice Ancient. That was during our fight with Städal.”

“You spoke with the Ice Ancient?” asks the knight commander.

He and everyone else on the other side of the mirror sound highly surprised. I had my doubts at the time, but I’m confident it was the Ice Ancient talking to me.

“You did?” adds the director, blinking and wrinkling up her eyebrows. “Though I suppose it’s not so surprising, given your powers.” She looks ready to hear me out.

“She told me a story that bears a strong resemblance to the account in Genesis. In it, Städal was frozen and shattered into fragments that scattered across the land and germinated into demons. I think this demonite is none other than Städal’s scattered fragments. And the fragments of the Städal I froze and shattered, they should similarly be...”

The room goes silent for a moment as everyone has their breath taken away.

“Städal, demons, demonite...” mumbles the knight commander, turning to the Time Keeper in Benjamine’s arms.

Everyone here probably had the same thought.

This is all wholly new information. Where do we even start if we want to figure out a way to exorcize demons *before* they’re born?

The thought we’re all presumably entertaining is that this demonite stuff is a massive opportunity lying beneath all of our feet.

A few days later, an official notice of “demonite gathering” is sent out across

Doran and the whole continent. Thus, the age of demon-slaying comes to the cusp of an age of demonite excavation.

Tale VII

“Miss Hel, what’s this ‘demonite’ like?” asks a sorcerer, quizzically tilting his head and pointing at a piece of paper.

“They’re black stones that come in all shapes and sizes. We’ll take the stones you bring to an appraiser to determine whether they’re demonite or not. Your reward scales with the number of genuine samples you bring, so this assignment isn’t as efficient as the rest. Still, we’ll accept these stones at any time, so you might as well be doing other assignments and, should you come upon any demonite in the process, please let us know.”

“Huh. Gotcha. All right, I’ll take the pest control one for today.” He takes the assignment paper and walks out the guild, looking gallant.

“Good luck, sir!” I wave at his back.

My ordinary days are back. It’s been a month since the whole thing with the Time Keeper. After my conversation with the director and the knight commander, we brought the king into the loop about the demonite situation, and he decided it wouldn’t be wise to search for it in Doran alone. Thus, demonite became well-known not only to our neighboring states, but the rest of the continent as well. The king’s reasoning was straightforward—why act in secret and risk the word getting out, creating distrust and stoking the flames of war, when we can bring everyone in to make a coordinated effort out of the demonite rush?

We also have to keep in mind the fact that Dr. Aristo was helping Städal. Doran’s obliged to do everything in its power to avoid further tarnishing its rep with other states.

Furthermore, it’s not like demonite is only found in the Kingdom of Doran. Städal’s fragments must be scattered across the whole world, and there’s only so much territory a single country can search.

There’s still not a lot we know about demonite. I’m visiting the knight order to be “interrogated” every five days to help with the investigation. That time we

talked through the mirror was the first time I ever mentioned speaking with the Ice Ancient, and the knights have been summoning me ever since; I've been more than happy to divulge. They keep asking me why I didn't tell them earlier. It's not like I knew about demonite before, so I simply didn't think it was so important that I'd talked to an ancient.

Publicly, the state's treating demonite like an illicit substance—dangerous to use, illegal to possess. Not that I'd expect any ordinary person to want something that can spawn demons—at least, not wittingly. Not handing them in to the kingdom has been made a punishable offence, just in case.

We've kept a tight lid on the truth of the stones' power; it's the one detail we'd rather the masses not know.

"'Sup, Nanalie. You got any work that pays about this much?"

"I do. Just a moment, please."

The young male sorcerer holds up three fingers and has a bashful smile on his face. I'm assuming he means three hundred pegalo. I get up from my seat and take two, no, three assignments from the box that fit the bill.

"There's this, this, and..."

Treyse was put on house arrest for a year and has been banned from attending any events—everything from house parties on up, or so Nikeh put it the other day. According to the medical checkup, she was found completely healthy. That was a relief to hear. Apparently it's still not clear if her lifespan's shrunk, but they're planning to send her to an institution that can examine her more thoroughly.

I've heard her memory's been fuzzy since she ended up in custody, and she doesn't remember much from before she went to Rockmann's place. Also, apparently it wasn't Treyse but *Rockmann himself* who stuck that dagger in his chest; the docs are saying it might've traumatized her.

"How about this one?"

For buying the Time Keeper on the black market, Count Drenman has been forbidden from visiting the castle for the same period as Treyse's house arrest.

“Can I really take this? I’m only an associate.”

“You’re an expert already. You ranked up the other day, remember?”

Though the truth remains unclear, the count insists the demon had possessed him as well and made him do it.

“What?! Oh, you’re right.”

As for Rockmann, apparently his looks were completely back to normal the following day. Nikeh came to tell me as fast as she possibly could. According to her, he can use magic without any issue. He recovered so fast that I feel stupid for ever worrying. It really was temporary like he said.

However, the demon-like powers coursing through his veins remain the same. Nikeh asked him if it had any impact on his magic, and he said he couldn’t really tell. It would seem the demon still refuses to talk, so we’re not making any progress on that front.

The fact Rockmann is both back to normal and not leaves me with a slightly hazy feeling. I’m almost angry—like, what if he had lost his powers permanently? I’m not a fan of that kind of noble sacrifice. Though I imagine I might’ve done the same thing in his shoes, so it’s hard to actually get mad at him.

While I don’t think I have any right to scold him, if I were his mother, Duchess Norweira, I’d probably shout “you need to value your life!” or something.

“Nanalie. Today’s take.”

“I got it.”

Once things quiet down and the row of sorcerers in front of my counter finally clears, Zozo hands me a large gunny sack. Rolling around inside is a bunch of possible demonite samples brought in by our clients. One of my new duties is carrying these stones to an appraiser. I’m the only one who can do this, and the location of the appraiser is kept secret from everyone else. The director has threatened to immediately fire me if I tell anyone; obviously for that reason alone I would never do such a thing.

“You can go straight to the order after you’re done delivering this. Man,

there's no way I could go through with helping along the investigation if I were you!" She waves her hand, looking annoyed by the thought of it, which prompts a smile from me.

Today I have to go to my regular interrogation—or rather, I'm going to help with the investigation. I lift the heavy sack and head to the backyard. If this were getting in the way of my job, I'd rather not keep going to the order, but it only takes half a day and they try to summon me on my days off, so it's not a problem for me yet.

"Ah, Miss Nanalie! How about we go drinking today?" calls out Cheena, resting on the bench in the backyard, once she sees me walking with the gunny sack. Her adorable, slightly unruly bangs leap up.

"You mean it? Sure, by all means!"

Cheena folds her hands behind her back and starts fidgeting.

"There's a new place in front of the 'Vegetarian Wolf.' I was hoping to check it out."

"Well... I just hope the usual hostess doesn't get angry at us."

"You mean like 'You've cheated on me with a different café!'?"

"Heh heh, that does sound like her."

I softly bring a hand to my chest; Cheena's spirit always soothes my soul. It's like her innocence soaks up all my fatigue, or at least that's how it feels. Given how I've recently had to stare back at some brazen faces in the order during questioning, I appreciate the assist. Otherwise it would be just like Zozo said.

"Well, I'll be going," I tell Cheena.

"Okay! Be careful on your way!"

I summon Lala and get on her back, then cast the Coat of Many Colors to make myself invisible and soar into the sky. The cold wind whipping at me in the upper air suggests the season's about due to change.

***

The appraiser's location changes with every visit. Only Prince Zenon knows of

it, and he notifies me remotely on the morning of each dropoff.

Today it's in the forest to the east. I circle around it from above, then have Lala land near the designated house. It's a lovely little building with a red roof, sitting in a clearing all alone. The entrance is adorned with colorful flowers growing nearby, and butterflies fly around, seeking the flowers' nectar.

One of these days I'll ditch the dorms and trade up to a sublime little cottage like this one.

Lala shrinks to a small size and climbs on my shoulder.

"Is anybody home?"

Still holding the sack, I ring the green bell by the entrance door. It makes a cute little sound. After a few seconds, I hear footsteps from inside approaching the door. Then comes the metallic sound of the door unlocking, and it finally opens.

"Nanalie! Welcome."

Greeting me with a smile and fluttering hair is my friend Benjamine. The sweet smell of burnt sugar enters my nostrils—was she making sweets?

The appraiser lives here. Benjamine, however, is not him.

"You're late. Could you not hustle a little?"

"Oh, shut up." I look down.

Standing there, by Benjamine's feet, is a small wax doll, looking all high and mighty like he's a big shot now. The gnome pokes at my toes, as if to say, "Go on, give me what's in that bag."

"Please, come in," says Benjamine. "The Elder couldn't wait for you to get here! Heh heh. People call him an appraiser now, hmm?"

The gnome sticks his nose up, looking smug.

That's right—the appraiser is none other than the Time Keeper. When Director Locktiss and I talked to the knight commander across the Morgue Mirror, he said they were planning to dispose of it, but Benjamine brought up the fact that only he can recognize demonite—without him, we wouldn't even

know such a thing existed in the first place. Thus, he has just barely avoided destruction, at least until the blessed day comes when someone can give a stone like the one we found embedded in the dagger a proper once-over and make the right call.

The geezer's still all over Benjamine. Her having saved his life might have something to do with it now too.

Apparently you can't use exorcism magic on demonite before a demon spawns from it, so judging them by appearance alone is difficult. And crushing one with a hammer wouldn't help—it would just turn one piece of demonite into two, and two into ten. It's terrifying how they can spawn demons regardless of how small the stones become.

After the Time Keeper appraises all the potential demonite gathered from around the continent, they get sent to Vestanu. I hear some nations were against sending (what might be) large quantities of demonite to Doran at first, but other than the incident with Dr. Aristo, the Kingdom of Doran has always had good ties with other countries.

The fact Doran didn't hide the existence of the Time Keeper and what we've learned about demonite also earned us some brownie points. We're trustworthy enough that so far nobody on the geopolitical scene seems worried about us keeping the damn gnome around, all thanks to the continued efforts of our foreign minister, as well as the second prince and our diplomats. According to Prince Zenon, he's never felt the importance of diplomacy to this extent before.

We also know that beyond the continent there's a place populated only by demons, and before long there's going to be a joint operation on the part of the whole international community to pay a little exploratory demon-slaying visit, according to the morning paper. The headline was "Heroes of the Continent."

The kings considered gathering demonite and using it to round up all newborn demons and slay them then and there, but so far there's no change in the demons' spawn rate. Also, some demons are evolving, and those have to be dealt with too. It will probably be years before we see a reduction in demon numbers.

“’Tis no demonite. Neither is this. Or this. Or this... Agh, is there not a single one...?”

Almost as soon as I came here the Time Keeper started checking the contents of the sack in his little station in the corner of the dining room. He grabs those stones with his hard, tiny hands, holds them up to a candle, and throws the junk off to the side, one after another.

I’m crouched beside him, watching him work. It’s been about an hour since I arrived. Benjamine made me tea earlier, but I’ve already finished it. She’s doing laundry in the garden.

Frankly, I have nothing to do. I’m not to bring anything extra with me, so, with the exception of the Cudgel of the Goddess, I’ve left all my personal belongings at work.

“Miss Nanalie, you’re sweating,” says Lala in her shrunk form.

“I guess it’s the difference in air temperature between ground level and high above.”

“Raise your bangs, please.”

“Like this?”

I do as she says, and she brings her bushy tail to my forehead. *Flap, flap.* I guess she’s wiping my sweat? Her cold tail feels nice.

“Ah, thanks for that...”

I bring my hand to her head as she sits on my shoulder and rub my cheek against her. Her adorable whining is another powerful source of therapy for me, especially with these demon troubles coming one after another.

The Time Keeper is here because the kingdom has personally entrusted Benjamine and Satanás with keeping watch over him. From what I hear, they planned to keep him at the castle or the order, but then they decided it was extremely dangerous to keep him in one place. And so, they roped in those two to help out, since they were already familiar with him.

In return, the kingdom’s rewarded them with this house. It’s thoroughly warded. A hundred plots of land have been cleared specifically for it, and it

teleports around them every day to stay elusive. Basically, today it's in the east, but it might be in the south or the north tomorrow. Some foreign states have also provided plots for it, and so sometimes it ends up in Vestanu, Welwedi, Sheera, Seleina, or someplace else. It's also a perfect opportunity to make use of Rockmann's creation, the "Device for Direct Address of His Highness" (even though the prince told Satanás never to use it again).

Apparently it's not really inconvenient for them to end up in other countries, because they get paid in enough local currency to be able to go about their daily lives.

Things will likely stay this way for a fair while, but word is that there are efforts to line up a single location secure enough to allow ongoing close observation of the Time Keeper. Considering how all this restricts Benjamine and Satanás's lives, the kingdom doesn't intend to have them watch over it forever. As far as I know, Doran is hoping to have a suitable environment for the containment of the gnome ready in half a year at the earliest.

You might ask, "why not just keep him at the order or in Shuzelk?" Thing is, the Time Keeper is knowledgeable about demonite. Doran is a relatively peaceful country, but the closer he's kept to any corridor of power, the more likely it is that his own abilities will be abused. Besides, although the Time Keeper can move his hands, he can't walk on his own, so someone could just carry him out and everything would be over.

The people whom the kingdom places absolute trust in are busy with other work, suffice it to say. And so, the choice fell on Benjamine and Satanás, as they have the trust of a member of the royal family (Prince Zenon) and can move freely. The fact that they'd put their lives on the line to protect people during the battle with Städal has probably made them extra trustworthy.

"Is there not one...?"

The tip of the Time Keeper's pointy hat droops. Looks like he hasn't found any demonite in this batch yet.

I still have no idea how he can tell what's demonite and what's not. I stare closely at him every time he does this and it just keeps eluding me.

I bring him a lot of stones every time, and usually there's only one piece of

demonite in the whole batch—sometimes none at all.

“Oh? Ooh! There it is! Hey, if you’ve nothing to do, why don’t you come and learn how to tell the difference at least a little?” He throws my way what he claims to be a real sample.

“Hey, be careful with these!” I exclaim.

“Nobody’s coming out of that one yet. ‘Tis but a stone. Unless you know what you’re doing, that is. No need to panic, you fool.”

I don’t reply. “Fool” was uncalled for.

The Time Keeper returns to checking the stones I’ve brought. In the meantime, I pick up the piece he’s thrown me.

“I just can’t tell...”

I move a candle from the table onto the floor, rub twigs together to make fire, and use it to light the candle. First I inspect the stone by rolling it in my palm; then I bring it to the candlelight and check again.

“Hmm...”

It’s kind of closer to glass compared to a regular black stone... Its surface is kinda lustrous, like it’s a gemstone. I feel like there’s a lot of stones like this around, though.

I pick up a regular black stone that the Time Keeper has thrown away, as well as the one that glitters like a gemstone, and bring them to the light to compare the two, pinching the stones with my fingers and rotating them to check from every angle.

“Hmmm...”

But I still can’t tell the difference.

***

“I suppose that’s it for today,” says the Time Keeper amid a big pile of stones and scraps of paper, rubbing his lower back and rolling his shoulders. There’s a tag attached to every stone I bring, stating who found it and where.

“Found by Rein Cascade, huh. He’s a sorcerer, so getting in touch with him

should be simple.”

After checking the tag, I stow the stone. I’ll need to take this to the knights’ dorms on the Royal Isle next.

“Oh, you’re done?” asks Benjamine, poking her head out from the kitchen as I put on my coat and prepare to head to the castle.

She comes my way, wiping her hands on the frilly waist apron she supposedly got from Cambell.

“It sure is hard to find them...” she remarks.

“Yeah...”

“If you have time, how about stopping here for dinner? Naru said he’s working late today...”

I happily clap my hands without a trace of reserve. It will probably be about ten days before I come here next.

To collect stones gathered in other countries, lightning-type knights from our kingdom’s order head over there in person, report to the prince upon their return and learn of the house’s location, and then finally come here. It’s pretty complicated. However, this primitive arrangement is the best we have at the moment. And there are dozens of countries, so the knights must have it rough flying around them all.

Hoping to lighten their burden in whatever way we can, Harré has become their point of contact with stone collectors here in the Kingdom of Doran. My job would’ve been the Director’s, but she’s busy and I didn’t have a fixed post anyway.

The prince must be busy too, telepathically issuing orders from morning till noon and fulfilling all his other duties. Having extra work must be tough on him.

Someone else will bring stones here tomorrow. All I can hope for is that one day this gets organized better.

“Dinner won’t be ready until late, so you can take your time. Elder, would you mind washing the potatoes for me?”

“You’ve got it.”

Looks like Benjamine knows how to handle this gnome.

Interlude

I like listening to people's stories. Especially when the principal gave his occasional speeches in the great hall back in school. He would speak about food, about flowers blooming in the garden, about stories from his childhood, about how Mr. Bevrio and Ms. Prisca seemed to getting along pretty well in the staff room... The other students looked bored, and some even slept during the speeches (although everyone paid attention when he talked about the two teachers), but I always listened with interest.

I also like talking to people. What I don't like, however, is being told and asked the same things as before. It irritates me.

And it would be fine if they kept asking me things they didn't know, but I can't stand it when they ask things they know full well, over and over.

In case you're wondering what I'm talking about all of a sudden...

"This is important, so I need you to think very hard about this."

I'm in a spacious room in Castle Shuzelk, one assigned to a royal magician. Around me are milk-white walls, a large painting, and silver-colored furnishings. Forced to sit on a leather-covered sofa and with no opportunity to close my eyes and enjoy the gentle breeze coming through the small window even for a moment, I maintain a grim expression all the way through. Through the window, the sun hangs low in the sky.

I cross my legs and fold my arms, tapping at my upper arm with my index finger. Anyone should be able to tell at a glance I'm not exactly having fun here.

Meanwhile, this blond man with a black writing brush in hand places his notes on the table, sits on the sofa across from me, and similarly crosses his legs. Unlike knight uniforms, his is deep blue. Maybe it's a special uniform for royal magicians. His braided hair hangs down to his knees. As usual, he's wearing glasses.

By the door behind him stands a young man, another royal magician, looking uncomfortable with the mood in this room.

“You won’t get anything by grilling me any further,” I say.

It’s been the same old questions for some time now. What is he hoping to get from me this way? It’s a waste of time—a total sham.

I swell my cheeks as hard as I can, and make my complaint to the man in front of me.

“You should be grateful His Majesty himself, or his chief vassals, aren’t interrogating you in person. We could be digging around in your brain here. It’s your fault for saying too much in front of the wrong people, you know.”

“My...fault?!”

I spring up from the sofa. The red eyes in front of me track my ascent, and I glare back.

“Things haven’t been going great for you, am I right? You still haven’t done anything about that demon’s magic, have you?”

I pound on the table over and over in protest. However, all I get in return is an icy stare.

What a jerk. No human with a heart can have eyes like that. He—Rockmann—re-crosses his legs the other way and gives me a rude stare, making my clenched fists tremble. I have to say, it’s been a while since I was last infuriated enough to feel like grabbing that long, shiny hair of his, shaking it around, and pitching him out of the nearest window like trash.

I calm down just a little. It looks like affection is not what I’m feeling towards him here.

Here I am, stuck in this room in Shuzelk, forced to give the same old song and dance about demons and ancients. I do feel bad about what I’ve done, you know? I said too much—yes, *too much*—back then, and talked about my conversation with the Ice Ancient, which prompted the kingdom to question why I didn’t mention it as soon as I woke up from my month-long sleep. Hence the interrogations.

Still, there’s only so much I know. I can’t give them information I don’t have.

Instead of grilling me like this, they could just use the kind of magic that would make it clear whether I'm telling a lie or holding anything back from them. I feel like my head's going to boil from all this repetitive questioning.

"Well, how would I know?" Rockmann gives a scornful laugh, pointing his palms upwards.

"Kgh..."

This bastard... How long is he going to play stupid with me? Shouldn't we be interrogating *him*?

I hear the dream demon's still clammed up. Just how long can they keep torturing the bastard before he starts talking or dies, anyway?

"Look, all I know is the fragments got scattered. That's it." My vocabulary's been worn down to a nub looking for ways to restate the same ideas.

Rockmann, the chief royal magician, is something of a head interrogator on my case. We've been having this exchange for a month now, and it's always the same.

When the knight commander stopped by the other day, I asked if someone else could interrogate me instead, but he insisted that only Rockmann is suitable for this, so that's out of the question.

There are layers of spells cast on this room. I can tell. Guess this is why it has to be Rockmann (for defense and such). I heave one heavy sigh after another at being stuck with him.

"Also, what was it? You said Städal fell in love with the Ice Ancient?" asks Rockmann in a flat tone, resting his chin on his hand while propping his arm on his lap.

I've already told him most of what I know. Even what I heard from the Ice Ancient—we just talked about it the other day.

"Yeah! And then he got angry and started doing bad things, and ended up the way he did."

"So, what else was there?" he asks with a disrespectful smile, despite my desperate, gesture-aided efforts to explain.

“I keep telling you there’s nothing else!”

As I groan and scratch my hair with both hands, my forelocks get messier by the minute.

***

All these fruitless exchanges have taken place here, in this resplendent castle. The glitter of the chandelier on the ceiling feels so hollow now. This all went exactly the same five days ago.

I’m sure that magician by the door is wondering when this is going to stop already. If so, I wish he’d voice those thoughts, because I want to be done with this too.

At this point I have to wonder if Rockmann isn’t doing this just to publicly harass me.

Concerned that those events in the past might be having at least some effect on our present, I once dropped by the school together with Satanás and Benjamine to check, and found that there was no record kept of us ever working as assistant teachers there. The principal’s daily reports from the day of the entrance ceremony and the following several days only mentioned three students getting bitten by a prycle on the day after the ceremony, and how the principal got scolded by the vice-principal for it. That’s it.

Those three students were Rockmann, Treyse, and me.

You *could* say the future has changed to an extent, but the powers of the Time Keeper have kept the changes minimal. I regret worrying so much about something so trifling, now that I’m getting picked on like this.

I pout. In the first place, what’s up with stabbing your own chest, anyway? The duchess should chew him out real harsh for that one. I mention it to Rockmann, trying to shift the conversation away from hounding me.

“That again?” He holds his forehead. “Would you stop changing the subject? Sigh... This isn’t going anywhere... Cammel, can you get us some tea?”

The man behind Rockmann leaves the room.

“The questioning stops today, for the time being. With that in mind, try to

recall your conversation with her again.”

“Your ‘questioning’ turned into something else a long time ago in my mind,” I reply.

As the door clinks open, the magician returns with tea, which he places on the table without a word.

“She just won’t stop quibbling, yeah?” asks Rockmann his subordinate.

“I-If you say so, sir...”

“Who’s the one quibbling here?” I mutter and reach out for my cup.

Still, if this really is the last time, I guess I can try to recall what the Ice Ancient said to me once more. First she told me she’s one of the ancients. Then she showed me how Städal was born. Finally, she told me how one shouldn’t create life. I’ve already reported all of this. Rockmann said I don’t have to bring up the spirit of Ice previously being deep underwater in the Land of the Sea, as that has to do with my mother, so we’re setting that aside for now.

I told him on the very first day how exactly Städal was born, so that leaves...

“But after one thousand years, that curse...”

I gasp, then stop leaning on the sofa and straighten my back.

“Oh yeah.”

“Did you remember something?” asks Rockmann, sipping his tea.

I take a sip myself, then tell him something I completely forgot about.

“She told me that, due to Städal’s curse, no child can be born of a union of fire and ice types.”

Rockmann does a glorious spit-take. He coughs over and over as he wipes his mouth.

“You okay?” I ask him.

I feel like I saw a rainbow in his sprayed tea.

He furrows his eyebrows and looks to be in pain, but raises his hand and replies, “I’m okay.” Perhaps to cleanse his palate, he sips his tea again, holding his chest.

It’s pretty embarrassing to remember something after I insisted for so long that I’d told him everything. I quietly apologize.

Collecting myself, I continue.

“But it looks like the curse is lifted, so she said fire and ice types should get along and it’ll be fine.”

“Pffft!”

Another spit-take. A bigger one this time.

Rockmann pounds on his chest and furrows his eyebrows. Is he really okay? I look at him with worry, concerned he might be ill.

Maybe the demon’s magic has made him unable to drink tea? Or he got a throat sickness after strangling himself in the past? Could any of that be causing this?

I insist as much, but he shakes his head in denial. Then what is it...?

“So, uhh, that might be partially why there’s so few ice types? Because they have a harder time leaving offspring.”

“Ah... Yeah.” He coughs some more and gets up. “I’m fine now, thanks.” Cammel rubs him on the back. “Looks like there’s really nothing else, so I won’t ask anymore.”

“Um, you sure? I just remembered that, so I might remember something else.”

“I don’t think there’s anything left.”

What’s come over him now, after all the persistent questioning? This is kind of anticlimactic.

Rockmann looks strangely tired.

“What’s with you...?” I mumble as I leave the room.

A knight in a white uniform tells me he’ll take me downstairs, so I follow his

back.

I stop by Benjamine's house on my way back. She asks how things went today, I answer, and she does a spit take with her tea just like Rockmann. This is my third time seeing one today. I start genuinely worrying she might be affected by a demon or something too, but she flicks my forehead and calls me an idiot. Ouch.

After Benjamine explains what was so weird about what I said, I realize for the first time how outrageous it was, and plop my head down on the table without a word.

***

Lying down on the floor, I draw circles on yellowed paper, throw it away, and repeat the same process. I feel like I'm really getting a method down to muscle memory here. In fact, I'm pretty sure I could draw a more beautiful circle than your average artist—on my first try—if I was suddenly ordered to draw one.

"I'm thirsty..."

Still, at this rate this room might end up completely buried in trash.

I take a sidelong glance at the disaster on the floor. I do feel like I need to do something about this, but I always end up procrastinating when there's a big project right in front of me demanding my attention, so it remains just a thought in my head. If my mother saw me like this, she would no doubt give me a good spanking.

I hear the pot with beans stewing in it start to boil. I set it as soon as I woke up this morning. It needs to stew for a while, so I'll let it be for now. As it bubbles away while I focus on writing and drawing on paper, I hear a light tapping on the window. It's a cute little sound. I get up, yawning due to all the noise this morning, approach the window, then unlock it and open it wide.

A cold breeze brushes past my cheek and nips at my nose. Casting my eyes down, I find a little white bird on the windowsill, vacantly looking up at me. As its cute round eyes stare blankly at me, I stare back. This little bird has been getting my attention on my days off—perhaps intentionally—getting me to

open the window and staring at me like it wants something.

That's right—this isn't the first time. It's come here before, not long ago. I'm pretty sure it knows what it's doing. It must think I'll give it something to eat if it stares at me like that.

"Chirp... Crunch... Munch..."

Before I know it, it's eating beans from my palm. They vanish in an instant. Once it's done eating, it flies away as if its business here is concluded, leaving a white feather on the windowsill in its wake. What a callous bird.

I get away from the window, another yawn escaping my lips. It's been quite a while since I woke up, but I don't really feel awake yet. I splash some of the dorm's well water on my face in the washbasin. Natural water really does a better job at waking you up than the conjured stuff. Maris has been expressing concern about skin-care in her letters—I should suggest using natural water next time.

"How goes your work on magic circles?" As I stand absent-minded after washing my face, Lala takes the scattered papers in her mouth and puts them in one place for me.

"I think I've almost got it... Meat, that is."

Shaking the moisture off my hands and rolling up my sleeves, I hold the brush once more. It's been four years since I took it upon myself to create meat, and I still haven't given up.

"Ah, Miss Nanalie! Your beans, they're boiling over!"

"Ahhh! My beans!"

I completely forgot. Hurrying to turn off the heat, I pick up the light-brown beans that ended up falling on the floor. My beans...

In the course of my experimentation, I started to wonder if I could make meat with something as a base if I can't just use a magic circle for it, and I came up with the idea of using beans. I've experimented on countless things before: dried meat, coilmarp, eggs, fruit, gourds... Nothing has ever come as close to meat as these tiny beans.

I've been spending my days off trying to turn their proteins into meat, devoting myself to drawing magic circles. I write the incantation of the fire-kindling spell, "Cluizel," within the circle, then surround it with small magic circles that will break up the beans' structure. Next, I surround it all with another circle. In it, I write the hieroglyphs of a common wind spell, one not exclusive to wind types. I add equations of addition and subtraction in between. This is essential—it determines the percentage to which the components of beans will separate or attach, regulating the degree of magic applied in the spell. But it's pretty difficult.

Stumped by my calculations, I press my face against Lala's belly.

"You're so fluffy..."

"M-Miss Nanalie..."

"How soft..."

I take deep breaths into the sea of comfy white hair.

"I'm thirsty... Guess I'll go drink some water."

Another day, another failure.



***

“Ohh...” I groan as I sit on my bed after opening the book I’ve borrowed from Harré’s archives.

God, I groan like an old woman. I give my hips a disciplinary smack. I better shape up and work on myself a little.

“’Nothing can oppose the flow of time,’ it says. I know that much...”

Flipping through a book concerning temporal mechanics, I forget about working on myself and lay my head on my pillow. Recently, I’ve been really digging into the study of time itself whenever I have a spare moment.

It’s a pretty opaque subject when you think about it. Who decides what constitutes time? What is the flow of time? How closely intertwined is time’s passage and the way living things age? Can you undo past events? I’ve taken the whole subject for granted in my daily life, never asking questions like those before.

On a bedside table lies another book—“The Seven Wonders of Demons.” It’s one of Dr. Aristo Pyguri’s manuscripts.

“I wonder how he’s doing...” I utter, gazing at the ceiling.

Going by what Rockmann told me during my interrogations, the royal court hasn’t formally charged him with a crime yet, and it will likely stay that way for years. Apparently the royal court is considering capital punishment, but the royalty and the clergy want to postpone the decision. Passing the final judgment requires the approval of all three of the above, so this standoff won’t end any time soon, most likely. Rockmann said he’d be glad if Dr. Aristo’s life is spared in the end, even if he isn’t allowed to walk free.

I recall my encounter with him at the masked ball, as well as that time I saw him under Städal’s control. The world has gained temporary peace, but I have my reservations about the current state of things. Peace is surprisingly complicated.

Lamenting reality not going the way I want, I pull myself together and open the book once more.

Tale VIII

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

The demon we caught the other day has finally talked—more accurately, it said it would speak *to me*.

“Hmm...”

Director Locktiss dropped in on another failed synthetic protein experiment last night to give me the news. Now why would the demon want to speak to me, and no one else?

Come morning, I arrive at the torture chambers on the Royal Isle under Castle Shuzelk. When I showed my pass to a guard at the castle gate, he asked, “You still need these passes?” He sounded incredulous. What was that about?

Anyway, here I am, in the castle dungeon. It’s probably for the best if I rein in any questions I might have about all the torture chambers ahead of time and stay focused. Though as I take a stance in front of the demon in question, I can’t help but freak out a little at the spine-chilling tools scattered about the dimly lit chamber. It’s scary to even ask what they’re used for.

It’s just me and the demon—a bilious ebon mist, bound in something like a birdcage suspended from the ceiling. The knight commander and some of his subordinates look on from outside the chamber.

The lamps hanging on the wall flicker.

“Here, take this.”

“Is this...a whip?”

Gonzales Pinyatz, one of the warden knights, hands me a black lash. I strike it against the floor to test it out, still clueless as to what I’m supposed to use it for. Is he suggesting I use it if the demon refuses to talk? Or if it attacks me? Or maybe if it tries to run? My imagination runs wild for a moment, but then I remember that I’m a mage, and a mage always has her own tools to rely on,

whatever happens.

Silence settles over the chamber.

How am I supposed to start talking to the demon? It's not exactly the mood for a "good morning" or "how are you?"

It said it would talk to me, but I've been standing here with my arms folded for about an hour now, wondering when it'll finally speak, and yet there's been nothing but silence in the air ever since I entered. It would be one thing if it was too exhausted to even speak, but I heard it hurl abuse at Mr. Pinyatz here just before I came in, so I know it's just fine.

Oh, what the hell. It's my day off, and I want my time back. Believe it or not, even I have things to do. I wanted to make more magic circles, and shop for some clothes, and I was also going to pick out flowers for that waitress from the cafe to congratulate her on her newborn baby. Yet here I am, alone with a demon in a torture chamber, supervised by knights standing outside. At this point I'm not so sure which one of us is being tortured here.

"He has absorbed my powers and temporarily lost his own," says the demon all of a sudden.

"Huh, I see... *What?*"

I'm caught off-guard; I was thinking about my meat-craft and contemplating things like "I need to get more beans..."

I ask it to repeat itself in case I heard it wrong, or it never said anything in the first place and it was only my imagination, but it clicks its tongue and clams up. What's up with this thing? Does it realize I've been waiting for it for an hour?

There's little point in getting worked up over how a demon talks to you, though, so I limit my reaction to a click of my own tongue.

"He did it all of his own accord. The contract and everything."

"So you didn't place a curse on him?"

From the demon's calm and composed voice you'd never think it was the same thing that hurled all sorts of abuse at its torturer just a while ago. It's not the abrasive manner the demon displayed when we met it in the past, either. It

feels like I'm speaking with a human being, not the cackling, roaring horror from last time.

"It's true that I set all this in motion, but the *woman* was my puppet, and the only one I chose to bear my curse. *He* absorbed that curse and changed its nature. What kind of human would do such a thing?"

"B-Beats me..."

Going by its tone, Rockmann legitimately creeps it out. They're *both* pretty uncanny, if you ask me. Still, now that it mentions Rockmann "absorbing" magic, I recall a story Prince Zenon told me once, from back when Rockmann was living apart from his parents, before he learned to keep his powers in check. Apparently, as an infant he had an instinctual compulsion to absorb his mother's magic, putting them both in danger. Maybe it's the root of his genius at spellcraft and his portfolio of novel spells; maybe it isn't. Regardless, nothing he does or knows should surprise me at this point.

"The woman fulfilled her part of the pact with me. She won't die. The man, however, will surely die young at this rate. He may have another's magic flowing through his veins, but he'll still find himself at death's door once a month."

"Once a month? You mean that wasn't the last time?"

So he'll get black hair again? I haven't heard from anyone that this happened to him again, but maybe he's hiding it—something *that* important. I bet nobody's noticing just because it's not bad enough to affect his work or daily life, but there's no way I can let it slide. During my interrogations he told me he hasn't come home to the mansion in a while, so he must be staying at the order's dorms or something. Ngh... Why do I have to worry about things like this? But then again, isn't that only natural...? I'm pretty sure Prince Zenon would get angry if he learned of this.

"Can it be cured?"

"You ice-blooded apes can purge the curse from his body the same way you purged me."

"Really? That's it?"

How suspiciously simple...

“You have a hard time treating wounds, don’t you? Be it your own or those of others.”

“Y... W... Well, yeah, b... How do you know?!”

“It’s obvious.”

Obvious? It’s true that the only type of magic that never came easily to me is healing. Even back in school, no matter how much I tried, my healing spells would come out pretty limited and it was definitely faster to have someone else heal my injuries for me. My healing instructor would scold me for fighting with Rockmann all the time despite how bad I was at patching myself up.

It’s a shortcoming I’m *woefully* aware of, but I’m not reckless enough to go sharing my weaknesses with the whole world. And yet, it saw right through me.

“Ice magic is terrifyingly effective against us, especially those of us endowed with intelligence and close to Städal. To diminish your powers, we cursed your kind with low fertility. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call it a deep-seated grudge that keeps drifting through the world even after its bearer is gone.”

The Ice Ancient said something similar. Städal placed a curse that forbade fire and ice types from having children together. I’d thought Städal was just being a jerk and finding the absolute worst possible way to cope with seeing his crush get all mushy with the Fire Ancient. This whole time it came off to me like a cheap shot, but he actually had a solid reason behind it—namely, to wipe out ice types entirely.

Wait, so... What if there are other curses barring us from all sorts of other stuff we don’t know about? Maybe I’m so bad at healing because they wanted to keep ice types from healing themselves... Hold on, is this why my clothes dispel magic? The director said I got such a uniform because I “push myself too hard,” but what if the Water of Creation was accounting for the fact I can’t heal myself well? Thank you, Harré Mooren. I bring my hands together in gratitude.

“However, your kind have an easier time purging us compared to those with other types of magic. Others may not be able to help that man, but you should be able to relieve him of his burden.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

The demon goes silent again, just like it was when I came in. Sure, I’ve heard what I needed to hear, but at this point I’m curious. I was the one who sent it here. And even though I’m an ice type, there are other ice types among knights, so why did it pick *me*, the very person who, it was fair to say, practically threw him into this cell to begin with? While I hope I don’t have to make use of this whip, I can’t shake the feeling the demon’s plotting something here.

“What is a ‘better love?’” the demon says out of the blue as I stand there wondering, causing me to blink in surprise. What’s it talking about? “What you said to me.”

Well, I guess I did. I just didn’t think *that* was what confused it, so the question threw me off a bit. Okay, “a bit” is underselling it. *This* is why it had me come over? It feels *weird* that a demon would think so hard about what I said.

“Do us all a favor and find a better love next time, okay?”

Okay, no, let’s think about this—it *feels* weird for a demon to pose a question like that, but let’s not forget that it’s *canny* and part of Städal. It might not be so weird after all. To this demon, it’s surely not such a strange thing. I should’ve known better than anyone why I said those words at the time, and yet here I am, thinking something rude.

When I embraced the young Rockmann in the past, I was thinking that if Städal ever gets to fall in love again, it should be a love like this one.

“Like... Even if the other party doesn’t feel the same way, you can be glad from the bottom of your heart that you fell in love?”

I get embarrassed halfway into the sentence and scratch my cheek as I face the demon. If only I had Benjamine teach me these things beforehand... She’d be able to say this better.

“So you’re saying what Städal felt was love?”

“Probably.”

“Interesting...”

It seems to have a much better grasp of human emotions than your average demon—makes sense, I guess, when you consider how much time it must have spent in other people’s heads. I’m sure that of all its kin, only a dream demon would be able to follow a conversation about love. I ask the demon what it knows of the subject; it says it’s seen its victims fret enough about it to have a general grasp.

“How strange that one might resent another enough to want to kill, yet long for that person at the same time,” I continue. “Did it not occur to him to curse the fire types instead? Not that I’m saying it would’ve been okay.”

“Don’t be a fool. Have you already forgotten how that woman came after the man instead of you? It’s the same thing.”

I didn’t get to bask in my superiority for long. Here I was, teaching the demon what a “better love” is, and I didn’t even realize my “student” outstrips me in its grasp of another emotion of just as great an importance. Why would you want to curse the one you love? I wonder if I could ever understand that emotion from the outside, no matter how much study I gave it. It feels kinda scary even approaching the subject.

My mind still wrapped in uncertainty, I report what I learned to Mr. Pinyatz and the knight commander and leave the castle. On my way home, I stop to look at the clear sky amidst a comfortable breeze. I have no plans to see Rockmann in the near future, but what if I come home and there’s a letter from him?

As I wonder about my reply in that situation, I suddenly remember—didn’t Rockmann offer to go somewhere together in the season of distant skies, or something like that...? Wait, what do I do about that?! Hey, hold on, is this really the time to be philosophizing with a demon?!

With the shock I got from that letter hitting me all over again, I charge towards the landing zone with a war cry, anxious to cool my hot face as quickly as I can.

“What’s with her?”

“You tell me.”

The knights I run past give me dubious looks.

Tale IX

Dragons have been selected for conservation. I read as much in this morning's newspaper.

"The yellow dragons once inhabiting the Margrell district aren't seen in Doran anymore, after all."

"I guess we should be glad it happened before they became a thing of legends."

I'm resting on a log in Harré's backyard with my coworkers, Cheena and Zozo among them. We're reading a newspaper together while snacking.

The rest area looks neat; the gardener trimmed the lawn just a short while ago. What would we do without that old man? He must've planted new flowers; there are yellow qwincas blooming in the flower bed.

I take a lap blanket lying in a messy state on a two-person bench and pull it over my shoulders.

"Now that they're considered endangered, we have to turn down dragon-related requests," I say with a steamed eddo in my mouth, pointing at the newspaper article.

Dragons are relatively harmless unless provoked, but they sometimes ravage nearby towns if they go hungry, so many countries hunt them. They're believed to be slow to breed, so their numbers have whittled down to the point where we rarely see them at all. I thought they'd simply stopped approaching human settlements, but given the news they must be really nearing extinction. How's that for a reality check?

Plus, you never know if humans will remain at the top of the food chain forever.

"Um, Miss Parasta, how did your marriage meeting go?" Cheena suddenly broaches the subject as the three of us idly sit around.

My eyes snap to Zozo. This topic is what's on everyone's minds at the

moment, and yet we haven't been able to ask her about it. Cheena, the hero of the moment, draws close to Zozo and swarms her with questions like "Was he handsome?" and "Was he a good person?" Meanwhile, Zozo's eyes look dull and sapped of life.

"Ch-Cheena..." I quietly call out to her and place a hand on her shoulder, but even before my hand reaches its destination, Zozo opens her mouth.

"There's not much to say. We said some flattery to each other and that was the end of it. It was the worst and most boring moment of my life. And I'm pretty sure it was the same for the other party."

Everyone's attempts to stop Zozo from going into that meeting the other day proved fruitless, much to her own eventual dismay.

"If I ever have to go again, I'll leave the country!" she exclaims, huffing. "I'm done with romance for the time being. You girls keep at it. Especially you, Nanalie."

"Please don't single me out like that... Cheena, you keep at it."

"Ehh, Miss Nanalie!"

The three of us sip our honey tea.

***

The recent news has led to a new posting on Harré's notice board. It's a reminder for clients that we don't accept requests for dragon scales or anything related to species selected for conservation. Following Director Locktiss's instructions, we've written several copies of it and will have them hang on various walls for a few weeks. For example, in the canteen, you'll find them on the counter and the partition walls between seats, and some will be on walls in the waiting area and at the entrance to the guild.

I walk around Harré with ten-plus copies in my arms. As I say hello to the guild's visitors, occasionally someone asks for a copy and I oblige. A sorcerer of the same age as me says he's never seen a dragon, and I reply "me neither" with an awkward smile. Young people display great curiosity about the subject, since they've never seen these creatures, but the older folks, who have, seem deeply moved by the news as they stand with open newspapers in their hands

and discuss the matter.

“It’s been so long since we last had requests to slay dragons...” says a sorcerer.

“Man, I feel so old now...” replies another one with a white beard, holding a hand against a scar on his face and looking melancholic.

Time and living things are inseparably connected, and the same goes for people’s memories.

Still, I know someone this news is going to be a problem for. As the smell of delicious roasting meat enters my nostrils, I stare at the papers in my arms, a particular client on my mind.

“Miss Hel.”

“Yes? Oh, Mr. Petros!”

As I head outside to put up one of the papers, someone calls out to me, and when I turn around, I see a doctor with a shopping bag in hand. It appears he was headed to client reception. He has an itemized form in hand.

I lead him where he needs to go. Client reception’s currently staffed by a lone newcomer, so I call out to him and sit beside him. It appears Ms. Nickee, who’s in charge of training new recruits, is off to the restroom, so I decide to, well, not exactly take on her duties, but at least help the rookie with the work until she returns.

What stands out about this boy, other than his silky chestnut hair, is his calm and relaxed manner. His name is Janus Telaroyde. Special ability—whistling. He showed it off in the backyard the other day, and let me tell you, guy’s really got talent.

“How may I help you, Mr. Petros?”

“I’ve been thinking of possible substitutes to use in my medicines, and here’s what I’ve come up with,” he says with a grave look, presenting the list I saw in his hand.

Mr. Petros used to place orders for the dragon scales he needed for heart medicine. You could still find those in dragon lairs at the Margrell district at the

time, but now, even if they're completely gone from the kingdom and have left for neighboring countries, we can't tread on their territory anymore. Not to mention the possession of dragon body parts is now outlawed.

"These other scales might not be as effective as dragon ones, but I'm thinking they could prove similar enough." According to the doctor, his heart medicine requires something extremely durable. "And so, I was thinking of merpeople scales..."

"Merpeople?!" I shout in reply, raising suspicion around me before covering my mouth and hanging my head.

With sparkling eyes, Mr. Petros places a book before me. On the cover is a mermaid with a fish lower half. I don't have to read the contents to know what this book is about. The doctor leafs through it and claims their scales should do the job, sounding much more earnest all of a sudden compared to how he was a minute ago.

Setting aside whether they'd prove a good substitute, I have to wonder how one could come to possess such scales. It's not like they're lying around like dragon scales used to, and I can't imagine you could just peel one off the merpeople's lower halves, all things considered.

The doctor says they're slightly inferior to dragon scales, but according to the book, their properties are nearly identical.

Since this would mean bringing goods in from abroad, we would also need the MCFT's approval.

"I hear they wash ashore on rare occasion," adds Mr. Petros, as if sensing my concerns. He has the book open again.

The Land of the Sea, where merpeople live, is located in an area of the ocean known as Coquille. The surface country closest to it is the Kingdom of Seleina, which we can also reach without too much trouble. It may be impossible to carry those scales directly from the Land of the Sea, but the same can't be said about taking the scales that wash up on Seleina's shores. However, since it's Seleina's territory, we would also need to head there and get their permission, separately from getting MCFT's approval.

Seleina has a place like Harré, but instead of going there, we'd need to approach their royal office—a place where people come to petition the king both directly and indirectly—to submit a written application. If you get permission there, the paperwork gets simplified, which would at least make subsequent deals with Seleina more straightforward.

Each of these steps will certainly come with a commission, as Mr. Petros is well aware.

Okay, looks like we have a course of action ready.

"Here's how this will go every time: once we have permission from Seleina and the MCFT, we'll issue a request to the sorcerers. Does that sound good?"

"With commissions, compensation for the work itself, as well as brokerage fees, I imagine it will get quite expensive."

"I think the commission fees will be at least five pegalo. That's how much Seleina's gilded butterflies are worth in transactions in Harré. Let's discuss it further before issuing the request."

"Much appreciated."

Well that settles that. Once Mr. Petros leaves, Janus and I talk out the steps to dealing with the MCFT.

"To get import permissions from the customs chief, we need to prepare an application with the director's seal on it first..."

"And then we submit it to the court, right?" he asks, raising an index finger and narrowing his eyes as he looks at me.

"Exactly! But wait, didn't they say we have to submit it to Minister Solido in Shuzelk starting this year?"

"Oh... I forgot. Sorry, I have trouble remembering things."

"You don't need to apologize, it's not like you ended up sending it to the wrong place. Save it for when you actually make a mistake."

"Miss Nanalie, do you, uh...make mistakes?"

"Well... Kind of... Maybe? I feel like I mess something up every month, and I'm

sure I've felt prepared to get fired before...” I feign ignorance.

“Wow, you make mistakes that often?”

I can't deny getting nervous about my employment here, what with last month's thing with the Time Keeper and getting chewed out by the director prior to that for running around the guild and all. I haven't told anyone how profusely I apologized to her, fearing I was going to get fired. It would be too embarrassing. I can't help but feel I'm being indulged here, but I'm probably lucky on that front, which makes me appreciate my work environment all over again.

Zozo said she's glad I didn't turn out to be as much of a workaholic as she thought. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not, but since she's glad, I suppose I should follow her lead.

“I think you're reliable.”

“Thank you very much,” replies Janus as he gets up. In his hand is an application form with his and my name.

Watching him head to the director's office, I sit at a sorcerer reception counter.

“'Sup, Hel! I gotta say, the old lady who made this request was a little eccentric. She kept trying to get me to do work on the side for her.”

“Welcome back! You said she was trying to give you other work? Without payment?”

“Yep,” replies the sorcerer, pressing his temples and looking troubled.

“That *is* a problem. I'll leave a note for my colleagues to admonish her in a roundabout way next time she comes to issue a request.”

“Could you make sure she doesn't know it was because I complained?”

“Certainly. We'll tell her indirectly. 'It seems there are more and more people like that recently'—that angle of approach.”

It's a receptionist's duty to be diplomatic with that sort of client, ridiculous as it might seem that it happens that often.

“Thanks, Hel. Love ya!”

“Your wife will scold you again.”

“Not the same, not the same!” he replies glibly, roaring with laughter on his way out.

“Say, Miss, is that request on the very left of the board still available?”

“It is. Would you like to take it on? You’ve recently ranked up from an Associate, Mr. Cody, so you can also accept the request next to it instead.”

“Oh, uh, you know me?”

“Of course. We keep records.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, though... Man, you’re kinda funny!”

I check his records and have him put his seal on the request form, then send him off. As the line in front of the counter comes to an end, I take out a leather notebook from my inside pocket. If someone gets sent on a business trip abroad to have a license issued, it could be me—with that in mind, I do some quick figuring in the notebook to estimate travel time.

The trip would take three days, and all the procedures leading to that should take about two months. Reading the small handwriting in my notebook, I notice a day circled in red—“Prince Zenon’s summons”—and shut the notebook.

The wedding of the Fourth Princess of Sheera—of course, the prince said I should attend only if I’m available. I haven’t even given a definite answer on whether I’m coming or not. Zozo said she was glad I’m not a workaholic, but here I am, looking to prioritize my work over the invitation of a prince. I’m sure people wouldn’t praise me for this.

“There’s a request from the temple,” says Zozo as I fiddle with the notebook. “Give it to Alkes once you’ve looked through it.” She places three papers on the counter and moves behind me.

As I give her a questioning look, she explains that it’s the director’s orders to check it and shoots me a wink.

“Okay. It’s rare to get requests from there, though...”

“I looked at it too, and it seemed light for a master-grade request. I guess they really want to make sure it’s carried out successfully.”

It’s only natural for demon-related requests to be of master grade, but sometimes you get masters even on requests for creating strong protective barriers around houses. Often enough, there’s clients who want something done with precision and built to last.

The temple should be able to pass the request on to the knights, which is why it’s rare for them to issue one to sorcerers at Harré.

“’Refurbish the temple’? It’s not our area of expertise, so they probably just want someone to cast a protective spell on the building,” I theorize.

“Maybe it’s cheaper than asking the order?”

Cheaper, huh. Guess the temple has its troubles too.

Tale X: Zenon’s Point of View

I’m on a luxurious passenger ship, sailing through radiant waters under a glaring sun.

“Here you go, Your Highness.”

As I endure the boat’s rocking and gaze at the endless horizon, feeling the sea breeze on my skin, a man with a white moustache that curls up at the corners calls out to me.

“Thank you.”

I bring a finger to my collar and adjust my clothing, then softly accept the bottle in his hands. The man is Sheera’s Foreign Minister. His name is Louis Vega. Seeming rather confident in this domestically-produced alcohol, he raises a glass to the sky and says with a broad smile that it’s made with the fruit of special trees growing in the mountains to the west.

I can’t exactly refuse it after he speaks of it so highly, so I put some in my mouth and roll it on my tongue. It does feel somewhat fragrant. My eldest brother would likely enjoy this taste.

As I give my honest impression, the man rubs his large belly and offers to let me bring the bottle back with me, laughing cheerfully. Then, he looks to another man standing beside me.

“Why don’t you give it a taste too, young lord?”

“I’d prefer you didn’t call me that... Please, simply call me Alois, Fodeuri, or some other name.”

Alois looks uncomfortable with the title. He straightens the collar of his blue formal outfit and shakes his head; his blond loosely-bound hair shakes with it. Before we departed, Mislina wished for him to wear it in braids—it’s still amusing to remember how much she messed with it.

“But young lord, you are a member of royalty.”

As I smile from my recollections, Vega smiles for what is no doubt a different

reason. It's looking like this will go on for a while, so I take another gulp.

Alois is used to ministers of foreign nations looking into his lineage and the status of his family, so he lightly laughs in reply. There are only so many topics royalty and titled nobility can discuss at such occasions.

"As I live a carefree life, it would be improper for me to be addressed with such a title. I've even gained the freedom to marry who I want."

Alois forestalls the man's questions, understanding where the conversation is headed. Vega was likely going to ask something to ascertain Alois's circumstances—specifically, in regards to marriage.

"That's just what I was going to ask!" replies Vega, leaning forward and looking altogether brazen despite his noble status.

Are most Sheerans this frank? It's both admirable and concerning.

"For a kingdom to let go of its handsome young genius, why, he must surely have done a great deal of good?"

"I'm not *that* young anymore."

"Perhaps the kingdom has made you pledge to remain within its borders?"

As Alois looks my way, his face seeming to signal an irritation over the minister's persistence, I bring my lips to the glass in my hand and act like I'm busy with this drink, remaining silent as I watch the two settle it between themselves.

"Do you not plan to go abroad?" asks Vega with a bright sparkle in his eye. He really doesn't know when to drop the subject.

"Abroad, you say..." Alois appears to contemplate the word.

Though it varies by country, lineage is considered more important than anything among nobility. It's the first thing they think of on the topic of leaving offspring. However, if you restrict marriage to your own country's nobility, it increases the rate of close-sibling marriages, making blood much too thick. Thus, one can marry foreigners instead. Naturally, the other party has to be of noble birth too. As long as the person is a noble and not the eldest son—the heir—they can emigrate. It's hardly rare.

Allowing blood to get too thick is considered a bigger problem than introducing foreign blood because the excess proximity leads to *kraive* being born, which must be avoided whenever possible.

Another name for kraive is “inchoates.” Such fetuses enter an abnormal state upon leaving the mother’s body—for example, crystallizing or dissolving. There’s a record of a closely-related water type and fire type conceiving a baby that then proceeded to evaporate. It’s not known what exactly causes this, but inspecting family trees has shown that this only occurs when the parents are closely related, so by now it’s a rare occurrence.

I hear Alois was suspected to be a kraive too on the day he was born.

“It’s nothing so special,” continues Alois. “I simply asked to be allowed to choose whom I want to marry.”

Despite him very obviously dodging the question and even his face showing he doesn’t want to answer, the minister presses on, saying that if Alois doesn’t have a fiancée, he should consider this and that Sheeran woman, naming marquis and count houses at length.

It’s an ordinary conversation in high society, but having it right in front of me feels like he’s telling me in a roundabout way to settle down with someone already. I know it’s just me being paranoid, but those glances the minister keeps shooting my way tempt me to tell him to stop. I get enough nagging from the chancellors and ministers back home.

“Then how about my daughter? No lady would surpass her in looks. With the exception of today’s star, Princess Carolla, of course,” utters Vega and casts his eyes to the bride at the center of the ship, who stands dressed in pure white.

Alois and I gaze upon her too. She’s the woman of the day. With a smile on his face as though he’s looking at something dazzling, Alois nods to the Sheeran minister’s words.

“Certainly,” he adds.

It’s the year 3669 by Arland’s Reckoning. Today, the wedding of the fourth princess of Sheera is being held aboard the *Seyre Willic*, a ship bound for Coquille. Representatives of all nations, regardless of distance, have come here

for what is the first joyous ceremony since the end of the continent's peril. We seek to both express gratitude and make a courtesy call to the Land of the Sea by sailing across their waters, just as much as it's supposed to be a royal celebration.

The official wedding was held yesterday in Sheera with the blessings of its people, so the ceremony here on the ship is an informal one. No kings are present on the ship, and instead it's mostly those who didn't attend in Sheera—the people who will take it upon themselves to create our future generations, including the various princes and princesses. There's also chancellors and foreign ministers here.

Not only are we here to attend Carolla's wedding, but we're also hoping to establish contact with the lord of the sea, King Celestial, who has yet to show himself. The only country capable of contacting him is Seleina, which has acted as an intermediary between Sheera and the Land of the Sea and has secured a face-to-face meeting on the surface of the sea tomorrow at noon.

"I can't wait for tomorrow... Some of us have such trouble waiting that they go sleeping in barrels, such as my chancellor."

"There's really nothing to do, is there?"

"I think he'll wake up before tonight's party, at least."

Since that day isn't upon us yet, we spend our time as we please. It may be a luxurious ship, but it's still a ship. The tight quarters are frustrating many, and more and more people keep retreating to the so-called "barrel rooms" to rest. On the outside, they look like small, ordinary wine barrels, but once you set foot inside, you find yourself in a spacious room. It's a handy artifact for voyages.

Mislina, who's also here, enters one of the many barrels under the sail once the ceremonies are over.

"I'm sorry, Alois."

He looks confused by my apology.

"I know you held out hope until the last moment."

"What last moment? What might you talking about?" butts in Vega.

Alois faces the minister, looking like he neither has any idea nor cares what I'm talking about.

I invited Nanalie as his companion for this day, but she rejected the offer in a letter two months ago. It wasn't really true that Alois needed a companion. Normally he would've been just fine on his own, even without Nanalie. I was just hoping it would be an opportunity to make their pairing known both to citizens of Doran and everyone else, which would be good for their future. But you could also say it was a short-sighted idea.

She's an ordinary citizen. In our correspondence, she talks about the mere fact of exchanging letters with a prince like it's overwhelming. She tends to be very conscious of the difference in our status and show a trifle too much reserve. Still, I'm on friendlier terms with her than with noble girls my age. It probably wasn't a lie that she rejected the invitation because of her work.

But it's one thing not to feel constrained in Nanalie's presence and another to try to drag her to a place like this. I regretted my thoughtlessness once I read her letter.

"Zenon! Alois!"

"Hey, Bella."

The princess of Seleina didn't attend the official wedding in Sheera and came aboard with a personal guard when we passed through Seleina's harbor. She comes close to us, a smile like a flower in full bloom on her face.

"Ahh, did you see how gorgeous Princess Carolla was back there? That was so exciting! Ah, she was so lovely!" Bella expresses such a level of fascination that I have to suspect she's never been to the wedding of a foreign princess before.

It's not like *I've* been to many weddings of foreign royalty. Usually it's the king and queen, or the crown prince with his wife. I can relate to Bella's excitement, though, especially as someone who knows Carolla's circumstances—namely, that she fell in love with her servant and tried to give up on him.

"It's good to see you!" continues Bella. "And you, foreign minister of Sheera. Congratulations on Princess Carolla's marriage."

"I'm honored you remembered me, Your Highness."

“How could I possibly forget such a charming old man?”

Once he’s faced with the carefree smile of a woman whose radiant countenance has earned her the title of the finest jewel of southern nations, Louis Vega’s cheeks go slightly red. On the one hand, it’s a shameful sight when a man his age gets led by the nose by a beauty, but on the other, this side of him is the most endearing he’s been all day and wrings a smile out of me.

“Hey, Zenon, are you feeling all right?” asks Bella.

“I’m seasick.”

I thought I’d be fine today, regardless of this being my first proper sea voyage, since I have a relatively strong constitution and have no trouble with horse-riding and flight. My confidence didn’t last long. As I learned today, I get seasick easily.

It’s not *that* bad, since I have medicine for it on hand, but I dread to think how it’ll feel once the effect wears off.

“Oh my, that’s terrible! Just you wait, I’ll look after you.”

Bella clings to my arm in apparent concern.

“Think she’s after you?” asks Rockmann, causing her to freeze in place.

She’s a head shorter than me. As she looks up at me, I find her round eyes as pretty and unwavering as always.

“He’s perfect for the role of my prince. I’m thinking of suggesting him to my father. And don’t you have your hands full with Degnea?” counters Bella, flashing her tongue and glaring back at Alois.

She’s using me to see how Alois reacts, I’m sure. This ship is full of royals and nobles from various countries, and Vestanu’s prominent figures are present too. Seeing Degnea chase after Alois since this morning, some might have come to think the two of them are in a relationship. And it would be one thing if she went around using underhanded means to harass other women or kept throwing herself at Alois, but she bears sincere affection towards him and all she does is approach him and talk, so it’s rather difficult for Alois to deal with her, especially given his gentlemanly nature.

Her older brother, the prince of Vestanu, is here too, and yet he looks like he doesn't mind in the slightest and wants her to go on, which further complicates things. Alois keeps reprimanding her for getting too close, but it's unclear if she takes those words to heart.

"So it really does look wrong to everyone around..." utters Alois, looking troubled and shaking his head to Bella. "She's a good friend."

"Hmph. And whose color are your clothes, pray tell?" retorts Bella. "If you keep being like that, the one you really cherish will go away one day. And then Zenon will be mine..."

She tightens her grip on my arm. Despite my training, my humerus creaks, aching severely. How is this possible?

"I shall never allow it!" comes a woman's high-pitched voice from one of the barrels piled up behind me.

Casting her gaze towards the source, Bella cheerfully laughs and waves her folding fan once she sees who's there.

"Why hello there, Mislina. Have you put on some weight?"

"Would you listen to the words coming out of this woman's mouth! And don't think I don't know you've been making eyes at my brothers!"

Mislina's furious face pops out of one of the barrels. In spite of it, she climbs out of the barrel in a rather adorable way, holding up her dress with both hands as she gets her foot over the barrel's edge and struggles to find her footing. Alois gives her a hand, which she holds without complaint; she thanks him, then resumes her glaring at Bella.

The two's antagonism didn't start today. Their quarrels are unsightly. Mislina sees Bella as something of a home-wrecker as the latter keeps coming after her brothers at every social event (as Mislina herself complained before today's wedding). Bella, on the other hand, is jealous of Mislina who's surrounded by such good men and can't resist saying some nasty things (as Bella herself told me at the last dinner party). It's hardly different from watching two children fight, and that's not just my impression.

Is it something about this royal family that all my siblings and I have many

friends we don't have to mind our manners with?

"There's no other woman whose company I don't appreciate as much as yours," says Mislina.

"Believe me, I feel the same way."

Sounds to me like they actually get along swimmingly, but I'll keep that to myself.

"We're making a temporary stop; there's people overboard!" announces the captain of the *Seyre Willic*, who suddenly appeared on deck.

A clamor rises as the crowd starts to wonder what's going on. There's married couples running from the stern to the bow, and many peer into the waters over the gunwales.

"What happened?" asks Mislina.

"It looks like we've hit a small tourist boat. They said there's people floating on the water's surface," answers the first prince of Vestanu, Koch Jiol Vestanu, who was supposed to be far away but at some point must have slipped into our group. He points to the fore of the ship. "That aside, Degnea was looking for you."

Koch swings his head as if to show off his beautiful white hair and smiles as he addresses Alois. He's got a keen eye if he's already figured out Alois is avoiding her.

"You're a bad person," says Mislina.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Alois is like a fourth brother to her, which is why she seems to dislike Koch as well, since he keeps trying to pair Alois off with a bad match. Koch, however, doesn't seem to think he's doing anything wrong.

"By the way, why are you here, Zenon, and not the crown prince?"

Since he couldn't get a satisfactory answer from Alois (or rather, Alois ignored him), he targets me instead and changes the topic.

There are people who try to be conscious of diplomatic relations when interacting with others but have to hide the fact they're not very good at it, as

everyone has their strengths and weaknesses; this man is one of them. He's like a wicked version of Alois, with an even more difficult personality.

"My brother couldn't fit it into his schedule, so father told *me* to go."

"But everyone here is next in line for a position of power or otherwise those who will shoulder their kingdom's future. Could it be that the king of Doran sees you as—"

What a rude man.

As soon as I open my mouth, about to protest, things get noisy on the ship.

"How gorgeous..."

"Is that skin glittering like a jewel or are my eyes playing a trick on me?"

"I've heard merpeople's skin shines in the sun as beautifully as the waves."

"But she has legs."

"The man looks normal."

"Everybody, please stand back. You never know what might happen."

We're left wondering what's so unusual about the rescued people. From conversations in foreign languages reaching my ears, I learn that the tourists we've picked up are a man and a woman. In the meantime, Mislina and Bella are unable to keep their curiosity in check and make their way to the bow to join the curious crowd. Koch and Vega follow them. What are they hoping to gain from seeing who's there? I can't relate to lookie-loos.

"My! I know this woman!" comes Mislina's voice after a while.

Just who did she find there? I don't normally join such crowds, but after hearing Mislina, Alois and I head to the bow as well. Once we get to an opening in the crowd and I see the rescued pair everyone's staring at, my eyes open wide.

"That's..."

Even Alois, who's never shaken by anything, looks just as shocked.

"Y...eah..."

At the center of the crowd is a woman lying limp, struggling to lift her eyelids. It's hot in the sun right now, but it's as though she's shivering in the cold.

"Miss... Miss..." calls out the vice-captain once she seems to come to her senses. He pats her shoulder.

Wet with seawater, the woman's pure white skin glistens in the sun. One could mistake that sheen for fish scales faintly glittering with prismatic colors. The extraordinary, unnatural beauty of that skin seizes the hearts of everyone present. Her white, revealing Seleinan outfit exposing her navel and her slender arms sways the hearts of the onlookers all the more.

Nobody gives so much as a glance to the rescued man by her side.

"Is she...a princess from somewhere?" utters Koch beside me, gazing with sparkling eyes at the woman. "It's like she's adorned with gems down to the bones—no, as if she was *one perfect gem, through and through*," he continues with lingering excitement and bated breath.

"Ngh..." The woman slightly opens her eyelids with long eyelashes.

The vice-captain, who's helping her sit up, goes slightly red in the face—perhaps she's regained awareness of her surroundings and exchanged looks with him.

"Miss... Or...Your Highness? H-How are you feeling?"

The vice-captain, a man by the name of Cascade, is transparently flustered. In front of him are moist green eyes; cheeks that have regained their reddish tinge; soft, pink lips; long, wet hair as blue as a clear sky. The vice-captain draws close enough to her face that they can surely feel each other's breathing, and, forgetting about everyone around, he draws his lips towards hers as if getting pulled in.

This isn't good.

"Hey, Alois," I call out to the man beside me.

He has a slight frown on his face. Once he notices me looking at him, he gives me a sidelong glance and puts on a smile, then moves his fingers behind his back. I'm guessing he intends to render the vice-captain motionless with his

magic, or use some other kind of spell.

“Why am I...?” quietly utters the woman at the center of everyone’s attention with no regard for the man’s approaching face.

She looks with surprise at the crowd surrounding her. It appears she’s not quite aware of the situation she’s in.

Then, she looks this way and opens her mouth wide.

“Agghh, Rockmann!”

Her gentle air gone without a trace, the woman yells like she’s seen a monster, startling the vice-captain beside her. She has a close connection to me and my friends.

It’s a woman who was never supposed to be here—Nanalie Persephone Hel.

“Good grief...” utters Alois.

“Of course something like this would...” I add.

I once asked Alois what made him fall in love.

“She has a great smile and laugh. Kind of catches me off-guard.”

Don’t know what made me recall such a thing all of a sudden.

I exchange glances with Alois. Now that Nanalie is no longer in danger—as the vice-captain seems to back away—both of us let out utterly drawn-out sighs.



Theodora Locktiss

There is never a day when I want to see the face of Grove Dalvesp.

Sitting here, in my dorm room at the top floor and at the end of the corridor to the right, on top of my bed lit by the morning sun, I lament the duties on my plate today.

When I close my eyes, the memories of that day flash before my eyes. If only I could go back...

***

Why...? How did it come to this...?

“Come on, Eruve, open your eyes...”

I lift the man in my arms, his skin scorched beyond recognition even as a human being. I know he won’t open his eyes. But I can’t let go of the man I loved from the bottom of my heart so easily, nor do I want to contemplate what’s become of him.

Tears crash on the black lump below. It soaks up every last one.

“I’ll never...forgive you...”

I gnash my teeth with such force that I can *hear* them strain, then look up at the ashen sky. The identity of the Black Pegasi Slayer remains a mystery. When did it all begin...?

***

It’s year 3654 by Arland’s Reckoning.

“Hey there, Theodora.”

“Are you here for demon numbers as usual?”

“It’s looking like another population spike.”

I sit at reception when the guild’s doorbell rings and a knight enters. He approaches my counter, the clacking of his boots resounding through the room, and extends a hand to me for the intel.

His name is Eruve Dalvesp. He's the knight commander of the royal order of knights. I hear he'll be officially elevated to knighthood soon for his distinguished service both inside and outside the kingdom, even if that title just barely makes him a noble. Despite their occupation, few of them actually receive the official aristocratic title.

Eruve became knight commander at twenty-two, which is unprecedented.

"Are you free tonight?" he asks.

"Tonight? If you mean after dinner, sure."

"That's not what I'm talking about, my sweet, dense Theodora." He places his hands on the counter and peers at my face. "How about we have dinner together?"

"Ah, oh, uh... Sure... Sure!"

I can feel my cheeks getting a bit hot. I'm sure everyone else can see, so I reflexively cover them with my hands. I'm so embarrassed I can't help making (and keeping to myself) a snide remark about how if he can say things like that so casually, he must be used to this.

Eruve and I were in the same class back in magic school, and what's more, we've lived in the same neighborhood since we were kids; we played together well over a hundred times, which makes us childhood friends, as they say. We've spent more than half our lives together.

He has a cheeky younger twin brother by the name of Grove, but I haven't spoken to him much. Perhaps Eruve and I are more like-minded.

I won't hide that I'm in love with Eruve. At first we were just friends, but staying that way gradually became difficult once we entered magic school. We were about the same height in the past, and I'm rather tall for a woman, but at some point he shot past me. His once clear and high-pitched voice became deep; his face, once lovely like that of a girl, became manly; his large eyes became long-slitted and sharp—basically, he turned into a man.

One time, when we had to go to a different classroom for the upcoming class and I almost tripped, he pulled me by the waist with his large hand; he asked if I was okay, peering into my face—ever since then, I've been madly in love with

him, and he makes my heart throb so fast I'm worried it might burst.

Our distance as friends didn't change even after we graduated, and we ended up working separately—he joined the order, and I went to Harré—but we never became estranged. Thankfully, the order and the guild interact for work reasons, which quickly alleviated my concerns that I might not see him as much as I used to.

Though I don't think one should bring personal feelings into one's work, every time he knocks on Harré's door I'm besieged by unnecessary thoughts: what we're going to talk about today, and if it's too corny to ask how he's been or talk about the weather.

"Your whole internal monologue's practically written on your face," says another knight beside Eruve as I think about today's dinner, returning me to reality.

"I-I'm not thinking about anything."

"Put your seal here. And get your game face back on, yeah?" He presents me a piece of paper with a sigh.

He's a dead ringer for Eruve; it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they're like two peas in a pod. The only difference is their hairstyles—Eruve wears his shoulder-length, while this one's is short and only reaches the nape—and a nasty-looking face wound he picked up from a demon recently.

His name is Grove Dalvesp. He's Eruve's younger twin.

"My game face is *completely* on."

"Anyone could tell at a glance who you're in love with."

I have no comeback for that one.

Work's kept me in touch with Grove pretty often lately. He used to be "the brother of a friend;" now he's "the brother of a friend(?)" as my relationship with Eruve has evolved into something more vague. Though when I think about it, Grove is my childhood friend too, so I can't deny it feels pretty late for such classifications.

"May your life with the commander be long and happy, Miss Locktiss."

“Ah, not you too, Vice Commander Alkes!”

“Aren’t you going to make our leader happy?”

“Mngh... Get your laughs at somebody else’s expense for once!”

Suddenly, the entrance swings open. I panic, remembering I’m at work, and face forward, when the sorcerer who just came in points outside with a frightened look on his face.

“It happened again! Another knight triggered a magic circle!”

“What?!” says Eruve.

“He’s going to die like everyone else if no one can do anything!”

Several knights rush out of the guild.

He’s not the first, and I doubt he’ll be the last.

“How many times does this make...?” says Grove.

“Five,” says Alkes.

The culprit seems to be targeting knights; nobody else turns up this way, trapped and tortured within a circle’s confines until they breathe their last. It’s impossible to disable these circles from the outside. In each of the four previous cases, the victim died.

To make a functioning magic circle, one must draw it by hand on the ground or paper. It’s a type of magic that takes significant time and effort, so you’d think someone would notice if somebody was drawing these in the middle of a town. And yet, not only have no sightings of the culprit ever been reported, even psychometry won’t reveal them.

“Who the hell is behind all this?! How dare they toy with people’s lives!” Grove exclaims as he stomps on the floor.

Every scene of this crime has borne the same condescending words: “Black pegasi. You have no need for blood. May you turn white to the core before you blacken with rot as befits your title.” Where does the culprit’s grudge against the knights *come* from?

A magic circle appears on the ceiling, and a rolled-up piece of paper falls out

of it. Eruve picks it up, spreads it, and reads the contents.

“There’s another circle reported in the east... What?!”

“What’s wrong?” asks Grove.

“It seems civilians got mixed up in it this time. We’d better hurry,” replies Eruve.

Knights start leaving the guild.

“I’m going too.”

“Theodora?” asks Eruve.

“Hey, we’re not dragging any more innocent bystanders into this,” says Grove with a frown.

Given that civilians are involved this time, it’s safe to say there’s a risk of significant casualties. What’s more, given the shift in modus operandi, there’s no telling what new moves the culprit might be making.

I have complete confidence in my magic, if nothing else. Even if it means abandoning my work duties, I want to help the man I love. It’s selfish and conceited, but it’s the truth.

Still, Eruve wouldn’t accept such help. Of course, I’m perfectly aware he’s a more talented magician than me. I know he’s strong—but I don’t know if it’s going to be enough anymore, and that gives me the shakes like nothing ever has.

As I get up from my seat behind the counter, Eruve places his hands on my shoulders to calm me down.

“As long as you’re here, I’m always going to return to this place. I promise.”

“How can I sit idly by when so many have already been killed?”

“Well, why don’t you think about what we ought to have for dinner?” With that, he waves at me.

How could I possibly be so carefree? This isn’t the time to think about your next meal. I suppose he’s doing his best to act normal. Would he come back as usual if I sent him off like I’ve always done?

While I can't be certain of his intentions, I send him off—like a prayer, almost—wishing him luck and waving my hand as usual.

"Miss Locktiss! The commander, he..."

Come evening, my acquaintance among the knights shows up at the guild. My brush comes to a halt, and I look up from my work.

***

Encouraged by my coworkers, I rush to the center of the town on my familiar with no regard for the wind biting my cheeks. I can't waste a second.

"Mooom! Waaah!"

"It's all right, it's all right."

At the market, I catch sight of people lying on the ground and children crying. There are knights in uniform as well; *he* must be close. There's a spot in the distance where the crowd thickens; I zero in on it. Making my way through the mixed crowd of knights and civilians, I manage to find Grove. But just as I'm about to call out to him, I see what his eyes are fixed on and find myself unable to speak.

"It's a deldrat," mutters one of the knights.

There's all manner of ways to construct a magic circle to snare or imprison, but the especially fiendish kind, where auxiliary traps are built into the main mechanism such that they trigger when the surface spell is disarmed or tampered with, are called deldrat. In more common parlance, they're known as nested traps.

"When he rewrote the circle, he tripped something," says Grove, his eyes unmoving, once he notices me standing beside him. "Inverting the letters made them spell out a different passage."

According to him, to save the civilians trapped inside, somebody would have to enter the magic circle, redraw the crescent at the center into its inverted form, and invert the writing. Eruve pulled it off, but in the process, he'd been trapped in a barrier at the center just large enough to fit him.

“Hey, what type of circle did it turn into?”

“I...”

“What the hell is that magic circle?! Tell me!”

As I pull Grove by his collar and bring my face close, he places his hands on my fists and says, “‘Execution’.”

A stifled sound escapes my throat. How did *that* circle of all things end up in the middle of town?

“It’s used against criminals. Nobody could escape it.”

Once it activates, there’s no turning back. The circle won’t dispel itself until it finishes its work.

“Eruve knew it when he went in,” Grove continues, his tone matter-of-fact.

I let go of his collar and stumble away from him.

“Eruve, Eruve...” I stagger close to Eruve and stretch out my hand to him, as if I could still cling to him.

“Ah, Theodora. Have you decided what’s for dinner?” says Eruve, pushing up his hair and smiling gently.

“Don’t give me the dinner talk! You think you’ve bound me to yourself with that promise?! You think I’m stupid?!”

Had I been here from the start, I surely wouldn’t have let him go in there, even if I had to die for it. If he’d had to go, I would’ve gone in his place. Still, I realize that the other knights must’ve had the same thought. Blood drips from Vice Commander Alkes’s clenched fists. It’s unbearable for him too; this is all he can do to endure.

He must have refused to let anyone else go, for things to have played out this way. I can easily imagine him entering the circle before any of his subordinates could stop him.

And yet, the only word that appears in my mind is “why.” Why did he have to go in?

“As long as you’re here, I’m always going to return to this place. I promise.”

“Why don’t you think about what we ought to have for dinner?”

I shouldn’t have stayed there and waited like a good girl. I should’ve ignored his promise. Even if he hated me for it, even if I caused him trouble, I should’ve come after him.

“There should be some way... Something.”

“Theodora,” utters Eruve.

“That’s right! It’s written on the ground, so I can just destroy the ground along with it.”

“Miss Locktiss,” adds Alkes.

“It might disappear if the circle loses its form.”

“Theodora—“ begins Grove.

“Give me a hand here!!!” My hands still on the ground, I glare at the knights around me. “Don’t you go giving up so easily, all of you!!!”

I wish they would fight to the end instead of giving up, even if they know it’s impossible to save him.

Even if there’s no hope of rescuing Eruve, I can’t stay calm while he’s still alive and in front of my eyes. *I couldn’t yet comprehend* what *it meant when all those seasoned knights didn’t move at all.*

“Don’t just stand there and watch while your commander is murdered!”

As soon as I shout, a crackling sound and a flash of white light erupts from the magic circle. The crackling gradually intensifies, filling the whole barrier with light.

“Ueh... Egh...”

What transpires before us is far more brutal than I could ever imagine. Some of the knights turn away, unable to look. Some throw up. Words fail, trying to describe what’s happening to Eruve. I could tell you *tendrils of arcing lightning*

flense and char him, layer by layer, scrap by scrap, but it won't put you here, now, seeing what I see..

The barrier is filled with blood. It runs so thick and deep you can't make out the circle beneath it.

"Eru...ve..." is all I manage to say, my voice shaking.

Before me lies what used to be a human being until moments ago—this thing was him, and no one else. He, who didn't scream even in his final moments, enduring the agony with his eyes closed. I'm certain he was there until just a minute ago.

It appears the barrier vanished after the flashing stopped. The accumulated blood splashes across the pavement.

As I stand there in a daze, Eruve's blood starts moving unnaturally. It creeps along the ground and forms into a sentence: "Burnt to a crisp. Not even good for charcoal anymore."

Not even...good for charcoal...?

"We've got more of the same type of circle and more civilians trapped inside!" shouts a knight, his voice trembling.

"Eruve... Eruve..."

Something bursts inside me. *My memory after that is hazy.*

"Theodora, you..."

The ground shakes. I feel magic whirling inside me, spilling over every side. A thunder roars in the distance. Grove is shouting something to me, but I can't make out the words and simply gaze at him.

"Vice Commander, the other magic circles have been destroyed by lightning! There are some injured, but everyone seems to be safe..."

"Theodora! Get a grip on yourself!"

"—ed, so I..."

"It's enough, it's enough already!"

As Grove shakes my shoulders, my senses return to me. By the time my vision

comes back into focus, every magic circle has somehow been burnt away. Although everyone says I'd done it all moments ago I have no idea how I could've accomplished such a thing. Even Eruve couldn't get rid of one of these circles without losing his life, so how could *my* magic destroy them so easily? It's unimaginable.

Anyway, I feel incredibly sluggish.

The last of my strength leaves my body, and I collapse.

***

"Miss Locktiss, what about your work?" asks a knight.

"It's my day off."

Three days later, I visit the knight order to offer my help in searching for the culprit, well aware they wouldn't accept it so easily. Or so I thought—surely, I'd assumed, they'd see me as some civilian getting ahead of herself—but they welcomed my assistance without any trouble, probably thanks to my "outburst" the other day.

When I don't have work, my time belongs to the investigation. Together with the knights, I use psychometry to trace the previously activated circles and destroy unfinished ones. A month later, our search reveals a suspect—a craftsman who lives at the edge of town. It's him, for sure. When we grill him for a motive later, he replies "My life was tedious and dull, and I was told I could do this."

It's clear he's not the mastermind; someone else instigated all of this. Still, his detachment doesn't make sense to me. How could he commit such atrocities on scarcely more than a whim?

He starts raving when we break the news to him that, regardless of who encouraged him, he's not going to avoid a death sentence.

"I-I just did it because I was told I could! God helped me stave off my boredom; yes, it was God! If you want to punish someone, you'll have to pass judgment on God!"

If I could, I would've done so long ago. This man is far beyond redemption.

“He got killed by such a lowlife! By such worthless trash!”

He was so talented, so brilliant. And he had to die for what, a moment’s stimulation for this selfish scumbag?

“Just die already! You deserve to die in a gutter like the dog you are!”

I lunge at the man and almost kill him with my magic before Grove restrains me.

“Sorry, Theodora.”

Though I flail, trying to press my assault, Grove’s embrace feels almost strong enough to break my bones.

“Sorry to let you say this. Sorry to let you utter such words,” Grove whispers into my ear as he holds my head in place.

***

“Theodora, the least you could do is show your face when I come by.”

While Grove has a gentle smile on his face, I avert my gaze and hurl abuse at him.

Six years after Eruve’s death, Grove became Knight Commander. He’d always had the makings of a leader, so it was only a matter of time, and when he took a promotion test, he landed the top position in the order. He told me in person, even though I never asked.

I’ve tried to push him away over and over, and yet he still comes to my side. Something might be wrong with his ears.

Grove also told me that the order’s best magician—a man by the name of Alois Rockmann—had to protect my subordinate Nanalie Hel during our troubles with Orcinus. I’d heard Nanalie is on bad terms with House Arnold’s second son—so this is what it’s come to...

This is frustrating. What would she think if she knew that her beloved risked his life without ever telling her? That he could’ve died? Would she manage to stay calm?

In the end, I never even told him I loved him.

“It worked out in the end somehow. Case closed,” says Grove.

“‘Case closed,’ is it? I’m pretty sure it’s all thanks to that Arnold boy.”

“Come on, I worked hard for it too.”

“I wonder about that...”

I know he did. I’ve been told by a knight named Weldy that Grove was the first to rush to Alois Rockmann’s rescue when the latter was kidnapped, and that he’d lost a great chunk of flesh from his side in the ensuing brutal combat with the subordinates of Orcinus’s queen.

“I’m going back to my investigation, but how about we have dinner together when I get back?” asks Grove with a smile.

“Heh heh, spare me the jokes.”

I wave my hand as if chasing him off.

Never; not with him. Never.

Alois Rockmann II

It was my first day of school, and before I knew it, I'd challenged her for a game. To me, it felt like I was about to greet her, but instead I offered to play rock-paper-scissors. After that was over with, I immediately came back to my senses.

For some reason, the fact I'd won made me feel like I'd taught her a lesson. I stared at my palm, wondering what in the world I was doing.

"Let's play a game. Rock-paper-scissors."

"Pardon?"

The girl in front of me was different from the phantom lady who had suddenly appeared in my childhood. The only thing they had in common was their dark brown hair. Something felt similar about their clothing too, but their age was completely different. And this one wasn't the calm and collected type.

"Where... Where is this?"

"This is my home!"

I don't know where it was. And my memory of it is too strong for it to have been some hypnagogic flight of fancy. It wasn't like I could simply leave the count's mansion without permission. I could've just shaken it off as a dream, but that little box I held that day ended up in my room at the research facility when I woke up, and I was still wearing clothes I had never seen before then.

"Is your magic playing tricks again?" asked the count when he came to wake me up and saw my new clothing. "It's concerning that you can still use magic at all, as suppressed as we're keeping you. I need to make something even stronger..." he quietly added with a serious look on his face.

I have a memory from when I was a newborn. My late great-grandfather, when he saw me back then, had this to say to my mother, an uneasy expression

on his face: “A defective one? Give birth to a better boy next.”

I came to understand that word as I grew up. I suspect I already knew what it meant by the time I was one or two years old. Whenever adults called me defective right in front of me, they would frown. I could tell they weren’t saying something nice about me. I didn’t yet know the exact meaning of the word “defective,” but their anger stood out plain as day.

However, at the count’s mansion and back home, the servants never used that word towards me. Instead, they would call me adorable, flush their cheeks, and pat my head. So I wouldn’t say I wasn’t loved in my early childhood—quite the opposite. Still, as it became painfully obvious to me that whenever I expressed happiness or sadness, it wreaked havoc on the adults around me, I wouldn’t smile back at people.

There was a plethora of magical items scattered about my room like they were toys: a metallic cane, a wax doll, a rotten piece of a large tree, a red gemstone, a large green stone, a thick dictionary, and a wooden clock. Touching them would drain the energy from the center of my body, bringing me comfort. The things around me didn’t break, and I could spend my time in that room without anything to worry about. The only adult who would enter my room was Dr. Aristo, and I think I smiled at him pretty often.

“In the future, you will be an awesome *mage!”*

As I played with those things in my room as a child, I would sometimes recall that memory I couldn’t place, and try yet again to place it. When I held hands with that woman, it brought me the very same comfort, that ebbing feeling I got from the trinkets that kept me company. I ate sweets in that memory, sweets I’d never seen before. Their taste stayed with me long after.

If it wasn’t a dream, then I really must have ended up in a different place. Magic had caused me enough misery; a little more was no surprise.

But then who was that Naijeiri woman? Where is she and what is she up to? I want to see her again... When I ran through my routine in my room and all its clutter, that thought was all I had on my mind.

I saw plenty of places I'd never seen before. I saw someone make sweets for the first time. She told me I would become an "awesome" mage with such confidence it was almost like she was talking about herself. I'd never heard such a thing from anyone before, so it surprised me.

She was always smiling. So was I. I wished we could stay together forever. And yet, she told me we couldn't. It was a very realistic thing to say. She told me it was impossible, since I was a child, and that she didn't make promises she couldn't keep.

"If you always keep this lid closed, then maybe, certainly, even if you don't want to, we'll meet again, I think. We'll start fighting all the time the moment we see each other. I'm sure I'll freeze your arms. I'm sure you'll burn my hair. But I won't freeze you solid, and you won't burn me to ash. It'll go on like that, for years and decades. We'll be rickety old geezers, squabbling to the end of our days. At some point, we'll have both realized that we've gotten older, together."

"We will not be siblings, not friends, not even lovers. But you and I will always be connected. It's not that lonely if you think about it that way, is it? Here, here's my box. It's yours. Don't cry."

And this girl was neither my sister nor related to me in any way. She wasn't my friend, and she wasn't my girlfriend. Just a girl who sat beside me. Someone whom I saw for only a third of the day. I spent more time with Prince Zenon and the noble girls.

"Let's see who's best!"

She kept coming at me over and over. It felt like we'd fight until the end of time. Having such a girl sit by my side the whole time was irritating, and dealing with her was a pain.

"We'll start fighting all the time..."

This Nanalie Hel was not *her*. There was no point in fighting this girl, and all it did was make me waste my energy. And yet those eyes, that self-assured

expression, and that swaying hair... They spurred me on.

In retrospect, it might've been something close to desperation on my part.

***

There are plenty of people who don't get along. It was just bad luck that she and I ended up sitting next to each other. Our first encounter could hardly have been worse, and that was probably why we fought constantly.

I could've just left her alone, even after the color of her hair changed. Let her deal with her powers herself. After a while they would overflow and wreak havoc on everything and everyone around her. Poor girl.

But despite those thoughts, I couldn't shake off the image of her back as she walked out the classroom, looking lonely.

I pictured Nanalie Hel isolated in a special room, alone. What did I care?

And yet, the image filled me with fear. It must have reminded me of what I'd gone through—I didn't want to see such a past repeat itself, even if it happened to someone else.

I started to attack her physically to bait her into burning off her excess magic, but it was in no way for her sake—I wasn't about to punch her in the gut and claim I did her a favor. I just genuinely wondered how I would've grown up had I not been constrained in my environment, and could smile and laugh and be at ease. I felt like I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself had I allowed things to take their course and let her smile disappear.

***

Being four years older than my fellow classmates, I wasn't allowed to lose to them in anything—be it studies or magic. I had to be first in everything. Problem was, the girl beside me, Nanalie Hel, instilled dread in me time and time again.

She was always in second place, breathing down my neck, and I never knew when she might overtake me. No matter how much farther ahead of her I tried to be, she was obsessed with victory. Add to that our proximity, and it really complicated things for me.

I avidly studied magic and absorbed such knowledge and power as to be beyond anyone's reach. I didn't care if people might see me as a monster. If I was defective, I would simply polish that defect instead of trying to make up for it, until it reached a state of perfection unseen elsewhere. My life became much more comfortable.

Prince Zenon taught me everything I knew about reaching an accord with others. However, he's the type to be up-front about his feelings.

"And how did you end up with such a crooked way of thinking?" my father had once asked me with a chuckle. I had no answer to that.

I liked girls with a mild scent like that of my mother, which is why I would never disregard them. And when I was nice to them, it put smiles on their faces. It helped that they were cute. It wasn't like I went out of my way to curry favor with them.

Then what about this girl with the azure hair and the deep frown?.

I believe words are magic. Once they enter your ears, they take hold of your mind and bind your body. Unconsciously, I'd come to be just the way Naijeiri said I would.

"In the future you will be an awesome mage! I guarantee it!"

"But—"

"You will use more magic than I do, more than anyone does, and you'll be super popular with the girls!"

If I became an "awesome mage" and "super popular with the girls," I thought I might see her again. And this time I would win at rock-paper-scissors and have her be with me forever.

This ridiculous idea never seemed to leave my head. Who ever said I'd get to see her again just because her predictions came true?

You're just a fool, whispered a voice in my head.

***

It came time for the final party of my school life.

I no longer needed to use my magic on Hel; by then she'd gained full control of hers. My role was over and done with, blessedly. And yet, the two of us didn't stop bickering. There had been few times we ever talked properly. I could remember them if I wanted to, but it's too much of a bother.

The party was far from dull. I talked with a few girls, and danced with a few more. Only, since I knew deciding upon a special someone made things stressful both for yourself and those around you, I hadn't committed to a real dance partner.

Nanalie Hel showed up late. Though she had tremendous energy when it came to studying and competitions, her tardy side would occasionally manifest too. All this despite the fact her roommates had arrived a long time ago.

She turned heads once she appeared in that powder blue dress. I saw some of the men get slapped by their dance partners as they gazed at Hel, swayed by her precious figure—she didn't expose her shoulders even in casual clothes—and a touch of sex appeal.

I, however, thought she was no different from usual. Her appearance hadn't changed enough to warrant so much attention, while Maris beside her looked several times lovelier than before. Seeing the baron's son so captivated by her, I was tempted to suggest he invite her for a dance if he liked her new look so much.

The party entered its final stage.

The last item on the teachers' program for the night was making me invisible. I knew that Mr. Bordon, one of the teachers, found me rather hard to deal with, but persistently concerned himself with me nonetheless. In particular, when it came to my fights with Hel, teachers typically didn't intervene, but Mr. Bordon once hurled himself at me to stop us. Though I was hardly the only student he'd give the occasional earnest scolding, to be clear.

I had him pegged for a hopeless meddler after six years at the school, but why did he have to send me to Hel in the courtyard? It was clear he had used some odd sort of spell—I wasn't invisible, for starters. Whatever spell he had cast, it

functioned more at the psychological level than anything material.

Sitting on the fountain, Hel turned around. She always had a comeback for anything I said, and this time was no different. Bickering with her in such a place somehow put a smile on my face.

Her azure dress glowed faintly in the moonlight.

Indeed, she was no different from usual.

I thought so all along.



“O beautiful Witch of the Ice, would you allow me this dance?”

Dressed-up or not, she looked the same in my eyes.