
Yuri Yumemi
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WITCHES CAN'T BE COLLARED


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XIII

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DEATH




“Welcome to the Sixth Precinct.
Let the investigation begin!”
WITCHES CAN'T BE
COLLARED



Rogue Macabesta

Detective with the Las Lilte Empire's Magic Crimes Bureau. His method—beating criminals to a bloody pulp with his bare hands—has earned him the nickname "Bloody Rogue."

"Puppeteer" Miseria

The Noble Council has declared her the Thirteenth Witch. Skilled at mental manipulation spells, she turns people into her "puppets."

"Sleepless" Humafu

A witch adept at telekinesis. Can't get any shut-eye without killing someone and has been perpetually sleep-deprived ever since she was placed in the Sixth Precinct.

"Saint" Catherine

Though the Noble Council has declared her a witch, she calls herself a saint, hoping only to offer a hand to those in need.

"Professional" Angene

A homebody. Her interests include bomb crafting, poisons, autopsies, and hacking. The Sixth Precinct's Forensics department equivalent.

Velladonna Villard

Chief of the Magic Crimes Bureau's Elayl branch. May not look like it, but she's actually pretty strict. Orders Rogue's transfer to the Sixth Precinct.

Rico Raina

Staff member at the Magic Crimes Bureau's Sixth Precinct. As a maid, she methodically tends to the witches' needs.

WITCHES CAN'T BE COLLARED

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YEN ON
New York



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Translation by
Andrew Cunningham

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Prologue

'If you misbehave, a witch will come get you.'

Every child in this land has heard that line. Witches are evil and drawn toward bad children. Adults make the witches sound as scary as possible so they can keep their children in line.

Rogue knew better than anyone that warning was merely a fairy tale.

Because…no witch would come *here*.

"Fill this with money, or you're dead!"

Behind the counter, a masked man with a grimoire was bellowing. A young female teller came running out of the back, both arms filled with stacks of bills. Looking ready to burst into tears, she dumped her armful into the sack, then sped off the way she'd come.

At the door on the left were the remains of a *liquefied* security guard. Ahead, three masked men roamed, watching the crowd and Rogue himself.

Rogue Macabesta sighed and not for the first time.

He was only there to withdraw some cash. Why was he mixed up in a bank robbery? The city was awash with crime.

If his memory served, it was the fifth bank heist that year. If he included solo jobs, that number soared over sixty.

Oh, and he knew why. It was all because of *magic*.

He hadn't had lunch yet, so his stomach growled, and he sighed again. It just was not his day.

"Hey, asshole, what's your problem?" someone snarled.

Rogue looked up to find one of the lookouts glaring at him.

"You make any funny moves, and I'll end you right here!"

"……"

Rogue glared back. It was a warning.

He'd meant it to be intimidating, but with his looks—well, it backfired. The lookout was pissed, vein throbbing at his temple.

He grabbed Rogue's shirtfront and hauled him to his feet. Spittle flying, he raised his hand.

"You think I won't? Fine, you die first!"

In his raised right hand, he was holding a disc with a sigil on it. That type of manatech had a handle, so it was easy to wield, and the range of the sigil was broad, making it popular with Voiceless criminals. The spell inscribed on it was likely Soup.

The disc began to glow. Light moved faster than bullets. There was no dodging the spell once it was cast. That forced Rogue to fight back.

He channeled power into his gloved right fist.

Then he stepped in close.

"Gahhh!"

With one punch to the face, the disc-wielding guard flew several meters back—and did not move again.

"What the—?!"

After seeing their comrade get taken down, the other two masked men aimed their manatech at Rogue. They'd occupied the bank easily, so it didn't seem like their first heist. The robbers would have bounties on them, which meant they were villains worth arresting.

"……I'm off duty," Rogue grumbled, reaching for the desk beside him.

Before the masked thieves could cast their spells, he picked it up with both hands and threw it at them. Neither managed to dodge the flying desk and were sent flying themselves.

Okay.

Leaving the three thieves in a heap on the floor, he headed for the counter in the back of the bank. The tellers were gaping at him, and so was the final masked man. But the thief snapped out of it when Rogue was still a good five meters off.

"D-don't come any closer! Or she dies!"

He put his arm around a teller's neck.

Rogue rolled his eyes.

"You think you've got time to *cast*? Did you not see what happened to your buddies?"

"Sh-shut up! I've got *this*!"

He pulled out a knife. Just a knife. No enchantments on it at all.

"Don't do it, man. You'll just get yourself hurt."

"Shut up, Detective! You don't get to talk!"

That made Rogue frown.

"You know I'm a detective?"

"Yeah! I ain't stupid! You detectives always gotta get in our way! Like criminals ain't got a right to be free!"

"……You *are* free. But what about the hostage you've taken? You ignoring her right to freedom?"

"I don't give a shit about anyone else! Get the hell outta here!"

He put the knife to the teller's neck.

"Eeeeek!" she cried, dropping all the bills she'd been carrying. That infuriated the masked man. Breathing heavily, he pressed the blade against her throat, breaking the skin. Blood oozed out, running down her neck to her shirt.

Rogue's voice dropped an octave.

"……Final warning. Let the hostage go."

He put his right hand in his pocket.

"Don't you fucking move!" the thief roared.

"I take it that's a no?"

"Shut the fuck up! Or I'll slit her throat here and now!"

So much for negotiating.

An instant later, there was a *thud*, and the masked man was down.

Rogue had flicked a coin *through* his pocket, striking the thief right in the brow.

He swore under his breath, eyeing the hole in his trousers.

"Another pair of pants ruined."

He pulled out his phone and called in the robbery.

"Rogue Macabesta, Elayl branch. Bank robbery on Flube Street, Third Ward. Four perps, all down. Pick 'em up for me. You'll need a med team, too— Huh? No, it's taken care of, like I said."

He hung up, and the teller came up to him.

"Er, um, Rogue…?"

Putting his phone away, he turned, wondering what was up. She seemed awfully happy for someone who'd just been attacked by bank robbers. That sort of attitude never boded well.

"You're Bloody Rogue?! Thanks so much for saving my life!" the bank teller cried.

His spirits sank. That nickname was really getting around.

Bloody Rogue, the man who took out crooks bare-handed, spattered in their blood. He'd tried begging people to stop calling him that, but nobody listened. It wasn't like he *enjoyed* bloodbaths.

"I—I can't believe *you* were the one to save me! Can I get your autograph?"

She'd almost *died*.

"Sorry, but I ain't no movie star. Gonna have to refuse."

"S-sorry…but if we meet again…?"

"I'll think about it."

That will never happen.

Rogue was being promoted to management.

All the magic crimes he'd put a stop to had finally impressed the right people. The Executioner. The Second Allan. The Rainstorm. The Swampman. They were tough criminals he'd brought to justice. Scum he didn't even want to remember.

But today was the last time he'd have to deal with them. His heart sang. He would never again have anything to do with people like the

perps on the floor. Rogue heard sirens approaching and began to hum.

◇

Once, only the nobility had magic. But as the world modernized, the techniques passed into common hands.

The Heat spell could generate warmth.

The Fly spell could make objects levitate.

The Regeneration spell could heal flesh.

Magic did not obey the laws of physics.

By using the correct words or writing, magic would bend to one's will. Literally magic. There was no need for talent; if someone followed what a grimoire said, even an infant could cast spells. And that low barrier allowed magic to spread like wildfire.

The people could conquer hunger and disease, and join hands to create new prosperity…

However, magic was too enticing to be used for *good*.

The Puncture spell could break objects—including safes.

The Modeling spell could change one's face—perfect for cons.

The Spark spell could generate electricity—great for killing rivals in inheritance disputes.

Crime rates soared, and the world belonged to the worst of society.

The Las Lilte Empire was ruled by the Two Great Noble Houses. It had such a high rate of magic-related offenses in proportion to the population size that it was called the crucible of crime.

The streets weren't safe. Women and children couldn't risk walking outside in broad daylight, let alone at night. Bank robberies were a daily occurrence. Any little argument could end in murder.

To defend themselves against the crime wave, good citizens had to purchase grimoires, too. But if they used one spell wrong…they'd become criminals themselves.

The Drakenia family—one of the Two Great Noble Houses—took the matter seriously and founded a new agency.

They called it the Magic Crimes Bureau.

Twenty-five thousand employees. They were former cops, wizards, students, and even retired soldiers. All of them were experts on magic.

They put their skills and experience to use, tracked down criminals, and achieved great things.

In the first decade of the bureau, they captured eight hundred fifty thousand magic criminals.

It was an astounding figure for an age in which the police had once thrown up their hands in defeat.

Five years after the bureau's founding, the crime rate began to decline at last.

People could take a stroll outside without getting mugged. Crimes in the public eye were *comparatively* few.

Compared with the turmoil before the bureau's founding, it was clear they'd had a significant effect.

And that day…

…Rogue Macabesta would be promoted from detective to a managerial position.

Chapter 1
Witches Can't Be Collared

At headquarters, the wall of the chief's office was lined with framed portraits—headshots of the members of the Two Great Noble Houses. Every one of them had golden eyes. The images on the wall were creepy as a cat in the night, but the staff wasn't allowed to take them down.

"Congratulations, Rogue. You owe me!" said his boss, Velladonna Villard, the moment he stepped inside.

Elayl was the capital city, and Velladonna was the chief of the Elayl branch…and rather prone to making sudden pronouncements.

"Thank you!" Rogue said, saluting—a formality.

Velladonna brushed back her wavy blond hair, flaunting it.

"I recommended you for this myself. No matter how good your record, promotions are not usually this smooth. The Drakenias have very high standards."

Her voice was syrupy and cloying.

She had left the top two buttons of her blouse undone, letting her fancy bra peek out. Bureau scuttlebutt claimed she'd slept her way to the top, but this was hardly a position one kept *just* by being good in bed.

The Two Great Noble Houses—the Ligton and Drakenia families. The Magic Crimes Bureau was controlled by the latter, and they were a rigorous meritocracy—even within their own ranks. Corrupt officers were frequently sent to the tundra.

"Mm-hmm," he said, nodding. No smile.

"Not nearly grateful enough!"

"Thank you!"

"More!" she cried.

He shifted his gaze slightly away from his boss, hoping he'd kept the sour look off his face.

"……Thank you."

"Ohhh, I could just eat you right up," she said, cupping her cheek.

Rogue was apparently her type. Her position had played in his favor before, including this promotion. It was best not to spurn her.

His gaze turned to the window as she took a seat at her desk. His reflection looked back at him from the glass.

He had long, narrow eyes and bit of a baby face—especially around the lips. He was short enough to have been teased relentlessly at officer training school. Few people would pick him out on the street and take him for a cop. The fur-lined coat he wore was an attempt to make himself look a bit more intimidating.

"You want me to eat you, right, Rogue? *Rawr.*" Velladonna struck a pose like she was a pouncing predator.

"Hardly the time for jests, Chief," Rogue said flatly.

"It isn't?"

"No."

"But a part of you longs to be gobbled up, surely."

"Nothing 'surely' about it, Chief. There is no such part of me, so let's get to the point."

"Oh, don't be like that. Men are all starving beasts. Let me dangle some bait over your head while you hop around trying to sink your teeth into it. You're far too diligent for your own good."

"Did you say something?" he asked. The last part of her statement had been an inaudible mutter.

"No, never mind," Velladonna said, pouting. It wasn't a good look for her.

He pretended not to notice. Then her phone rang.

"Yes, it's Vella… Why, helloooo," she purred. "Oh dear. Another victim?"

She was nodding. Must be a call from *her* boss. Too high a rank for a mere detective to ever see in person, so this was none of Rogue's business. He simply stood there like a statue.

"Okay, Vella out. Yes, bye-bye!" Here, she switched to a growl. "Dumping your bullshit in my lap again, asshat."

Rogue flinched and asked, "Something wrong?"

"Nothing! At least, it's not *your* problem, Rogue."

With that, Velladonna put her chin in her hand, dejectedly playing with a pen. That call must have been very bad news. He could hear her grumbling, "Ugh, this is so annoying," under her breath. She was clearly fleeing reality.

Rogue stood there, poker-faced…until his eye caught a light in the windowpane. The monitor on the desk was showing some investigation reports. It was only reflected for a moment, but he knew which case *that* was.

Ah, so it's about the Lifetaker……

This was the most recent unsolved case, and word about it had reached his ears.

Two months prior, a strange body had been found in the commercial district, Dillo. There was an ID on the corpse, so the victim was immediately identified.

Jim Foley, twenty-five years old, businessman. No criminal record. Apparently a person of fine character—questioning those who knew him turned up no grudges against him. He had no history of serious illness; he'd been in perfect health.

Yet he'd died in a back alley…of *old age*.

All the moisture had been drained from his skin, mummifying him. His limbs were thin and twiggy. His face was twisted in a rictus of fear and pain. Even his family had not been able to recognize him.

No traces of mana had been found at the scene, but it was put down as a homicide anyway. Only magic could explain a twenty-five-year-old dying of such a cause.

The assailant had a spell that could rapidly age someone, so they were dubbed the Lifetaker.

But no suspects had been determined, and no progress had been made.

"If you say so, Chief."

As of the next day, Rogue would no longer be working cases. If he did get involved, it would be through his subordinates. There was no need to worry about it now.

Then he realized Velladonna had stopped groaning. She was giving him a long look.

"…What?"

He did not like the smile that question elicited.

"Rogue, you thought you were free from this mess?"

"…Well…"

"Maybe it does have something to do with you, hmm?" Velladonna purred, unable to stop herself from giggling, "Hee-hee."

Rogue didn't find it amusing.

"Chief, how am I involved?"

"Oh? Do you reeeally want to know?"

"……No. Never mind."

He wasn't about to let her trick him into asking more. He tried to change the subject, but her head went down. Her shoulders were shaking. She was unable to disguise her glee. Rather, she was rubbing it in his face.

Clearly, she was up to no good.

And whatever sinister plan she was cooking up was already in action. This was the sort of maniacal laughter that came before she revealed how she'd pulled the rug out from under him.

No sooner had he braced himself than Velladonna dramatically swept back her hair, rising to her feet.

"You're going to Nabaco Island! Congratulations, Detective Rogue!"

She started clapping.

"Huh?!" A rude noise slipped out of him, but she didn't bat an eye.

"Nabaco is a lovely place. Good liquor, and the liquor's also good. Oh, and they have great liquor!"

——*Nabaco Island?*

The blood drained from his face.

Nabaco was a pastoral island with only five hundred residents. It was a half hour by boat from the mainland. He wasn't sure what crimes might happen there, but this wasn't how he'd hoped to avoid interacting with criminals. He was clearly being relegated.

He tried imagining himself working there.

Helping old folks who'd thrown out their backs, sitting around from morning until night with only the occasional free donut to break up the monotony. Days so empty that, over time, he'd come to accept that as a good thing.

The more he thought about it, the more of a nightmare it became. When he spoke again, his voice cracked.

"Chief, I can't accept this. What did I do—?"

"Oh, you'll soon be right at home there. I mean, they have murders almost every night."

"I don't think—"

"I'm kidding, of course." Velladonna cut him off with a smile. Like a mother watching an excited child.

Rogue knew then his protests were futile.

"……You're not changing your mind?" he groaned.

She put a finger to her tinted lips.

"Well, you look *so* sad. It does make me *want* to reconsider."

Her eyes ran up and down his body, ogling every inch of him, soaking him in. She even licked her lips. Then she drew close to him, her soft breath tickling his ear.

The ashen look on his face made her grin broaden.

"We could play it that way…but I *do* have a second option."

"……Which is?" he struggled to ask.

"Ever heard of the Sixth Precinct?"

"The sixth?" he parroted. Elayl only had *five* precincts. He'd never heard of a sixth. "Chief, are you being serious?"

"How rude! Of course I am."

"Then where is this coming from?"

"The rank and file aren't told about it. Only *important* people. Like me! But it *does* exist."

This felt wrong.





His feelings must have shown on his face, but Velladonna clearly didn't give a damn.

She tapped the desk with her fingers.

"It's a top secret division with a very unusual jurisdiction. They handle cases that are beyond the capabilities of the other precincts."

"Uh-huh."

"And you'll be provisionally placed as the chief of it. Well? Not a bad offer, is it?"

If this was true, it was the opposite of bad. Precinct chief was a high rank, even in management. They oversaw several hundred detectives. Their role was the furthest thing from the blood-soaked streets and came with quite substantial authority.

"……I'd love that, but can I ask one thing?" Rogue said.

"Oh? What is it?"

"……What's the case? What is it you want me doing?"

He had a hunch.

"Good instincts." Velladonna smirked. She pointedly settled back in her chair. "Right you are. The top brass are desperate to get the Lifetaker behind bars. Naturally, you don't *have* to take this offer. Nabaco Island awaits! Getting thanked by your elders is hardly unpleasant. I'm sure they'll love to have a young man around to lift things for them."

She elegantly crossed her legs.

If he refused this second option, his fate on Nabaco would be sealed. Velladonna wouldn't hesitate. He'd seen any number of poor saps fall prey to her snap decisions. And he'd learned from their mistakes.

"Chief," he growled.

"Hmm?" she said, tilting her head.

"……Where is this precinct?"

That was all Rogue *could* say.

◇

The empire occupied half the continent of Deane, and the capital—Elayl—was shaped like a crescent moon. It sat at the edge of the land, and ocean commerce flowed through it. It was the beating heart of the empire's economy.

It had nine wards. On the left side of the city was the ocean; at the center, high-rise office buildings; and at the upper end, hills leading inland. A twenty-minute drive from HQ into those hills, and the bustle of the city vanished without a trace, replaced with luxury homes.

Rogue was headed for a building on the outskirts of town.

It looked like an old church. *Looked* because it was covered in vines, the outside walls peeling off—a veritable ruin. But this was the address he'd been given. If he hadn't been warned ahead of time, he might have driven right past it.

A disheveled exterior wouldn't exactly interfere with its purpose. Velladonna had said the Sixth Precinct was located underground. Allegedly in the interests of informational security. He had his doubts.

Rogue stepped into the church and paused.

There was a door on the left, behind the pulpit. It was made of iron and placed awkwardly in the ruined church.

Then he heard a voice.

"Detective Rogue Macabesta, I presume?"

A girl's voice was echoing from a speaker somewhere.

"……That's correct," he said.

"Wait right there," she said, clearly able to hear him. *"Verifying your identity."*

No one came out to meet him. He deduced that there must be a hidden camera.

He stood where he was until the heavy metal door slid aside—into the wall itself, without a sound—revealing an elevator a few meters

in.

"Identity confirmed. Please step inside."

He did as he was told, stepping up to the pulpit. He moved through where the steel door had been, and the elevator doors opened for him. It was a bit large to ride alone; the floor, walls, and ceiling were all white. It was nothing like the overgrown exterior.

No further instructions came.

He looked back once, then stepped into the elevator.

As the doors closed, he found himself out of breath. He'd thought himself resigned to this, but his doubts came flooding back. He questioned why it was underground. And wondered what good working there would do him. Desk work was one thing, but Rogue was a detective. Holing up indoors would get him nowhere.

The descent went on for a while. He wondered how far down the place was. After what felt like an eternity, the doors finally opened.

"You've arrived," a woman said.

He stepped through the doors into an open area.

The room was furnished with round tables and chairs, and several people were seated at them. An atrium revealed the floors above. Each floor was lined with fancy doors, and the passages outside them were lined with glass railings. There were no vines, no peeling plaster.

It looked much better than he'd feared. But as he took in the offices, Rogue frowned.

Where are the other detectives?

No matter how busy things were, there should be someone else working there. But looking around, he didn't see a single adult.

He had no idea what Velladonna was thinking. But there was no use standing there—he started walking and soon found a girl with glasses waiting for him in the center of the hall. She had fine features, but her pale skin and the dark circles under her eyes made a sickly impression.

"Welcome to the Sixth Precinct, Detective Rogue. I am Rico Raina, on staff here. Let me know if there's anything you need."

She bowed low, but Rogue was preoccupied by her form of address.

She'd called him detective…

…not *chief*.

"Rogue. Nice to meet you. I've got several questions…"

"Ask away."

"Is this really the Sixth Precinct?" he asked, looking around.

Girls sat on the chairs, leaned against the walls with books or over the railings above—he counted twelve at a glance. All girls, and not one of them seemed like they worked for the Magic Crimes Bureau.

But Rico nodded. "This is the Sixth Precinct," she confirmed.

"I was told I'd be chief here…so where are the other officers? Out in the field?"

"You are the only officer assigned to the Sixth Precinct. In that sense, you are technically the chief, Detective Rogue."

Her stare was almost mechanical.

His head was spinning.

"……So who are *they*?"

"Prisoners."

"Prisoners?"

He wondered why there were prisoners in a precinct. That alone prompted infinite questions, but he restrained himself. He focused on his most pressing concern.

"……I was told to take charge here and track down the Lifetaker. Not look after the incarcerated. Can investigations actually be done like this?"

He'd practically growled this line, but Rico didn't bat an eye.

"Not to worry. These prisoners are rather unique. Let me introduce you. This way."

She headed off toward the girls.

Rogue followed, scowling. This was too smooth, like a rehearsed procedure, and that fueled his suspicions.

Soon, they stopped in front of a girl occupying one of the round tables. He was there for introductions, but her eyes were closed.

Based on her breathing, he guessed she was asleep. Rico paid this no mind.

"This is Miseria. Skilled in mental interference spells, she turns people into puppets. Code name: Puppeteer. She once went after the imperial family and turned all the imperial guard into her puppets."

The girl in question had her legs crossed and her chin in her hand. She wasn't moving. She was wearing a white jacket over a white skirt, and she had long white hair that flowed over the table and her legs.

She was visually striking, but she otherwise appeared to be a normal girl. There was nothing unusual about her.

Yet that stirring in his chest wasn't going away. Rogue had felt like this before. She should have been a normal girl…but by the time he connected it to his past—it was too late.

Rico was still talking.

"Under a special jurisdiction, she's been given a six-thousand-year deferred beheading. The Noble Council has declared her…" Rogue's heart was racing. "…the Thirteenth Witch."

That turned his fear into fact.

"……What?" he rasped.

Rico tilted her head.

"Did I say something wrong? This is all information covered in the officer training school curriculum."

"……I know."

"Then what is the problem? Miseria being a witch?"

"……Witches should be in the Andewurs. Why are they here?"

Rico raised a hand, pointing up through the atrium.

"The Andewurs? Rest assured, this is *an* Andewurs. Like the others, there are elaborate defensive and obfuscation spells applied. The latest in technological security ensures no intruders can get in."

"……Yeah, that's not the problem," Rogue said, his voice rising. "Why are we letting witches roam free?!"

Was she working here without knowing how easily witches could blow them all away? Rogue included?

Long before magic spread to the masses, the empire had its share of witches. They were beings melded with their own spells, no longer aging—literal monsters. They appeared without warning and brought calamity upon the empire.

There were witches who'd vaporized entire towns; caused riots that left hundreds of thousands dead or injured; kidnapped thousands in a single night. Witches were *very real*.

And yet—

—the average citizen was not even aware of just how great a threat they posed. They had become an imaginary threat to make their children listen. *'If you misbehave, a witch will come get you.'* In their minds, witches were ancient history.

As Rogue's frown deepened…

"Did we wake you, Miseria?" Rico said.

He jumped and turned to find the white-clad girl's eyes opening. Her long lashes fluttered a few times, then her pupils snapped into focus.

"Oh dear! Is it time? I dived too deep," she murmured, turning to face them.

Unfathomable blue eyes.

For a moment, he felt as if they were swallowing him up. He felt helpless, like he was out at sea, praying for rescue.

Trying to shake himself free of her gaze's grasp, he noted her smile—manufactured, like one on a doll's lips. She had a pretty face. The choker at her throat went well with her skin tone. Her glittering white hair caught the light. In another day and age, she'd have inspired quite a following.

But Rogue found himself backing away.

"No need to be afraid. I am only human."

A clear voice, and an adorable smile. She said it so lightly, it left him stunned—then shame and anger caught up with him.

"……Human? Witches are—"

"Now, now. Let's get to know each other first. I'm Miseria, a prisoner of the empire. Your name is?"

He mulled that over for a moment.

"……Rogue. Rogue Macabesta."

She flashed another smile.

"Rogue, hmm? What do you make of your assignment to the Sixth Precinct? Ready to—I don't know—push Velladonna off a cliff?"

That one took him a beat, too.

"……Why does a witch know the chief's name?"

Witches in the Andewurs were meant to live like the dead, shut off from all outside information. But this Miseria girl made it sound like she knew Velladonna personally.

"Hmm." The white-clad girl frowned, glancing at Rico. "Rico, has this pitiable newbie been briefed on nothing?"

Briefed?





"Um," Rogue said.

Her eyes on the other girl, Rico tilted her head.

"Is that so? I assumed Chief Velladonna had told him everything."

The two girls seemed to know something he didn't, and they reached an understanding.

"It seems there was a miscommunication," Rico said, turning to face Rogue. "Detective Rogue, allow me to explain what the Sixth Precinct is. Investigations here are done with the help of witches—despite the gravity of their crimes. You will oversee the witches, ensuring they solve crimes falling under your jurisdiction."

For a second, he forgot to breathe.

Solving crimes…with witches? That was insane.

Why would Velladonna not tell him something that vital—?

Rogue soon worked out why. They had an unsolved murder, and she had a boss breathing down her neck. The bureau was a meritocracy, and failure to deliver could end her career. In which case, she had to make full use of anyone up to the task. *Especially* if that was someone who refused to play her games.

If he hadn't accepted the promotion, he would never have wound up there. He regretted his own ambition.

As the light faded from his eyes, Rico spoke again.

"I do hate to pile it on, but may I proceed?"

He made a face like he'd swallowed a bug, then nodded.

"……How much worse can it get?"

"We've received further orders from Chief Velladonna. I meant to relay these once the dust settled, but…"

"……Hit me."

"'Yoo-hoo, Rogue! How's it been? This is your beloved Velladonna!'"

Rico's voice had become syrupy and exaggerated.

"Wh-what are you…?"

"Chief Velladonna was very specific. I am to relay these orders while imitating her."

"Uh-huh…fine, let's go with that…"

Rico proceeded.

"'You're to wrangle these witches and take on the Lifetaker case. By the way—someone else *was* in charge of the Sixth Precinct, but he got on the witches' bad side. We can't exactly take them off the case, so I had to rack my little brain for a solution. Then I thought: *Oh! Our ace in the hole, Rogue! He might manage to pull it off!* So you'd better do just that, Rogue. If you can't wrap this case up quick……spend the rest of your life locked up in there, with witches making eyes at you. Oh! Time for a meeting! Buh-bye!'… That is all."

Rico paused momentarily, then her tone returned to the formal one she'd used before.

"Detective Rogue, you are officially appointed chief of the Sixth Precinct."

In his head, he was throwing every insult he could at Velladonna.

If she'd been there, he was pretty sure he could have punched her. This was just *that* unreasonable.

The white-clad girl smiled at him.

"Feeling better?"

"Oh yeah. *Loads* better," he said, but his sarcasm didn't rattle her grin.

"Another one of *those*," muttered a witch somewhere up above. He felt like there was a hint of sympathy there. Perhaps he was not the first person sentenced to the Sixth Precinct like this. His gaze flicked around the room.

Picking up on that, the white-clad girl nodded.

"Well, most appointees were like you—unwilling. Though, you *are* the first to receive no prior briefing at all."

"……" That only fanned the flames of his fury. "……You seem well-informed."

"But of course. I've been the one on point lately."

"On point?" he asked.

"Broadly speaking, your partner on the job. You've had those before, I'm sure. This precinct works on a volunteer basis, and at the moment, I'm the most inclined."

With that, she rose from her chair. Her long hair fluttered behind her, and as that caught his eye, she put out her hand.

"We'll be working together."

"……Right."

He took off his glove and shook her hand. She was so pale, it was hard to imagine she had blood in her veins, but her hand was surprisingly warm. A lower temperature than Rogue's own, but still very much alive. Perhaps her claim of being "human" was not so far-fetched.

Rationally speaking, they'd never assign a witch here who couldn't be controlled. He felt himself starting to relax a bit.

Then a witch from the crowd yelled, "When are you gonna kill him, Miseria?"

"Huh?" He yanked his hand away. *Kill*? "……What's that mean?"

"I do beg your pardon. She just likes to scare people."

"Baloney! You made the last guy kill himself!" the other witch yelled.

The white-clad girl smiled like a child caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

"Ha-ha, well, that was how things turned out. But it wasn't like I *wanted* to kill him."

"Liar!"

"For shame!"

"You're so twisted!"

That prompted a chorus from the crowd and left Rogue feeling bamboozled. The last detective committed *suicide*? What could be bad enough to cause that?

He looked at Rico.

"No way, Rico. I can't work with a murderer. Call the chief."

"Don't worry, Detective Rogue. They're equipped with safety devices. Right there on her throat."

He looked again. There *was* a black choker around the witch's neck. Not just the white-clad girl's, but around the neck of every witch in the room.

When his eyes were back on Rico, she said, "That's their *collar*."

"Collar?"

"It's a type of manatech. If any of three conditions are met, they'll instantly kill the wearer. First, a direct act of murder. Second, leaving the designated range—in this case, the empire's territory. This applies if any part of them leaves that range. Finally—"

At that point, the white-clad girl took over.

"When mana over a specified threshold is detected. This leaves us only capable of generating a *child's* level of mana."

She followed that with a titter, but at what, Rogue wasn't sure.

"Wait, but your hands are still free. You wouldn't even have to use a spell," Rogue pointed out.

Pens, knives, their own teeth—if their hands were free, there were any number of means at their disposal. Those collars didn't look especially durable; a girl could easily rip them off.

"No, Detective," Rico said, "These collars *don't* come off. They will remain in place until the wearer's death is detected. Until that time, nothing can break them—not even a magic sword."

"A harsh truth," the white-clad girl said, nodding.

"Is that supposed to reassure me?" Rogue said, glaring at her. "I just heard that you made the last guy kill himself."

"Oh, I did."

"Does that not count as murder? I mean, you aren't dead."

"Sometimes, a few errant words can push people to their deaths, Rogue. Who knows what might become a trigger?"

"Don't bullshit me," he growled.

"If they counted suicides against us, we could never operate at all," she said, shrugging it off. "There are so many people out there who would happily throw away their own lives if it meant they could take us with them."

"And that's the only reason?"

"Is it not good enough of one for you?"

"Why would it be? Who'd want to work with a witch?"

"You're making me sad. You hate me already! And here I am, just trying to make friends."

"Don't lie to my face, witch."

"I mean it," she said, winking at him. "I adore men like you."

He swore under his breath.

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

"Really? I think I'm not bad-looking."

She pointed at her own face.

"That ain't the problem."

"'Brutal,' my—"

At this point, Rico interrupted.

"Time is of the essence. Chief Velladonna gave strict orders to solve this case as soon as possible."

He flinched, turning toward her. Those were hardly fair terms.

"……I'd never have come here if I knew witches were involved," he said.

Rico merely crooked her head. "Oh? You seemed to be getting along famously."

"……"

"Chief Velladonna said to remind you that the paperwork for your transfer to Nabaco Island is all drawn up. She can have you there before the day is out."

He choked on that one. Was he stuck? Shirking this duty would result in his exile to an island. The worst fate for a detective. At the very least, he could *investigate* things at the Sixth Precinct.

He turned his back on them. Whether he was with a witch or not, the job didn't change. He just needed to do what he usually did. His footsteps echoed on the floor, then he took a breath and raised his voice.

"Right, briefing time!" Not a single witch responded. They just kept doing what they were doing. Like they hadn't even heard him. "Hey!

Didn’t you hear me? Don’t you have collars on?”

He got louder, but they didn’t budge. A few even snickered.

He was appalled. The white-clad girl stepped up next to him.

“Rogue, we’re merely assisting the bureau. You can’t force anyone to help if they’re disinclined. Whether we have collars or not, that will never change,” she declared.

“Well, shit.”

He decided that the place was the pits.

“Don’t let it get you down, Rogue. *I’m* willing to help! I’m sure we’ll have lots of fun together.”

She put a hand on his shoulder like they were old friends, and he brushed her off.

……Goddamn it.

He swore again.

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The capital was always cacophonous. Horns blared everywhere he went. At last, the traffic started moving, but Rogue’s spirits were only sinking. Working a case with a witch? It was his first day on the new job, and he already wanted out.

“It’s not *that* bad,” the witch in the passenger seat said.

“You be quiet,” Rogue said, not even glancing at her. “Remember where you stand.”

“Don’t be like that, Rogue. Let’s work together!”

“Like hell.”

“So hostile! Isn’t your promotion riding on this?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Isn’t it? I think I’m already involved.”

“Hey! Don’t!”

The witch—Miseria—had jabbed him in the ribs. He’d almost swerved into a tree.

Straightening out the car, he muttered, "No more funny business, witch. You know how much money it costs to keep a car running?"

"Now *that's* none of my business."

"You've got a screw loose."

Miseria just laughed out loud. She had been laughing a lot the whole drive. Like she was off to a picnic.

This is one cheerful witch.

But that didn't make her any less of a witch. He couldn't let his guard down, so he clammed up. Miseria tried to engage him a few times, but he just kept his eyes on the road. When they reached the Fifth Ward—Dillo, the commercial district—he pulled off the main road onto a side street. He found the barrier tape and parked nearby.

It had just stopped raining, and there were still puddles around. No sun reached the back alley they were in, and there was a chill in the air. There was brightly colored graffiti on the wall—dogshit art.

"We're here," Rogue said, getting out of the car.

"Thanks," Miseria said, not budging. She'd opened her door and was holding her hand just outside it.

"What are you doing?"

"You're not helping me out, Rogue?"

"……"

Was this witch merely an actor Velladonna had hired to punk him? That didn't seem entirely out of the question.

"……Ridiculous. You got in yourself."

"That's no justification for not doing it now."

"No excuse. If you're not coming, I'll just leave you here."

"You're no fun, Rogue."

At last, Miseria emerged from the car and began walking away.

"Let the investigation begin!" she cried.

"You keep quiet. I'll handle this."

There was a beat cop by the tape, and Rogue showed his *current* ID.

"Rogue, detective with the Elayl branch chief's team. She's cooperating. Expert on mana traces."

"Yes, sir." The cop saluted, then let them pass.

Velladonna had provided fake IDs for them. Likely because she couldn't afford to let word get around that witches were solving crimes. Rogue was all right with that; it was one less thing to worry about.

He reached the body bag, and his brows went up.

It was all flattened out, like there was nothing in it. Hard to believe an entire person was inside.

Scowling, he unzipped it.

"Heinous," he growled.

Inside the body bag, there was a baby. Not even a hair on its head yet. It was inside a massive coat, its eyes hollow.

Clyme Huta—a florist, eighty years old. A DNA test had proven it. Fingerprints also matched this baby to that old man.

All signs of those eighty years were gone without a trace.

"A fascinating manifest," Miseria said. "The young turn old, and the old are infantilized. Hmm, an impressive spell. Rogue, what do you make of it?"

"……There are no signs of a struggle. Eliminating those after the fact would take some time."

"Meaning?"

"We're off the beaten track, but all it would take is a glance down the alley. They couldn't clean up a body here. I'd imagine…the crime took place elsewhere, and they moved the body here afterward."

Miseria applauded.

"Excellent deduction. I can see why you're a rising star."

"Are you mocking me?"

"No, I mean it. You're mostly right. The problem is: How'd they get the body here?"

"That ain't a problem."

"Oh?"

Her smile held a question, and he ignored it, turning back the way they'd come. Past the sea of cops to the graffiti they'd seen on the way in.

"Our killer came through there."

Art on the wall, done by some local with different colors of paint, sprayed around. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Miseria slowly catching up to him.

"Your reasoning?" she asked.

"A Jump sigil. That'd make it easy to carry the body here, and if you cover it up with graffiti, no one'll notice the inscription."

To cast a spell, one had to chant or use a sigil. Chants activated immediately, while sigils allowed people to use magic after a delay. With premeditated crimes, it was standard practice to place sigils in the vicinity.

Miseria was clapping again.

"Wow! Then you'll just have to remove this paint!" she said, giving him an expectant look.

"……"

"Hmm? What's the matter, Rogue?"

He took out his phone and made to contact a friend of his in Forensics. They had a pressure washer.

"Nothing, just have to wait for the machine to do that."

"My, my. Why take the long way around? Just use a cleansing spell."

"……I'd rather not."

"Oh? Ah-ha!" Miseria clapped once, as if everything had just clicked into place. "You're Voiceless?"

"……"

He started dialing his friend's number…

"In that case, fine. I'll cast the spell for you. You could have just said."

She took the phone out of his hand and stuffed it back in his pocket.

"……That's personal information. Witches don't need to know."

"Hmm, you think? I already know your name and occupation."

"……"

"How long would it take for that machine to arrive?"

"……You're twisting my arm."

"No need to be all grim about it. We're on the same team! You need merely say the word."

"……I don't need your help."

"Are you *sure*? I could swear Velladonna said to solve this case *quickly*."

The smirk on Miseria's face could only be described as mean. It made his anger start to simmer, but Rogue kept a hold of his temper. Perhaps this wasn't a hill worth dying on. It *was* better to crack cases swiftly. For Rogue, and for everyone.

Even he couldn't believe how reluctant he was.

"……Fine, cast away."

"That's better." Miseria chuckled. She held out her left hand, palm facing downward and the back of it angled toward Rogue.

"What are you doing?"

"Give me a kiss right there. Oh, you'll have to kneel and express your gratitude in words. Keep the speech to less than a minute, please."

"Huh?"

His mind went blank.

What is she doing while we're at the scene of a murder?!

"What's wrong, Rogue? Do you have a problem with that?"

"S-several!" It was such a wild request he stumbled over his words. "A-are you insane? This is a crime scene! What even for?!"

"Rogue," Miseria said, taking a step forward. He took a step back. "People need motivation. Even the simplest task is just such a chore without a reason to act."

"Y-your point being?"

She took another step forward, and Rogue took another step back.

"I'll be honest with you. I don't actually care if this case gets solved or not. All I want from an investigation is *entertainment*. If

you supply that, then I won't hesitate to assist you."

Her eyes narrowed, taking measure of him. Her hand was still extended ostentatiously.

"……Entertainment?"

He took a third step back but hit the wall. There was nowhere else to go. His eyes met Miseria's and found a gleam within.

"Exactly. Do you understand?"

"……How could I?"

"Are we at an impasse?"

"……I didn't say that."

"Hmm. Yet you don't seem enthusiastic. Perhaps we should call the whole thing off."

Her grin was approaching shit-eating.

"……Hold on. Give me some other options. I'll do one of them."

"Let me see…" Miseria's gaze turned skyward, considering this. After a moment, she tapped her cheek. "How about here? It's softer than the back of my hand!"

"……S-softness wasn't the issue…"

"Oh? Then you want somewhere *harder*? My forehead, perhaps? I think you should be capable of that."

"_____"

Rogue was left dumbfounded but also certain of one thing. All Miseria wanted was to make a detective submit to her. She reveled in seeing him falter and writhe. That was her idea of *fun*.

"Shit…"

Even though he knew what she was playing at, he realized he couldn't put up further resistance. No matter how hard he tried, it would always end in his humiliation. And if this went on any longer, one of the officers nearby was likely to come nose around.

Groaning, Rogue went down on one knee.

I've gotta kiss her hand? Here?

Seen up close, the back of her hand was very pale but had a hint of pink to it, the only sign of life. It was downright bewitching.

……For the sake of the case!

He told himself this was a necessity.

But it didn't seem like he'd convinced himself.

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Rage burned within him. He wondered why he should have to kneel in front of a witch. He questioned what he had done to deserve this. Then he glared up at the root cause.

"Oh, that's a good look for you, Rogue. The agony of the young is like nectar from heaven."

Miseria was laughing so hard, there were tears in her eyes. And she was slapping his shoulders like she was congratulating him on a job well done—which only infuriated him.

"I'll make you regret this…"

"Looking forward to it!"

"Dammit…and you're plenty young yourself! 'Agony of the young,' my ass."

"Well, I *look* young at least."

That reminded him.

Right…witches don't age.

"But that's beside the point. I'd better keep my word. This way!"

Miseria dropped her smile like she'd flipped a switch, turning to the wall.

"Dead flesh lingering in the eternal night, become as dust, and begone."

With this incantation, she cast the spell; a reaction occurred and the phenomenon took effect. The wall in front of Miseria began to glow, and when the light died down, something dark and dirty was flowing away from the wall. When this flow subsided, the wall remained—with no paint left.

"There you have it."

"……I thought you could only muster a child's amount of mana?"

The relationship between mana and spells was like a puppet show. One needed multiple hands if they wanted multiple puppets to perform. Likewise, to cast a complex spell, one needed a lot of mana. Yet Miseria had done just that, supposedly with what amounted to the mana level of a child.

"Well, I'm *very* good at using mana. Feel free to shower me with praise."

"……"

Ignoring her prattling, he inspected the wall.

The scrawl on it was definitely a Jump sigil. A geometric pattern of red lines—he couldn't decipher all of it. It was a very detailed sigil, but a part of it was clearly missing. The killer had likely done that on purpose, preventing the sigil from functioning.

"……They're careful," Rogue muttered, shaking his head, "……but we don't have to use the gate. If we analyze it, we can learn where it goes."

"Wait. Rogue, are you forgetting something? I'm a witch. I can repair a sigil," Miseria said, raising an eyebrow. And smiling.

"You can?"

"Would I lie to you? Here, let me demonstrate. '*Blood tide rise from the gaps of the leylines!*"

Her words took effect. The sigil turned red and moved like it was alive.

A restoration spell? She made it look easy.

"Now we can make the jump. Shall we find out what our killer looks like?"

"Hang on, I'll call for backup."

Miseria grabbed his wrist. *Why?*

"Don't be a dull boy, Rogue. Let's capture them together! That's far more fun."

That sounded ominous.

Miseria's smile broadened.

"You mean—"

Before he could finish, Miseria lunged toward the wall. Rogue was yanked after her, and when he next opened his eyes, he was indoors. The area was poorly lit. A dying fluorescent light was flickering. There was a chair, a gray desk, and a pile of cardboard boxes. The shelves around them were lined with bottles of an all too familiar illegal drug, and a distinctive stench filled the air.

"Wha—? How'd you get in here?"

A man, his corpulent frame stuffed in coveralls, was holding a bottle in his left hand.

Their eyes met.

The man looked surprised, but he soon made up his mind. As he clutched the bottle, his right hand went into his pocket, and he pulled out a gleaming black pistol.

Then he aimed it right at Rogue's head.

Choking back a roar of rage (at Miseria), Rogue clenched his fist.

Bam!

At the sound, he jerked his head sideways. A bottle broke on the shelf behind him, and Rogue lunged forward. One blow to the liver at point-blank range. The man folded, not even making a sound. He shook once, his head fell back, and then he crumpled against Rogue —who tried to catch the guy, but his knees buckled.

"Damn, he's heavy!"

The unconscious man's full weight bore down on Rogue. He'd been off-balance and couldn't support the sudden burden. But even if the man was a criminal, Rogue couldn't exactly just let him drop. Rogue gritted his teeth and tried to hold his ground. Then the witch's voice reached his ears.

"Oh, nicely done, Rogue! Instantly toppling a hulk! Most impressive."

"Don't just stand there! Help me set him down!"

"I'm afraid I'm a feeble little thing. I'll be of no use."

She wasn't fooling anyone.

"You know that's not true!"

"I really am sorry. I could cheer you on? Good luck, Rogue!"

"Dammit!"

His arms and thighs were screaming, but he pushed through and lowered the man to his back on the floor. Only then did Rogue let himself collapse.

"Hahh…hahh…"

"This is no time for lollygagging, Rogue. He's our source! We must interrogate him."

"Says the girl who didn't lift a finger…"

Rogue picked himself up and collected the gun. With his safety assured, he got right up in the man's face and slapped his cheek.

"Hey, wake up."

"……Hmm?"

The man's eyes fluttered open.

"You're headed straight to jail, but first, we got questions," Rogue said. "Did you kill Clyme?"

The man looked away.

"……I have the right to remain silent."

"Buying time will do you no good. There's a sigil leading from the crime scene to you."

"……"

Rogue sighed and glanced around.

"With all the product you got, you're looking at years in the slammer. But if you tell the truth, we can shave some time off that."

"……I don't know nothing."

Rogue stood up. He'd tried to rattle him, but the man didn't even show a flicker of guilt——which meant he wasn't the killer.

"Who are you protecting?"

"…!"

The man's reaction was dramatic. Sweat poured down his face. Rogue pointed at the desk chair.

"That chair seems a bit short for you. Did you have company?"

"……I said I don't know nothing!"

"How many are in on it? Is it a woman?"

"……"

The man stared at the floor, his lips sealed.

Anything else was a waste of time.

Criminals in it for kicks would blab if Rogue pressed them. But not if they were trying to protect someone else. With perps like that, he had to shore up his evidence and slowly tighten the screws on them. They'd never confess until someone convinced them that the fight itself was futile.

"Gimme a hand this time. We're taking him to the station. Gotta grill him there."

Rogue dragged the man to his feet and moved toward the sigil… but the witch didn't follow.

"Hey! Aren't you gonna help?"

"Hmm…that just seems tedious."

"Tedious?"

"There are more dramatic ways to gain information. Like torture."

She said that so blithely, he *felt* his brows slam together.

"Don't be daft. That's illegal."

"Oh, laws. Very important, yes. But, Rogue"—the witch waggled a finger at him—"I'm a *witch*. Laws don't apply to *me*."

She said this without a shred of malice, so cheerily that he almost smiled along with her. Her expression was out of place in this dingy hovel. But he could feel the air change on his skin. A chill ran down his spine. The difference was obvious. Like he'd suddenly found himself standing before the gallows.

The witch raised an arm to the heavens.

Like an entertainer drawing attention.

"Come, Rogue. Let the puppet show begin."

She snapped her fingers.

"Wh-what…what's going on?"

A shriek split the air beside Rogue, and he wheeled toward it.





He saw the man's arm slowly rising, like it was dangling from an invisible string. Swaying back and forth, rising—like a marionette.

"M-my arm! What are you doing to me?!"

With his other hand, he tried to stop his involuntary movements, but not only did he fail…

"Calm yourself. This won't take that much time. Though, that's up to *you*."

…at the sound of the witch's voice, he lost control of his right arm, too.

Soon, the man's left hand was held out in front of his face, the index finger pointing up. Then with his right, he grasped his own nail. Clearly, it wasn't an act he intended, and it didn't look like it would end well.

"S-stop! You can't!"

The man was turning pale.

"Let's peel that nail off. You can handle it, right?"

"N-no——"

Rip.

The sound was clearly audible.

"————————"

The man's face twisted in a silent scream.

His eyes were wide, and his face drenched in sweat. She hadn't torn his nail off—he'd done it himself. Rogue didn't even want to imagine the pain. Before he knew it, he was scowling at the witch.

"……That's enough. I'm taking you back to jail."

"Oh?"

Miseria's gaze turned languidly toward Rogue. Her smile never wavered.

"If I do this a few times, he'll spill the beans. And yet you want me to stop?"

"……I never asked for this."

"But it's far more effective."

"Stop it. Now."

"Is this a lawman's pride? It's only us here. Don't worry, no one will ever know what you let happen to him."

"……I'm not taking a witch's word for it."

"Hmph." Miseria put a hand to her chin. "You're dead set against it?"

"……How can I not be?"

"So you want to save him from me?" She snapped her fingers, and Miseria's voice dropped, now low and weighty. "Then may your wish be granted."

Rogue found himself unable to move. Every part of him was stiff as a board. He couldn't even move his eyes. He swallowed—that alone was under his control.

She's got me.

There'd been no signs of a spell.

He wondered how she'd done it.

He racked his brain, then saw the man crumpled and trembling. Rogue felt someone behind him, and the witch's voice descended from above.

"You're about to take everything that was meant for him. Should I run you through it?"

Her voice full of glee, she placed a saw before his eyes.

"This will cut off your arms and legs."

An electric drill.

"Then a hole in your belly."

A hatchet.

"Then we'll crack open your skull. I'm so impressed you volunteered to do all this for him!"

As she went over the menu, it ceased to feel real. Was he dreaming? But Rogue's mind alone was still churning. The witch was actually doing this—it was a spell. A spell to turn people into puppets. The very trick that had earned her the code name Puppeteer.

He could not think of any way out of the situation.

He tried to bite his tongue as a form of protest, but just as his teeth began to exert pressure— "Oh, don't do that. You're *my* puppet now."

—she took control of his jaw, too.

The witch placed her chin on his shoulder, side-eyeing his face. She'd caught him so fast, it was like she could read minds.

"Stay with me for the whole program," she whispered in his ear.

True to her word, his arm moved on its own, grabbing the handle of the saw she'd put in his hand. He placed the blade on his elbow, then began furiously moving it back and forth, cutting through his jacket and shirt, feeling the cold metal teeth.

They touched his skin.

An instant later, red liquid sprayed. And kept spraying. A high spray, like rain pattering on the floor. He could hear them splattering all around—and over that, he heard a man's voice.

"Stop, I give up! I'll tell you everything!"

◇

"Huh……?"

Rogue was on his stomach, his cheek against a cold floor.

"Oh, you're up."

He looked toward the voice and found the girl who'd just killed him with her arms around the back of a swivel chair on wheels, which was squeaking as she spun. Her hair was swaying.

"That was a *long* nap. I was getting impatient."

"Wh-what are you say—?"

He scrambled to his feet, and Miseria stopped spinning the chair.

"That was just a dream," she said, smiling. "We played a fun little game inside a dream I conjured up. Don't worry, you both had the same one. That's only fair!"

A dream?

Rogue inspected his limbs. No pain, no wounds. But he could vividly recollect the agony of it.

Was none of that real?

"Ha-ha, lovely to see you so bamboozled."

"……What was that even *for*?"

"Just a little surprise. Fascinating, yes?"

He glared at the smiling witch, then glanced down at the man on the floor. He was clutching his left hand to his chest, whimpering.

"Now, now, don't look so mad. I'm kidding! I *did* get the intel."

"……I told you no more torture."

"What torture? That was all a dream! And by my standards, a tame one."

"Tame?"

"Yes…I even released the spell when he threw in the towel! I could have kept going. I could have kept that spell alive until your mind collapsed on itself. Or used another spell—"

Miseria rose from the chair and touched a finger to the man's brow. He screamed.

"W-wait! I said, I'll talk! You promised!"

"Don't worry, this is just a demonstration."

"N-noooooooooooooooooo!"

As Rogue watched in horror, Miseria took her finger off the man's brow. His scream faded, and he crumpled.

"Reading," she said. "It grants insight into the lives of others, but with a major drawback. Direct contact with memories mixes and shatters them. Like playing a puzzle blindfolded. A spell that brief doesn't give me much insight, and it merely knocked him out. But what if I dug further? I'd have a proper puppet on my hands. You catch my drift? I *am* choosing my means."

"……"

Rogue felt thoroughly defeated. Arguably, her point was that she could solve this crime whenever she wanted.

"What next, Rogue? Should I be *less* choosy?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly, like she was testing him.

"……Stop. We can't go around 'shattering' memories."

"You have a kind heart."

"……Put a lid on it."

He wasn't on board with any of this.

This witch cared nothing for the suffering of others and considered it viable "means." But worse, he hated how badly that had scared him.

Dammit.

Swearing under his breath, he went to pick the man up— "Wha —?"

All the man's nails were where they should be.

"……When did the dream start?" he whispered, dazed.

"The moment you brought up the law, sleepyhead."

She'd heard his hushed question.

"……Why?"

"Oh, did you *want* me to rip his nails off? If you prefer we play it that way, I can."

It felt like a gut punch.

"……You're a *witch*."

"That I am! Incidentally, have you worked out what I do for fun?"

He didn't answer.

He just glared at her over his shoulder.

"One of my favorite things is seeing men like you turn to darkness. I hope you're ready for it, Rogue."

Her smile was so beautiful, it gave him chills.

◇

A light turned on in a dark room.

The Lifetaker had returned and was staring at the prey they'd claimed that morning. Nothing untoward seemed to have occurred. There were no signs of anyone else entering.

——*Not that anyone* could *find this place.*

Their prey was exhausted, but the spark in their eyes proved the fight had not left them.

The Lifetaker did not approve. They were not there to make enemies. So they spoke.

"You're very lucky."

They could sense the prey's confusion.

"You have a vital role to play. One that will change the world."

The Lifetaker saw light in their prey's eyes. Perhaps they took that as a sign they'd be spared. That would never do. The truth must be made clear.

"You will grow old. Wither until your life turns to dust. That is the hand fate dealt you."

The prey howled. Despite the gag, the sound echoed through the room. The Lifetaker reached for them…and the howl did not subside.

Chapter 2
Collars Don't Suit Witches

The man they'd taken into custody was named Zack Knoll. A drug dealer who sold product outside the bounds of the drug laws.

He shared nothing further than he had under torture, but he did mutter his way through a few facts about his own baggage.

That room was where he'd made the drugs.

He'd come back from war, found no one willing to hire him, and been forced into that industry.

He'd just needed the money.

He'd never met the victim.

Someone he'd sold to likely put that Jump sigil there as a prank. (This was a feeble excuse. The room's security measures were rock-solid.) Rogue and Miseria interrogated Zack at the local station, and when they learned what they could, they dumped him in a cell and headed back to the Sixth Precinct. On the elevator ride down, Miseria reviewed what they'd uncovered.

"Zack Knoll claimed a child came to him. Claimed that child forced him to make the sigil. This child knew Zack Knoll was ex-military, so he believed they must have connections in the army."

"I guess we'll have to follow that lead."

"You have an angle?"

Rogue nodded. He'd heard nothing about problems in the military, and they were keeping a lid on their business. If he was gonna dig,

it would need to be in the past.

"……You've heard about the Cleansing War?" he asked.

"The Cleansing War?" Miseria seemed distant. "Did we have one? When someone gets to my age, memory's the first to go."

"Like you're going senile. How old are you anyway?"

"One thousand two hundred."

"Are you fucking serious?"

Rogue didn't know *that* much about the war.

It'd taken place as magic spread among the common folk worldwide.

The conflict started in the Zegmed Theocracy. *"Magic is a gift from God above, and the lower classes cannot be allowed access to it."* Zegmed used that as an excuse to wage war against their neighbor.

The Two Great Noble Houses of the empire sent troops to aid that neighbor, and Zegmed was destroyed. This led to accusations of excess intervention from opponents at home and abroad.

As a result, squadrons involved in the Cleansing War were disbanded at the war's end, and to protect their privacy, all records of those involved were destroyed. Detectives couldn't access their files.

"We're here," Miseria said.

The elevator doors opened. Rico was waiting underneath a light.

"Welcome back, Detective Rogue, Miseria," she said.

This came as a relief. A novel sensation, but a strange one. It genuinely felt like he was back where he belonged.

Largely the fault of his companion.

"Hi, Rico, having a good one?" she said cheerily.

"Not really."

"Oh?"

Rico pointed further in. "I was looking after the witches," she said.

Rogue understood. There was a whole crowd waiting for them. Clearly making themselves at home, some were playing cards, while others were eating or chattering away.

But when Rogue stepped into the hall, it became silent enough to hear a pin drop.

Heads swiveled.

Their faces were blank, but there was curiosity in their eyes, like he was an uninvited guest.

Probing the reason for his safe return.

The air crackled. He could feel the tension on his skin. The relief he'd felt not ten seconds before was a thing of the past.

"My, my, what's the matter? You look ghastly," Miseria said, acting perplexed. Clearly on purpose.

Rogue waited on tenterhooks for what the other witches would do next. And finally, a voice came from above.

"We're wondering why you didn't kill him!"

He looked up in time to see someone vault over the railing. They flipped several times in the air, then landed in front of him. A drop of several meters—yet they barely wobbled.

There stood a girl wearing a jacket with studded shoulders, and a pair of sunglasses. She wasn't exactly tall. She was a full head shorter than Rogue. She would look like a kid playing dress-up were it not for the collar around her neck—identical to Miseria's.

——*She's also a witch?*

As he wondered, Miseria beamed at her.

"Hello, Humafu. How are you?"

"Bitch, please. You're the registered newbie killer! You know damn well I had money on him croaking out there."

The sunglasses girl's voice was a low growl.

"Did you? At my age, memory's the first thing to go."

"Eat shit!" The sunglasses kid grabbed Miseria's throat with one hand and lifted her into the air. Her strength was shocking. She didn't even look like she was straining herself, but Miseria's feet were completely off the ground.

"Humafu, this temper of yours is not your best feature," Miseria said, kicking.

"And your worst feature is how you go around winding everyone up! I oughtta snap this skinny neck!"

Miseria winked at Rogue. The sunglasses girl caught it.

"The hell was that?" she asked.

"We haven't known each other long," Miseria said boastfully. "But Rogue and I are now good friends. He'll gladly step in to chew you out on my behalf."

"Huh…will he, now?" The sunglasses girl's voice got even deeper.

She glared at Rogue, baring her razor-sharp canines.

Miseria, you fiend! Leave me out of this!

"Maybe I'll kill you first, then!"

She tossed out this threat so easily, he could only assume she'd plain forgotten about the collar. *Is she nuts? How can she make a threat like that when she'd die the second she followed through?*

If logic wouldn't work, he'd just have to go for broke.

"……Let her go," he said, glaring back.

Frankly, he'd spent the bulk of his career handling dim-witted thugs like her. So what if this one was a witch? This type wasn't *nearly* as terrifying as Miseria.

"Son of a… You trying to stare *me* down?!"

The girl—Humafu—moved toward Rogue. She was so pissed off, she forgot what she'd been doing. He saw her toss Miseria aside.

Her hands went inside her clothes and came back out clutching a pair of fruit knives.

"The crappier the weapon the better. I've killed hundreds with shit like these! You're about to find out what a dull blade can do!"

She pointed the knives at a round table and chanted: "Engine."

Silver streaks flashed, and the table's legs were severed. The sound of it collapsing resounded through the hall. The blades had flown so fast, he hadn't even seen them. He'd worked it out after the fact, when he saw the knives fly back to Humafu's hands.

The fruit knives were floating some centimeters above her palms. They'd shot out with dragonfly-like precision, slicing through the table legs.

Object control magic. He'd never seen anyone this good. His rational mind was sounding the alarm, ordering him to turn tail and run. He did glance over his shoulder, but the doors were tightly closed.





"Shit."

Humafu lunged toward him.

Miseria was just watching. Rico didn't seem like she fought. No one was coming to his aid.

He raised his fists.

Guess I gotta.

"Taste my cheap-ass blades!" Humafu snarled.

"Huh?"

"Cheap, dull blades… You're gonna taste 'em!"

"Yeah, you said as much."

"Dull blades are…*yawnnn*…" She'd been acting funny even before the yawn. "…'eap 'ives….'urt 'ore…"

She tried to rub her eyes and bumped the sunglasses in the process. They fell to the ground, revealing more of her face.

The shape of her eyes alone made her look pleasant. But they were bloodshot, and when she yawned again, they teared up. Like she'd been up all night for the first time ever.

"Are you…sleepy?" Rogue asked, stunned.

"'hut up!"

She sent the knives toward him, but they were as slow as turtles now, and he easily avoided them. They traced a wobbly arc in the wrong direction entirely. "Guuuh." Humafu let out a groan and toppled over face-first. He had little reason to, but Rogue caught her anyway.

"So…sleepy…"

"What's her deal?" he asked with her in his arms.

"Humafu—the Noble Council designated her the Seventh Witch, code name Sleepless. She's unable to sleep unless she's killed someone, so ever since her incarceration, she's been permanently sleep-deprived."

He looked closer, and she was making sleepy noises, but each time her eyes almost closed, they popped back open. She was stuck in this loop in Rogue's arms.

"You're messing with me right?

"So…sleepy…"

"My arms ain't your pillow. Go on, scram."

"No…I'm sleeping here…"

Humafu had her arms around him and was shaking her head.

Rico looked relieved.

"She's in her quarrelsome phase. Let's peel her away."

With practiced ease, she took Humafu from him and dragged her away across the floor.

Rogue couldn't help but be impressed.

"Can't believe you get by in a place like this, Rico. Hats off to you."

"Always nice to be appreciated."

He thought her lips might have turned up just a bit. She bowed once, then hauled Humafu off into the back. Rogue watched her go, then rekindled his anger.

"……Did you have to drag me into that?"

Even he was startled by the edge to his tone.

"I do apologize," Miseria said, still lying in a heap on the floor. "You're a reliable man, Rogue. That was *cool*."

"Don't say what you don't think."

"I do think it! A lot! My, what a dashing figure you cut, swooping in to save me from Humafu! I want to hit the town and tell everyone! Rogue here is the coolest!"

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter. You could easily have fed her one of your dreams and saved your own ass."

"Hmm, that would be tricky."

At last, Miseria picked herself up. She moved over to Rogue, making herself look so serious, he was rather taken aback.

"……'Tricky' how?"

"Well, these collars are rather limiting. I can only keep that spell going for a short period of time. The moment she's got her hand on my throat, she's won."

"……Then why'd you start a fight?"

"Because I thought it would be funny? And I had a feeling things would work out this time."

For some reason, she looked rather bashful.

"This time? You do this shit all the time?"

"More times than I have fingers and toes!"

He sighed.

Genuinely appalled.

"……Some people never learn."

"Once you swallow, you forget how hot it was. Only a fool dwells on events of the past."

"You are owning yourself so hard right now."

At this juncture, there was a *thunk*.

"H-how are you just…talking to Miseria?!" a panicky voice exclaimed.

"……Hmm?"

He turned to look at the new girl who'd interrupted. She had dull brown hair and wore a nun's habit. She was pointing a shaky finger at Rogue. There was a book at her feet. Clearly, she'd dropped that, generating the loud noise.

"A-are you okay? No injuries? Did she do anything to your mind?"

At a glance, the girl did *not* look like she belonged there. Her gaze was going every which way, and her ears were bright red; she seemed to have no confidence or pride.

Unsure what to make of her, Rogue managed to answer, "Not that I know of."

She remained so distraught that he was not sure she'd heard him.

"My, my, if you don't introduce yourself, he won't know who you are. Do the thing," Misera said, smirking.

"R-right! I'm——"

The girl put one hand on her hip and held the other out in front of her, her gloved fingers forming a peace sign.

"I'm the Saint, Catherine! The Third Witch, with a deferred beheading of three thousand eight hundred years! Tremble in fear before me, Rogue Macabesta!"

"Uh……"

Rogue had no idea what to do with *that*. The girl herself appeared mortified. Her jade eyes filled with tears, and her pale skin flushed so red, she might as well have been in hot water. She was stuck in that pose, shaking like a leaf.





It would be one thing if she'd done it with gusto, but performed so awkwardly, it just made his protective instincts take over.

"D-Detective Rogue? I-I'm the Saint, Catherine? The Third Witch! My deferred beheading is three thousand eight hundred years?!"

She must have thought he hadn't heard her, because she was doing it again.

"……I heard you."

A gust of wind blew though the room.

"Er, um, okay."

Catherine put down her hand and hung her head. She glared up at Miseria through her lashes.

"……Miseria!"

"Oh? What's wrong? You look like you swallowed poison."

"You tricked me!"

"I did? That's not nice. I *may* have suggested that if you nail that pose, the newbie would be intimidated. Nothing more."

"So it *is* your fault! You made me… Made meee!"

"It's for the best. Good for a speedy introduction. Rogue, Catherine is always like this. Let's move right along."

"Wait, Detective Rogue! I'm *not* always like this! I'm very talented!" Catherine wailed, almost pleading.

"Not anymore," Miseria said sorrowfully, shaking her head. "She may have been fearsome once, but now she's simply a disaster. Time is a harsh mistress."

"You shut up, Miseria!" Catherine shrieked. "Detective Rogue! Let me help with the case! Get me up to speed!"

"Uh…let's just go." Rogue sighed.

"Augh!" Catherine looked crestfallen.

Miseria shrugged. "Dealing with her will simply waste daylight."

"Oh, not you," Rogue said to Miseria.

"Huh?" Miseria blinked at him in confusion. That was a new look for her.

Rogue patted himself on the back for that and turned to Catherine.

"Let's talk where she's not around. We need to catch up."

"D-Detective Rogue!" Catherine gasped, eyes sparkling.

"You're casting me out?!" Miseria cried. "That makes no sense! I must protest!"

"On what grounds? All you do is slow things down! Can you not go one minute without fucking with people?"

"I cannot." Miseria brushed back her white hair with the utmost pride. "It's what I live for."

"Get a life."

"This will never do, Rogue. All of us have principles by which we live—"

"This way, Detective Rogue!"

"Coming."

"Rogue?!"

◇

They found an empty room with a desk in it. Miseria had followed them halfway there, but when they ignored her protests, she stalked off, sulking. Or pretending to.

"Th-thank you, Detective. I really appreciate it," Catherine said earnestly.

Those jade eyes and delicate features could inspire awe in the beholder, but her brows—scrunched with worry—largely ruined the effect. The collar on her neck made her look like a shy girl with a secret love for punk rock who'd forgotten take off her choker.

"I just don't know how to handle her. She teases me relentlessly," Catherine admitted.

"I sympathize completely. I've had it up to here with her," Rogue said.

"O-oh? That bad?"

"Enough about her. We've got bigger fish to fry. Here's the case file."

He'd printed out the files from his phone and spread out the pages on the table.

"……Interesting," Catherine said, gravely looking them over.

"Did my predecessor work this case?"

"……"

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you!" Catherine wailed, bursting into tears.

"Er, uh…what's wrong?"

"I mean, I mean…" She sobbed. "He was *such* a good man! But Miseria made him kill himself…and I thought we were going to be friends! Augh!"

"S-sorry, guess that was a sore spot."

"It's fine, don't worry about it," she said. "Oh! I never gave him back the book I borrowed! Wahhhhh!"

"How can I not worry?!"

This was too much for him.

But it was also a distraction. Rogue cleared his throat.

"So—I take it you're willing to help work the case? Most people here seem to want nothing to do with me."

"I'd be glad to!" Catherine said, dabbing her face with her handkerchief. "We cannot let this vicious killer remain at large!"

The timid look in her eyes was gone. She looked genuinely invested in bringing the killer to justice.

But…

"……You mean that?" Rogue asked.

"Mean what?"

"The vicious-killer thing. I dunno what *you* did, but that idiot Miseria seemed hell-bent on hurting as many people as she could. The others aren't much better. I can deal as long as you're helping, but if you're just using the case as an excuse to indulge in your whims, that's a problem."

He waited for her response. Would she angrily declare she wasn't like them? Would there be more waterworks? Or…would he get a glimpse of what made her a witch?

After a solid ten seconds, Catherine beamed. "You're a *good man*," she said.

"Dunno what that means."

"I mean, you're actually interested. Most people hear 'witch' and don't even ask."

"……That doesn't make me 'good.'"

"It does. I can tell!"

This rattled Rogue.

Miseria and the others clearly didn't give a damn what anyone else thought. But Catherine? She seemed downright benign.

No, I can't let myself assume that.

The girls there were *all* witches.

There was no such thing as a benign witch. That made no sense. By definition, witches were malignant.

"You don't want to leave this place?" Rogue asked.

"I do. I dreamed about it at the Andewurs and every night since I came here."

See? They all want to escape.

"Detective." Catherine frowned. "Are you aware of the perks for helping with your investigations?"

Even witches didn't work for free.

"What do they give you?"

"Stuffed animals, books… Oh, and better food!"

"That sounds downright exploitative."

"That's not true! We're even allowed to watch television on Fridays!"

"……"

"And they might grant our requests. Even…our release."

"That's in the cards?!" he yelped. That was a bombshell.

"It's nigh impossible," Catherine said, wincing. "Even Miseria hasn't pulled it off. You'd have to literally save the empire in its hour of

need. Only that would make the Two Great Noble Houses relent."

"But they wouldn't let you stay *in* the empire, right?"

"No. We'd be exiled. Blindfolded and dumped in a strange land. With our collars still on, and not a penny to our name."

"Sounds rough."

"But hardly surprising. Anything they do to witches is justifiable. Witches are *evil*."

"……You're including yourself there?"

Catherine nodded.

"……Once, I did my best to help people. I used my spells to save people all around the empire. But…" Rogue held his tongue, waiting. "Eventually, I blew it. So many people… Tens of thousands. And my magic—"

Her voice was a croak.

Catherine turned away from him.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be sharing this. We're short on time."

"……Yeah."

He couldn't tell how genuine she was. But it left him wondering whether every girl declared a witch was truly a villain.

If what she'd done had been an unfortunate accident—if the damage was great enough, her intentions might not have mattered.

It was easier to deal with the obviously twisted witches. Easier if he was certain they were evil.

"Detective Rogue, let's follow this military lead. Um…and thank you for listening," Catherine said.

When he heard that—Rogue made a choice even he couldn't believe.

"Right. For military stuff, Daniel at Popmart in the Third Ward's our best bet. He's like a Peeping Tom for army dirt—constantly keeps an ear out. If you tell him you're acting on my orders, he'll tell you everything he knows."

"……Huh?" Catherine blinked at him.

Rogue was kicking himself already. He couldn't believe he was revealing his source to a criminal. Bad idea. But it was too late now.

What am I doing?

"Uh, so yeah, mm-hmm. Time's a wasting, so let's split up. I'll hit a different broker to verify—"

"Detective!"

She threw her arms around him.

That getup hid a lot. He could feel a soft weight against him.

"……!"

His thoughts dulled. The sensation took control of his mind. What *was* that pressing up against him?

"……Le—"

"Le…? What's wrong? You've turned bright red!"

"L-le…ggo!"

"Lingo? What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

Catherine moved her ear right up against his lips, straining to hear him. He could count the individual hairs on her head. He could smell her shampoo…

Rogue fought valiantly, but it was a full minute before he secured his freedom.

◇

Miseria came over to him five minutes later. She opened the door and stopped dead, sniffing the air like a dog.

"Oh dear," she said.

"……What?" Rogue asked, exhausted.

"Never mind. I have my own problems," she said. "Come, Rogue! The interloper is gone, and we're back on the case!"

"……I've had enough of you."

"I'm not about to let you rest! We've only just met, but I would imagine you'd have worked *that* out by now."

"Listen, witch, people don't give up that fast."

"Then I'll just have to work harder. We're going to be good friends."

"Put a sock in it."

"Your protests have grown rather uncouth, Rogue!"

He felt better. Served her right.

Miseria feigned hurt feelings, winding her hair around one finger.

"We have an analysis of the drugs we found at Zack Knoll's."

"Awfully fast," Rogue said. "No Forensics department here. Who did the honors?"

"One of the witches, naturally."

"……So you've stolen evidence?"

"Rude! I merely borrowed some. Who cares if there's a little less of it now?"

"Anyone would!"

"If we leave it to the police, it'll delay the resolution," Miseria said, then turned to the vents. "Hey, Angene! Your turn!"

Rogue looked up, bracing himself.

"……She's not coming out of that, is she?"

"You called?" a whisper asked right in his ear.

Rogue screamed. "Aughh?!"

He spun around to find a girl plastered right up against him.

Rogue leaped back, examining her. She was quite tall. He had to look up at her. She had on a robe, and her right eye was hidden behind her hair. She stood like a willow tree, only enhancing her ghostly vibe.

"This is Angene, the Professional," Miseria explained. "She enjoys making bombs and poisons, doing autopsies, hacking, the works. Here, she's mostly on forensics duty. The Noble Council declared her the First Witch."

"Did you have to sneak up on me?!"

"Tee-hee-hee-hee. Miseria, this one yells a lot."

"Doesn't he?"

"I *will* smack you," Rogue said, glaring at Miseria.

"Oh? Let's see you try. Go on. My cheek's right here."

Fighting off the urge to take that offer, he turned to the new witch.

"……What are the results of the analysis?"

"Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee. A very special cocktail. A steroid, a mana booster, a painkiller, et cetera—all blended together. Drink it, and you'll go a whole week without sleep or rest. Very potent, like someone trying to make their own superhero. Hee-hee-hee-hee."

Her body swayed, appearing even more willowy.

"A drug that'll make a superhero… Sounds like prep for their next crime," Rogue muttered.

"Indeed." Miseria nodded. "Perhaps what they've been doing was merely practice. Discarding the victims of their spell in back alleys like that—not even setting the scene—suggests that our killer thought nothing of them."

Her phrasing was unpleasant, but her profiling was on the mark.

This scumbag was covering their own tracks but not bothering with the victims. Perhaps they *wanted* the bodies found.

"Anyone besides Zack Knoll making this?" Rogue asked Angene.

"No. Some of these ingredients are imported, so I hacked the server and checked the purchase history, but he's the first to do so. Hee-hee, it's like he's brewing it just for his buddy. Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee. What a lovely friendship."

With that, she turned away. She was wearing heels but made no sound as she walked. Her hand reached for the knob.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. My work here is done. Hee-hee. The rest is up to you. Tee-hee-hee-hee."

The door closed on her sinister giggle.

She was fairly chill for a witch, and that left Rogue rather taken aback.

"She spends all her time in her room," Miseria said. "Researching magic, I'm told."

"Researching… Should we be allowing that?"

"Dunno, but we are."

"I was a fool to ask you."

As long as she had that collar, it could be contained…hopefully.

Nursing that fear, he tore his eyes off Miseria, reviewing the files. Zack Knoll would be released in three days' time. Whether he'd be charged with anything was undecided. They knew he had more info on the Lifetaker, so letting him go might be useful for getting a new lead. The question was whether they could get him where they needed him.

As he gazed at the grumpy mug shot, Miseria leaned in for a closer look.

"You know torture would be the fastest approach. It's already worked once."

"……Not happening."

"So you propose…?"

"This dude's risking his life for a *friend*. He'll have anti-Reading measures in place. Best we hit the pavement."

Miseria had been grinning the whole time. Perhaps she was eager to see him get stuck.

"We'll play it your way, Rogue." Even her phrasing was malicious. He swore under his breath. "But you shouldn't be so dismissive of friendship. Having friends is always better. They'll work for free in a pinch. Very handy."

"That ain't friendship."

"Friendship doesn't necessarily go both ways."

"That's even worse." Rogue sighed. Talking to her wore him out. "C'mon, let's go look for Zack Knoll's so-called friend."

"You got it, pal."

They were *not* pals.

◇

Club West, in the Fifth Ward, was run by a scumbag named Mikhail. Rogue had known him for a while. He was just enough of a scumbag

to have a sense for who was genuinely dangerous and keep his head down and out of trouble.

Rogue and Miseria were led by a bouncer through booming bass to a VIP room on the second story.

It was encased in glass and offered a great view of the party.

"Never did get the appeal of dancing."

"Heh-heh, Rogue, my man," Mikhail said, flashing golden teeth. "They're drunk on the vibes. Once you're drunk, *anything* is fun."

He'd had that gold implanted on his canines and was lounging on the couch like a big shot.

"Why don't you and your lady friend take a seat, have a drink?" he said, giving Miseria an appraising look.

A man in black brought glasses to the table.

"No, thanks," Rogue said. "You're not made of time, so right to business. Any idea what ex-soldier might be connected to Zack Knoll?"

"Oh…to that loser?"

"Likely got a rep. May have a kid. Ring any bells?"

"Rogue, business has been tough—"

"My ass it has. Spill the beans, I'm not here to wheel and deal."

"I see Bloody Rogue ain't gone soft."

"You catch my drift? Then start talking. No need for mind games."

It was best to stop men like Mikhail from saying anything. He was a scumbag in the truest sense—an expert on how to play any situation to his own advantage. Waiving authority and threatening violence made things easier.

"Well, one of my men did say something."

"Spit it out."

"He's ex-military, too. Served during the same time period as your Zack Knoll. When he started dealing, my guy had lots to say about that—shocked such a diligent man would go that way."

"Surprised myself. What's your guy's name?"

Mikhail shrugged.

"Quit last month. Moved back to the farm."

"Where? He have kids?"

"Ain't heard of any. If he ain't moved again, then he's on an island out to sea, name of Halbin. Heard of it?"

"Nope. Can you get in touch?"

"Afraid not," Mikhail said. "Once a man quits, he's not my problem."

"Mikhail, if this leads to trouble, we'll be making it your problem."

"Heh-heh, I'm an open book. Nightclubs only survive because the law turns a blind eye."

"Don't you forget it. So what's your man's name? Got a photo?"

Mikhail called over the bouncer, who left and came back with a sheet of paper.

"Staff roster," Mikhail said, grinning. "Rogue, we've got nothing to hide."

"We'll find out," Rogue said, glancing it over.

"Should I make a copy for ya?"

"No need."

Mikhail glanced at Miseria. "So who's this?"

"You don't need to know," Rogue answered.

"Oh? All right, then."

But his beady little eyes were locked on her. Miseria just smiled.

"It's been swell," Rogue said.

"Leaving so soon?"

"Yup. I mean, you've 'got nothing to hide.'"

By the time they left, it was dark, and a grimy moon hung in the sky. They got in the car, and just before they pulled out of the lot, Miseria said, "Rogue, you seemed like a real detective in there. Very intimidating."

"You be quiet."

"Still," she said. "We're right back where we started."

"……Yeah."

If the guy was overseas, there wasn't much they could do. And that wasn't the only reason they'd come up empty.

"The idea that the Lifetaker is an army brat isn't looking very likely."

"Oh! That's what I was about to say." Miseria looked vaguely surprised. "May I ask your reasoning?"

"It's not only based on what Mikhail had to say. I just remembered something like this happening before. I caught a dude named the Second Allan who used disguise spells. He'd turn himself into a dude named Allan to throw off our investigation. Had the sigil engraved on his teeth, so we couldn't even tell he was using magic."

"Placing the sigil inside yourself—classic. But on a tooth… How'd he do it?"

"With a laser. He had an accomplice who ran a machine shop."

"Modern technology is a marvel," Miseria said, impressed. "And you think the Lifetaker's up to something similar?"

"Yeah. They are turning their victims into the elderly or babies. We *know* they've got a spell that controls aging. Which means…"

"They can alter their own age to look like a child."

"Exactly. Not sure if Zack Knoll's hiding that fact or just never knew."

Miseria applauded. "Mostly in line with my own reasoning. Well done, Rogue."

"Shush."

"Now, now. Would you like me to pat you on the head?"

"No. I'd rather you tell me our next move."

"Hmm, about that."

"What?"

"Despite what I said, we may not be *entirely* back where we started."

They stopped at a red light. An old woman was tottering across the intersection in front of them.

"Meaning?"

"Why is the Lifetaker posing as a child? Wouldn't transforming into an average-looking person confuse the investigation far more than making us think they were underage?"

"I get that, but…"

"Would you like to know my answer? You would, right?" Miseria's eyes were gleaming, clearly wanting something out of him.

"I'm driving. Just spit it out."

The light turned green, and he floored it. Miseria slammed back against her seat and let out a grunt. "Urgh!" Rogue couldn't help but think it served her right.

She adjusted herself and continued, "I believe there is a goal beyond confusing us. A counterattack."

"How so?"

"To hunt those on their heels, they're spreading false intel, pointedly hinting that a child is involved. To the Lifetaker, our actions are predictable. Anyone who starts asking about military families must be the detective. They need merely find us and kill us."

"They're picking a fight with the bureau?"

"I believe that's the plan, yes."

It was hard for him to believe. Who ever heard of a crook chasing cops? That would leave them with every officer in the country breathing down their necks. It was tantamount to suicide.

"Why should we care? Let 'em come."

"Gosh, how bold."

Miseria began shadowboxing in the passenger seat.

"Don't be silly."

"Look! I'm rather good at this, don't you think?"

"I don't. Stop rocking the car."

"Such a dull boy. Do you take no joy in conversation?"

"I'm playing along plenty…"

"Hardly enough for me. Let us regale till our voices run hoarse!"

"Talk to the mirror. I bet you'd never stop."

"Right you are! I can talk forever with no one else around at all!"

Miseria leaned in, putting her lips by his ear.

"Or I can whisper that monologue in your ear, if you prefer?"

"Don't—"

A moment later, she murmured sweet nothings, like casting a spell. It tickled his ear, gave him goose bumps, and made his cheeks burn. And that was the least of it. What she said was far too inane—of such shockingly little value, it made him feel positively dizzy. Feeling his eyes roll back in his head, Rogue roughly elbowed her away.

"Fine, fine! We'll do it your way, just stop that!"

"Really? Delightful," she said but failed to stop muttering.

"Stop it now!"

"So demanding."

"Pot calling the kettle black!"

He meant that, but she just whispered, "I am the portrait of restraint," and he was left grinding his teeth.

Witches.

"Now what?" Miseria said, ignoring his scowl. "We may be stuck, but surely we can't leave things be?"

"……Gimme a second."

"Oh? You have a plan?"

In lieu of an answer, he took out his phone.

"Change of destination."

◇

It was the middle of the night, but the bureau never slept. Yellow streetlights poured in through the windows of his old home at the Third Precinct. He'd called ahead, so they were waved right in—staff and officers alike gave them curious looks, but that was the price he and Miseria paid.

The records room was in the basement. Inside, Rogue and Miseria were greeted by a wall covered in files.

“When in doubt, dig through files?” Miseria said, looking around. “Searching for what, exactly?”

“You remember the gate at Zack Knoll’s? Wondering if something like it has been used anywhere else,” Rogue said, pulling a box of files off the shelf.

“Blindly? From all these?”

“That’s how it goes.”

“You’re such a tryhard.”

“And you’re gonna help.”

“I’m afraid I’m very feeble,” Miseria said, flexing an arm. “My hands, they are white as a cave fish! Never known a day’s work! I could never lift.”

“A minute ago, you were bragging about your boxing skills. You’re a fount of lies.”

“You dare call me a liar? Please. I hate liars more than anyone. The word alone makes me break out in hives.”

“Yet here you are, lying yourself blue in the face.”

Seeing no use arguing further, Rogue focused on the files. That gate sigil had been distinctive. If it had been used in any other crimes, he’d spot it right away. The files were arranged by date, and he went through them quickly. He’d made it through a tenth of the total when he saw someone on the far end of the stacks.

Miseria must have given in and joined the fray. Flipping through a file, she said, “It’s midnight. Planning to sleep here?”

“Until I find something.”

“A real workaholic.”

“That gate’s not cataloged yet, so we gotta do things by hand.”

“Does your blanket not beckon to you?”

“Speak for yourself.”

He was appalled. Would she ever stop goofing around? But Miseria was, at least, doing the job. Flipping through files several times faster than Rogue himself was. Processing everything at a glance.

“You sure you’re not missing anything?”

"I could do all this before breakfast. Far easier than building a six-layer tower of cards."

"A singularly useless comparison."

But even as he spoke, his eyes caught something that gave him pause.

"I may have found it," he said. "A month back, there was a case where a drug addict was scrawling sigils on the sides of office buildings. The lines were all out of whack, and the sigils wouldn't activate, so it wasn't a big deal…but think it links back to Zack Knoll?"

"Meaning?" Miseria asked, coming over.

"No reason for an addict to scrawl sigils. Zack Knoll's a dealer. He may have ordered one of his clients to get out there and draw them."

"What for?"

"Unclear. But it's a lead. Let's check him out."

He shut the file and took a step but found Miseria blocking his path.

"What's the big idea?"

"I'm helping," Miseria said, smiling—and not budging.

"You're in the way."

"Rogue, I'm trying to save you time. Take a look."

Miseria pulled a file from the shelf beside her. A photo of Zack Knoll's gate was on the page.

"Well, shit."

"Your theory was accurate. Sixteen others have been arrested for illegal gate setting. Care to check them out? I'll show you around."

Rogue gaped as she slid the file back on the shelf.

"……What do you know?"

"Nothing. Like yourself, I merely speculated."

"Spit it out."

"Patience. Things will come to a head soon enough."

With that, Miseria patted his shoulder and moved past him.

He turned to find her leaning against the wall, kicking back.

She called it speculation, but she seemed convinced something was about to go down.

"Don't make this complicated," he said, moving forward.

"Not to worry. Nothing's going to happen *here*. But you should be prepared to leave on short notice."

Miseria was playing with the car keys. He wondered when she had picked his pocket. She tossed them Rogue's way, and he caught them one-handed.

And as he did…

…the phone in his pocket vibrated.

He answered with his other hand.

"Detective Rogue!"

A voice so loud that it shook his eardrum. So shrill it was hard to make out, but he soon placed it. The Third Witch, code name: Saint.

"Catherine?"

"Yes, Detective Rogue! Your information led me right to the crook! I'm staking out his lair!"

Crook? Lair? Was any of this true?

"W-wait, where are you?"

"Dillo! West Third Street, the red-roofed house by the dentist's office! I'm keeping a lookout from a nearby building."

"Wait, listen…!"

"Your lead gave me a suspect! The name's Iudic. A merc with ties to Zack Knoll! Loves fighting, been in all sorts of wars, including the Cleansing War."

Catherine said that in a single breath, clearly pretty worked up. Like she thought she had to convey everything she knew ASAP.

"Catherine, don't go—"

"His car's here! Hanging up!"

"——Huh?"

The line went dead.

Madness.

"Goddamn it!"

"A trap, of course. The Lifetaker would not be so easily traced. She found one of the threads he left lying around."

Miseria had her arms folded, unconcerned.

"You put her up to this?"

"Of course not. I merely thought it through. You should do the same. Why is our culprit putting gates around? There are bureau detectives everywhere. Anyone would need an escape route. He can flee through these gates *and* use them like this—to hunt us."

Miseria tapped a finger to her throat. Rogue stared at that a second, then burst into action.

An escape route. Fair enough. Zack Knoll was the Lifetaker's accomplice; it made sense he'd be placing them around. But the source Rogue had given Catherine had led her into danger. As he reached for the door, he heard a voice behind him.

"Going to rescue her?"

"Obviously!"

With that, he slammed through the door. Her footsteps followed. He ran faster, as if trying to shake her off, but her voice stayed right behind.

"I don't know what's so obvious about it. Let's take our time—let the Lifetaker finish her off for us."

"Why are you like this?!" he yelled and nearly crashed into a staff member. He dodged at the last second, his feet slipped, and he almost took a tumble. Staggering, he got a hand on the wall and found the witch peering up at him.

"Did that clear your head?"

"……I'm going to rescue her."

"I'll say it again. I wouldn't recommend it. Catherine's a witch. She's a beast wearing the skin of an adorable girl. She does not deserve your compassion."

"You're a witch yourself."

"That I am. Don't forget that, Rogue."

"You won't let me."

She giggled. Her lips curled.

"Right you are, Rogue, and that was a snappy comeback, so let me share something with you. You know she's a witch but not the extent of it. She's responsible for more deaths than any other witch at the Sixth Precinct."

"You're not much better."

"I am far better. Entirely different." The witch was clearly offended. "……Shall I elaborate?"

"……If you want," he spat, straightening up. He headed for the door at a brisk walk.

"Magic simply adores her. All she has to do is wish for something, and the spell comes to her from beyond. She learns new spells like you learn words or ideas. Can you believe it? She alone has crafted over ten thousand spells." Keeping pace with him, the witch cackled. Having the time of her life. "And she used that power to save people. Everyone went to her for help. They believed if anything went wrong, she'd take care of it."

"……"

"But she betrayed their faith in her."

"How?" he asked, despite his vow not to speak.

"A volcano near town grew active. If it erupted, the damage would be untold. They called for her. With her power, she could easily stop a volcano. She really could. Except…" The witch put a finger to her lips, like she was sharing a secret. "She failed. She couldn't do a thing. Supposedly, she couldn't predict how the crater would react. But she didn't even cast a spell. Perhaps the pressure got to her. It *was* her hometown, after all."

"And?"

"The residents knew her, so none of them evacuated. Confident she'd handle everything. They saw the lava flowing down hill and thought it was part of the show. They all died."

They reached the office door. He ran his ID card over the scanner, the doors opened, and the grimy night awaited them. There was a gust of wind, and he squinted into it.

"What do you make of that?" the witch said, leaning in. "Does that witch deserve rescue?"

Blue eyes studied him. A smile was on her lips, but that look was searching deep inside Rogue.

"……How would I know?" he said, dragging his gaze away.

◇

A car pulled into the driveway and stopped. A small figure emerged. *Iudic?* They wore a gray coat, with a hat pulled low over their face. Peering over the lot wall, Catherine asked her fairy for help.

Fairy, will you knock off that hat for me?

Naturally, fairies did not actually exist.

This was simply what Catherine had called it long, long ago, before magic research had progressed at all. The only reason she was still calling it that was because she thought it was very saintlike.

At her murmur, magic moved the way she wanted. To her eyes, it appeared to be light. It formed an orb, bumped Iudic's hat, and knocked it to the ground. To anyone else, it would have looked like the wind had blown it off.

Making magic do what she wanted was nothing to Catherine; she'd never needed to use complex incantations or sigils. All she had to do was say what she wanted.

Iudic bent down to pick up their hat.

I can almost see them…

Catherine let out a squeak.

Iudic's face was covered with a cloth. There were holes in it where their eyes were. Golden eyes. Which snapped toward Catherine.

——*They're onto me.*

And in that instant, all the orbs of light around her moved to surround the house.

Why?!

She hadn’t given any orders. On closer inspection, there were sigils carved in the road around the house. The same color as the ground itself, so she really had to squint.

“Ow!”

She felt a sharp pain in her back.

Catherine swung around and found a transparent wall rising up to surround the house. Everything beyond it was wavering, like something seen through a liquid. She gingerly poked the wall, and a jolt of pain hit her, like she burned herself. She yanked her hand away.

Uh-oh.

“Enclose. A spell that traps people inside.”

Their voice was muffled, and their gender was unclear. She found Iudic standing there, looking right at her.

“A-are you going to kill me?”

“I don’t want to kill anyone like you, but that is the outcome here.”

“Y-you’re under arrest! Come quietly!”

They clearly thought they’d won, which meant she had a shot. Catherine could do anything with magic—even alter an opponent’s spell.

Fairy, stop this spell!

Nothing happened.

The transparent wall remained in place.

“Wh-what?”

Iudic shrugged.

“All mana in the vicinity is locked in the wall. I’m not sure what you were up to, but you can’t use any magic.” Catherine glared at the figure, but she could not wipe the smirk off their face. “I’m not going anywhere near you. Don’t want to accidentally leave *evidence*.”

With that, they pulled a lighter from their breast pocket. They tossed it onto the grass in front of them. The ground must have already been coated in oil; the flames spread quickly.

“Don’t worry, a witch can survive this. If you’re a *real* witch.”

Iudic headed off around the side of the house, their diminutive frame vanishing around the corner.

"Ack! Come back here!"

She gave chase but lost sight of them.

What the—? I thought magic didn't work here!

She looked around but saw only the walls of the house. Nowhere to hide.

"Oh, no…"

She could hear the crackle of burning grass.

The whole yard was turning red.

She could run into the house, but that would only buy her time. Maybe if she filled the tub—but she soon abandoned that line of thought.

This is my penance. For all those lost lives.

The people from her hometown were dead because of her.

Only Catherine could have saved them, but she hadn't.

If she closed her eyes, she could still see their final moments like it was just the previous day. The town swallowed up by molten rock. Like a sandcastle washed away by the waves.

Her heart ached. They must have been in such pain. Such fear. And yet Catherine had…

"……I should perish here."

The fires were almost upon her.

She made to wipe her tears, and something hurtled out of the fire. It grabbed her in its arms, pulling her away from the flames.

"Wh-why……?" Catherine stammered. "Why would you save me, Detective? I'm a witch……!"

"……Good question. What the hell am I doing here?"

Rogue sighed. He was soaking wet, water dripping from his hair and clothes.

"I borrowed the neighbor's hose," he said, putting his jacket over Catherine. "This should ward off the fire. Let's get outta here."

"W-we can't! The crook said there's no escaping this wall! And we can't use magic inside the barrier!"

"……Well, shit."

Rogue yanked open the door to the house and stepped in, but he came right back out.

"Nope, the water's shut off. Dammit! This was the plan all along."





As she watched him swear, the guilt overwhelmed her. Catherine hung her head.

"……I'm sorry, Detective."

"Don't be."

"But……"

"I made my choice. It's not on you."

"……Detective."

"Quit crying and help me find a way out. The perp was here with you, right? Where'd they go?"

"I don't know. They hid behind that wall and vanished…"

Rogue swore and started banging on the wall.

"……There's gotta be *something*."

"Is Miseria…?"

"Huh?" Rogue's expression was frightening. "She didn't feel like coming. She's chilling in the car."

"No, I mean," Catherine said, "she might be able to free us."

"Are you nuts? She'd never lift a finger without a good reason."

"You never know! She's never liked any detective as much as she likes you. This is a first. Miseria really seems to enjoy talking to you."

Miseria was a cruel witch. If someone bored her, she'd soon discard them. With a masklike smile plastered to her lips, she'd kick them off a cliff. Without the slightest hesitation. But to Catherine's eyes, the way she treated Rogue was entirely different.

Catherine didn't care what happened to her, but she wanted this detective to survive.

"Call Miseria. I'll negotiate."

◇

Rogue handed his phone to Catherine, and Miseria picked up on the first ring.

"Miseria?"

"Oh, hello, Catherine! How have you been?"

Her usual flippant tone got on Rogue's nerves, but she was their sole lifeline.

"We're surrounded by a wall we can't get out of."

"Just use your magic tricks! Jump, Dive, or even go over the wall with Floating. There must be something."

"There is not. My magic is sealed."

"Oh dear. Well, nothing I can do about it. Good luck!"

"Miseria—he'll die."

He heard laughter from the phone speaker.

"He'll be dying for you*. I did warn him!"*

"——! You really are wicked!"

"Not as much as you."

Catherine ground her teeth.

"Please, help us. I know you've got a dozen ideas on how to get us out of here."

"Even I'm not up to this task. It would take at least three days."

"Stop teasing me!"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to. Just…every time I see you, the urge to tease you is irresistible. Probably because of that wholly inappropriate code name. 'Saint' of all things."

"Miseria——!"

"I love honest people. And I loathe you. You get why, yes? 'Saint' Catherine? A sad little witch, unable to offer any form of salvation."

He'd heard enough. Rogue grabbed the phone from Catherine.

"Where do you get off?" he growled.

"I do choose the time, place, and person."

"What did Catherine do to you?"

"Nothing, really. But what will become of you? If you stay there, your death is guaranteed. Such a shame. You'll die knowing she's to blame. But that's nothing to be ashamed of. It's the natural response. Anyone would do the same. Still, we did work this case together; I'd love to give you options—"

"……Enough."

He cut her off.

He didn't like this. Not how certain she was of the outcome or the way she was baiting him to abandon others. All of it pissed him off. He wasn't about to dance on a witch's hand. Her words bounded around inside his brain and drove him to action.

"I'll do whatever you ask—just save *us*."

The words hung in the air.

It felt like every other sound died away. Her breath, the sound of clothing rustling, all signs of the witch's presence were replaced with silence. For the first time, he noticed Catherine staring at him. Eyes and mouth open wide. And that served as a harsh reminder— —he'd just yelled at a witch.

But anger still held sway. He growled into the silence.

"Did you hear me?"

Still no answer. Just as he was wondering if she'd hung up…her voice came again.

"……I hear you. This is me being surprised. Have you already forgotten the pain I put you through?"

He paid her spite no attention.

"And your answer?"

"You said 'whatever,' but are you sure*? I might genuinely take you up on that. Perhaps even ask—"*

"Spit it out. I'm a man of my word."

"Rogue, why are you going so far out on a limb for her? You haven't fallen in love or anything, right?"

"Nope. I just can't stand people like you."

"I get that a lot. But that's hardly motivation—"

"It's plenty," he growled, so low that it hurt his throat. "I'd rather die than let someone aggravating get their way."

Everything around them had turned red. He heard glass shattering. Perhaps the screen of his phone had cracked. Flames

were licking at the edges of his vision, but he listened close—and heard a faint sigh.

"Then I'll be destroying your mind," Miseria said. *"Turn you into a puppet who'll follow anyone's orders blindly. I'll leave that puppet at the Sixth Precinct—that will let all of us do whatever we please. Does that work for you?"*

"Do it, witch. Try me. Make it happen!"

He spoke on reflex alone. No thought for the consequences. Fury at this witch was his sole motivation.

"All right! Then let's get to escaping!" Miseria exclaimed. *"If you're trapped where magic doesn't work, then we* know *how the Lifetaker got away. There's a secret passage somewhere! Likely a manhole leading to an underground tunnel. I don't imagine it's very long, so search the ground around the spell wall."*

Catherine went running off, scrambling along the ground, feeling out everything. Soon enough— "Found it!"

It was in the weeds. Catherine yanked a few out, revealing a camouflaged lid.

Rogue shoved the phone in his pocket without hanging up and grabbed the lid. It opened with a clatter, revealing a ladder below.

A voice came from his pocket.

"Sounds like you've located it."

He glanced back and found the house in flames. This corner was the sole area not on fire.

He sent Catherine down ahead, then slid down the ladder himself. The burning air vanished, the temperature dropping. When his feet touched down, he found himself in a short tunnel. Barely big enough for someone to fit through.

Catherine moved down it ahead of him, found another ladder, and paused.

"……I'm so sorry, Detective Rogue. I was careless."

"Heard it already."

"True…"

With a clatter, she went up the ladder, popped off the lid, and found Miseria waiting for them.

"You both smell *burned*," she said with a pleasant smile.

They called police dispatch and the fire department, then clambered back into Rogue's car. None of them were talking. Rogue was not in the mood, Catherine was clearly despondent, and Miseria was sitting in the back seat, grinning but not saying a word. Perhaps she'd decided not to push her luck. But even that was infuriating.

I knew she was rotten, but there are limits!

They'd been in a sea of fire, but she'd chosen that moment to unleash the full weight of her malice on Catherine. Rogue couldn't abide that.

How dare she talk like that to anyone?

"Hey—" "So—"

Rogue and Miseria both spoke at once.

"You first." "Go on."

Miseria shook her head.

"Please, say your piece. Mine was not important."

"Then I'll say this. You owe Catherine an apology."

Catherine looked shocked.

"Detective, I really don't—"

"Nope, it's bugging me. I'm gonna make her say it."

"Okay," Miseria said. "I'm sorry, Catherine. I really do mean that. I'm sure you won't believe me, but this is from the bottom of my heart."

She bowed her head without a moment's pause.

"……You really mean that?" he asked.

He didn't buy it. She never meant anything.

But Miseria's face was hidden in shadow.

"I know exactly why you don't believe me, but I *do* mean it."

"You're a hard lady to trust. What brought this on? Are you up to something?"

"Even I regret my choices sometimes. I went too far this time. Crossed a line."

Miseria closed her eyes.

"More than one," Rogue growled.

"Enough, Detective," Catherine said. "It's all my fault anyway. Miseria said nothing wrong."

"But…"

"I *am* a witch. I don't require the comfort of some ordinary man."

Catherine's tone was final. Any trace of her usual insecurity was gone. A strong-willed light shone in those jade eyes.

She's capable of this?

"……In that case, fine," Rogue said.

The mood in the car was heavy. Miseria alone was her usual self, obviously unrepentant.

"Oh, right. I got bored while you were escaping, so I found something."

Miseria pulled out her phone and showed them the screen. Rogue glanced at it over his shoulder.

It showed a Jump sigil—a gate. A basketball-sized mark beneath a tree lining the street. The effects of a spell varied by the size of the sigil for all spells, not just Jump. At this size, only a little kid would be able to fit through. But…

The Lifetaker could pull that off.

They'd probably escaped through the tunnel, then used this gate.

"They must have had Zack Knoll putting gates all over the city for months now," Miseria said, putting away her phone. "Back to that file room?"

Rogue shook his head.

A counterattack trap, gates to escape… There were only so many gates Zack Knoll could have his buyers set. This wasn't a spell just any average layman could use. Most of those buyers would have been decoys.

In other words, they'd been buying time until the Lifetaker could set their own network of gates. Now that they had what they

needed, following that lead would not get them to the real criminal.

They had reached a stalemate.

Or a form of one anyway.

The more they chased, the more the crook would run.

Do we ask for backup? No, we can't. The Sixth Precinct is top secret.

He felt like there were gates scrawled all over the view streaming past the windows. Every tree and wall seemed like a likely suspect.

What they needed wasn't inspiration or clues but manpower.

If they had three hundred officers searching the town, that alone would corner this crook. But with witches on the case, that approach was not an option.

So what do I do?

"Rogue."

"What?" he snapped. Despite himself.

Miseria didn't bat an eye. "About my demand…"

He'd forgotten all about that—or wanted to. How did one go about destroying a mind?

If that ran afoul of the collar, that would help him, but Miseria had already taken out any number of predecessors, so there was no use getting his hopes up. His stomach hurt.

"We'll discuss that back at the station," Miseria said. "You don't mind, do you, Rogue?"

"……Fine."

That was the best he could manage.

◇

At the Sixth Precinct, the mood had changed. Witches who'd shown no interest in him were now studying his face intently. Pointing and whispering.

What now? he wondered but didn't stop.

His mind filled with worst-case scenarios. When would Miseria come for him? What spell would she cast?

"Hey, everyone! We're baaack!" Miseria said.

All eyes turned to her.

"Hmm? Is there something on my face? Whatever. I have a surprise announcement!"

I'm doomed. She's gonna tell them all.

Rogue braced himself.

"I've decided to fully back this detective. My wits and powers are at his disposal."

——*She's pulled the rug out from under me.*

As if on cue, every witch fell silent. An ominous hush. *What did Miseria just say? She was backing him? How did that work?* Before he knew it, he was yelling.

"Wh-what the hell is wrong with you? I'm so lost! You've done nothing but get in the way!"

"My, here I am, offering to help, and you spurn it? Did you *want* me to destroy your mind? I mean, I do aim to please. Won't even charge you for it."

"I don't even know what you're talking about!"

"Yo, Detective. I'm up for working tomorrow, too. If I'm in the mood," Humafu said. She was lounging in a chair, reading a magazine, and didn't even glance his way.

"H-huh?!"

The rest of the witches began chiming in.

"Okay, then I'm in, too."

"Fork over the files. I'll be done in five."

And more.

Rogue's head was spinning. Feeling like he was being punked, he searched for a camera—and found Angene grinning from ear to ear, holding up a square device. *Is that…a receiver?*

She pressed a switch on it, and he heard his own voice blurting, *"Wh-what the hell is wrong with you?"*

Sh-she bugged me?

Rogue quickly patted himself down and found something hard tucked inside his collar. It was shaped like a fly and very small. He yanked it off his shirt.

When did she…? Well, she only had the one shot.

When she'd popped up right behind him. He hadn't noticed her come in at all, so she could have planted it with no issue.

"Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee. You're an easy mark. Hee. We all thoroughly enjoyed the escape drama. Hee-hee-hee. Hee-hee."

"Y-you knew about this?"

"Of course," Miseria said. "I just didn't feel the need to tell you."

Everyone but him had been in on it. Catherine alone was waffling around, at a loss.

"We all agree you ain't half bad," Humafu said, pushing her sunglasses up and shooting Rogue a bleary look. "So we're down to play. Keep it fun, or you won't last long. Ugh…I'm so sleepy… Someone lend me a lap…"

"So…it was all an act?"

Miseria shook her head. "Not all of it. Some of that was just for my own entertainment. We test every detective sent here, and I'm the examiner. Congratulations, Rogue. You're the only one who has ever passed."

Then she pointed at Catherine.

"She wasn't told anything. I mean, she can't keep a secret."

"Y-you're so mean!" Catherine wailed. "Ganging up on me!"

"Aw, there's nothing mean about it," Miseria said. "We're actually grateful!"

"You don't sound grateful!"

"Listen to the voice in my heart. It's applauding!"

"That's not true! You can't fool me!"

"Right, you're no fool. Maybe a little slow on the uptake, but no reason to put yourself down."

"……You're lucky it was me. I'll let you off with a lecture."

"Hmm, what a privilege. But let's leave that for later. Do you have anything to say, Rogue?"

She turned to him, and his mouth opened—but no words came out. Things were moving too fast, and his mind couldn't keep up. Should he be relieved to have avoided that dire fate? Or pissed at her for tricking him?

"Yeah, I dunno. What good did this do anyone?"

"Like I said, all we're after is entertainment. Best not to overthink it."

"So if it's fun, you don't care if one of you nearly dies?"

"Hmm, I feel like you still don't get *witches*," Miseria said, putting a hand to her chin. "We've melded with magic and no longer age. We're very hard to kill. Not nearly as fragile as we might look."

"But…you *can* be killed. If you're burned to a crisp, you're not surviving that!"

"Likely not. But I haven't actually *tried*."





"I think we can assume you'll die."

"Such a pure soul. Witches are ideal pawns in life-threatening situations. Nothing for you to wring your hands about."

"……"

That didn't sit right.

Rogue's morals went against her words.

"You look disgruntled."

"Go talk to any man on the street. They'll look just as peeved."

"Ha-ha, perhaps they would."

"……Hmph."

He turned his back, but Miseria just stalked around to the fore, shoes tapping.

"You know what to do?" she asked.

"……What?" he said, wary.

Miseria smiled, like teasing him was a source of infinite delight.

"Exactly what you've been doing. Let us spin your head around and give us all a good laugh. Keep right on flailing."

She held out her hand.

Rogue glared down at it. Pale, delicate. Yet it had slain any number of people. Not a hand he should ever shake. Perhaps this was a deal with the devil. Once he signed it, the path ahead of him would be a sickening one.

And yet…

"This one's real?" he said, taking her hand. "Then I'll be your damn clown. Just make sure you help me back."

"You're such a worrywart." Miseria winced.

"With good reason. I nearly died myself."

"Just you wait. When we're motivated, we can accomplish *anything*."

◇

“There you have it. Find this mark, paint it over. Make sure it’s totally ruined,” Rogue said, printout in hand.

About twenty youths were before him in street clothes, none of them looking like they were listening to a word he said.

“Yo, Humafu, can we really trust them?” he whispered.

“Relax, they’re my posse. They’ll do whatever I say.”

This corner of the Fifth Ward housed a ruined textile factory—now a gang hideout. Humafu had taken Rogue there, saying she had a plan. Naturally, he wasn’t in uniform and had taken steps to disguise himself, so he had no concerns on that front.

“We’re giving gang members information on an active crime.”

“They’re the ones graffitiing these sigils. Even if they know they’re gates, they can’t make use of ’em.”

Humafu seemed really confident, but Rogue wore a permanent frown.

They may be juveniles, but they’re still criminals. I dunno about this…

“That hard to believe, Detective?” she asked.

“Yeah, well.”

“Then watch me handle ’em.”

Humafu stepped up to the line of gang members, hands on her hips.

“Shitbirds, do this right, or your heads roll!”

A stir ran through the crowd.

“You know damn well I don’t make idle threats! What I say goes!”

Some of them were outright trembling. No one dared argue. Clearly, she had them scared shitless.

“Cool,” Humafu said, pleased. But as she started to turn—

“We ain’t your slaves! I can take this bitch!”

—a musclebound man pushed through the crowds, pointing a gun at her. Rogue started to act, but Humafu waved him off.

“You stay put,” she said, stepping forward.

Her eyes were on the man with the gun.

“Taking a shot at me, are ya?”

"Don't you move!"

The gun went off, opening a hole in the factory wall.

"Your aim sucks!" Humafu said. "Try that a little closer."

A second later, she was right up against him, her hand on his wrist, pointing the barrel at her forehead.

"Pull that trigger. You can't miss."

"Th-the hell is your problem?!"

"Shoot me."

Her lips curled in a grin below those sunglasses.

Bam!

Humafu's head snapped back.

Rogue almost yelped.

But she didn't go down.

Her back arched, her hair dangled—and she slowly, dramatically straightened herself up.

"Ah…ah…augh…!"

Horrified, the man fell on his rear.

"You new here? You all gotta educate! Recruits gotta know who I am! Or…"

Two fruit knives flew out from behind her, slicing through the gun in the man's hands like it was made of plastic. A few *snicks* later, and a pile of scraps lay at his feet—impossible to tell they'd ever been a gun.

"…they'll get themselves killed."

No one dared move a muscle. Humafu slapped Rogue on the back.

"Let's beat it," she said. "I'm sleepy as all hell."

"Are you…hurt?"

"Hng." Humafu pulled up her bangs, revealing her forehead. "Not a scratch."

Like she said, her smooth, pale forehead was unblemished.

"How's that work?"

"I'm cursed."

"By who?"

"Does it matter? I'm cursed as shit," Humafu swore, kicking the door open. "Means not only can I not sleep, but I can't even die."

She spat something out into her palm.

The bullet that had been fired into her forehead.

Humafu looked up at Rogue and flicked away the blood-covered bullet, raising an eyebrow.

"Good for putting the fear of god in people, at least."

"……How did it even get to your mouth?"

"Through the brain."

"……"

An answer so blunt, he didn't know what to do with it. He awkwardly reached for the car door.

"……If your gang does their thing and takes out the gates, that'll cut off the Lifetaker's escape route. But—"

"But?"

Once he was sure Humafu was strapped in, Rogue hit the gas.

"—the Lifetaker's killing indiscriminately. We've got no way to pin down their next target. No telling how many more victims they'll claim."

"Hmm, you think?"

"I do. This just makes things even."

"Victims… *Yawn!*"

That was a big one. Humafu swayed, banging her head on the dash. And didn't move again.

"Wake up."

"I ain't asleep. Just sleepy. Mmmph…"

"You seem like you're five seconds from passing out."

"Mmph…hwa!" Humafu snapped up. "Where are we? Are we home yet?"

"Uh…I'm really starting to have doubts about this sleepless thing."

"I can't sleep, man. Ain't slept in five hundred years. Focus on the case! Quit running your mouth! Eyes on the road!"

"……"

"Here I am, willing to help—don't you let me down."

"……"

Don't snap at her. Don't. She is *a witch.*

Rogue took a deep breath.

Humafu had her arms folded, leaning back against the headrest like a boss. The exact attitude that led her to form a posse from local hoodlums.

"……If we could just find a pattern."

That was the crux of the matter.

Disguise spells were common as muck. Their first line of defense was physical evidence—trace mana—and the second was security cameras. But that did them no good if they didn't know what the perp looked like before the spell. This left them searching through the victims' contacts, but that accomplished nothing if the targets were random.

Where do we even start?

Frowning, he groaned.

"Here," Humafu said, eyes front, reluctantly showing him her phone. There was a map of the city on it, with six red dots. Spaced out, avoiding clustering.

"What am I looking at?"

"Where the perp did the kills. His hideouts."

Rogue was so shocked, he almost ran someone over. He looked at Humafu, and she only said, "Steady."

"You can't just drop critical intel on me!"

"It don't matter *how* I say it."

"……And you've been with me this whole time! When did you work this out?"

"Quit yelling. This'll move the case along! Bow before me!" Then she added quietly, "It's Angene's work, though."

"Don't steal her credit."

Humafu yawned. It looked totally natural.

She had some nerve.

"So? How'd she do it?"

"List of empty properties and the like. She sorted out what was borrowed in someone else's name, sent 'em a virus that siphoned their personal data, listed up the likely suspects."

"……You people *can* do anything."

He was half appalled. Miseria had promised as much, but this was going *too* smoothly, and it unnerved him. If the witches applied themselves, any case was a trifle. What good did regular detectives do?

"Ain't nothing witches can't do, Detective." Humafu's voice reached his ears. "All you can do is cower in fear."

"……Not about to," he croaked, which earned him a snort.

"Fine. Look at me."

Humafu turned, taking off the sunglasses. Her eyelids slowly opened, looking right at Rogue. But those droopy eyes were just adorable, like a kitten's. They were bleary from sleep deprivation, and the sunlight was sparkling in them—not the least bit intimidating.

"……"

They really didn't suit her character.

"Don't forget, we can take you out any time."

"……Uh-huh."

He shifted slightly.

"Ha! Don't you run."

Humafu leaned in, peering up at him. Her brow furrowed—that alone had some power to it, but the eyes ruined it. It was all he could do not to grin.

"That's more like it. Either way, it ends the same. Do what I say, or else."

"……Sure."

"Don't you get on my bad side."

"……Mm-hmm."

She hissed, and he turned his attention to the road—which was blessedly empty. He offered a silent prayer that the rest of the drive back would be equally empty banter.

◇

Rogue was leaning against a wall in the Sixth Precinct living areas, the rooms where the witches lived. He'd been there a solid half hour, checking his e-mail and fighting off the urge to yawn. At last, a door opened.

"Thanks for waiting. Sleep is a powerful foe," Miseria said, shaking her head. "A concern since the dawn of civilization. One humanity may never fully solve."

"Only you think that."

It's too early for this.

Is she like this year round? Perish the thought.

If they stood around talking, it might never end, so Rogue started walking.

"Think we'll find any bodies?" he asked.

"Odds are not high."

"But it's worth checking out."

"That it is. You're in touch with the other witches?"

"About to. Doubt they'll follow my orders."

Miseria chuckled. "You're a doubting soul. I told you, you passed the test."

"The endurance test for your new toy."

"A clever way of putting it. You understand your position well."

"Wish I didn't," he growled, then pressed the button for the elevator.

Not the one from the church to the Sixth Precinct, but the one for switching floors within the precinct itself.

Only twelve people lived there, but it was a rather large elevator. Everything there was roomy. It was built like they expected to entertain visiting dignitaries. He assumed this was to keep the witches happy—it made him want to find who'd budgeted for this and chew their head off.

"But your concern is appropriate," Miseria said, tapping one foot. "Purehearted, honest witches like myself *will* help. But there are many kinds of witches."

"'Pure,' my ass."

"Don't I look the part?" the witch boasted, hand on her hip, smiling an extrafishy smile.

But it didn't matter.

He rolled his eyes at her.

"Admit I'm pure?"

"Say what you want."

"Well, since you've admitted it, let me tell you—you have nothing to worry about. Half of them are cooperative. They'll get the job done. The other half are not at all cooperative, their souls as black as mine is pure as the virgin snow. Just being near them will taint you. Best be wary."

"The way you talk, I can never tell what you actually mean."

"I mean everything. This is a charitable warning! If you desire a long life, at any rate. How large is your pension?"

"I'm not staying here that long."

Miseria sighed dramatically.

"Then we'll be stuck waiting for the next doomed detective? Deary me. More unfortunate sacrifices."

"They're spinning in their graves."

"Warning number two—anger is bad for your health. You should smile more!"

She put both index fingers to the corners of her mouth, pulling them upward. Behind her, the elevator arrived, and the doors opened.

And who's the one damaging my health? he thought, lining up beside her.

◇

One of the Lifetaker's hideouts was in the Sixth Ward, south of Dillo, in a middle-class residential neighborhood. It was inside an abandoned elementary school. There were signs labeling it as private property, no trespassing, and the grass had been left unmowed. Once brightly colored playground equipment was now rusted and stained, with dirt plastered to it.

The morning dew dampening the hems of his trousers, Rogue cut through the grass and stepped inside the school building. Already, he caught the stench of death.

That's more than one or two.

There were eight classrooms, and all of them stank.

"Going in."

He reached for the first door. It was rusty and took him a minute to deal with. They spotted the corpse before he got the door fully open.

A skeleton. Practically all the body's flesh was gone.

It was bound hand and foot to a folding chair, head down. The stench of rot wafted from it. Flies clustered around the few remaining scraps of flesh. The stench was like a punch to the nose as he stepped through the door.

"My, my. Quite a welcome party," Miseria said, whistling.

Rogue wondered if the Lifetaker expected them to find these bodies. Like the backstreet, this place might be a trap.

He picked his way through the class and saw the blackboard behind the podium. On it was a gate sigil in chalk. The Lifetaker was making good use of the existing facilities.

"A practical son of a bitch," he muttered.

"Or a stingy one," Miseria answered. "Let's move on."

Each class had more bodies. Not an unusual sight in his line of work, but it still put a frown on his face. It was like the perp had dumped his trash here.

Each classroom had another gate. And there were dampening spells on the walls and windows—no matter how loud someone

screamed there, no one outside would ever hear a thing. That alone proved the murders had happened there.

Once they toured the classrooms and stepped outside, he started getting texts from the other witches. More bodies and gates. Nothing else was out of the ordinary, so they were headed back to the precinct.

Miseria peered over his shoulder.

"Then we should head back ourselves. We *did* find something, after all."

"Something unpleasant."

A witch in his passenger seat—and a rotating roster of 'em. He wouldn't have even imagined the concept before coming to the Sixth Precinct. Something like that could never happen. But here he was, their new toy. As he laughed at himself, they left the elementary school.

They drove for a while, then Miseria said, "I have something important to tell you."

"What?" he said, looking askance.

"Finding the lairs and gates is arguably progress. But to get us here, you've been burning rubber."

"Yeah, well, detectives don't get to sit still."

"Hmm. Rogue, you of all people should be aware of what you lack."

"Huh?"

Miseria put a finger to her chin for emphasis.

"Well, if you haven't, you haven't. So be it."

"Wait, did you…?" Rogue felt his palms sweating on the wheel. "Are you up to something again?"

"That's such uncharitable phrasing. I am not up to anything. Nothing major anyway."

Miseria wagged the finger in front of her face with a sinister smile.

"It's almost noon. We're rapidly running out of the carbs necessary for sustaining life. Burning through those means our brains are

barely functioning. Rogue, this is an active threat. There's a café over there. Pull in."

He glanced at it, ran through what Miseria had said, and concluded that the concern wasn't real. The café sign vanished behind them.

"Or we could try that burger joint. An adult male requires approximately two thousand two hundred calories a day. You can brute-force what you've lost with a burger and a shake."

The burger joint sign vanished behind them.

He could feel a vein throbbing in his forehead. It was starting to hurt. When Miseria started talking about what donuts were made of, he lost it.

"Can you not just wait? Are you a child?!"

"I'm an adult. I told you, I'm one thousand two hundred years old. But the longer you live, the more unbearable some things become. You'll understand one day."

"Don't try and make it sound deep!"

One hand on the wheel, he shoved the other in the glove compartment, pulled out a packet of gum, and threw it at Miseria.

"Chew on that! And don't waste our time."

"Rogue, this is mint. That doesn't qualify as sweet."

"Shut up!"

As he roared, he saw a familiar nun by the side of the road. She was talking to another, older nun. Was there a problem? He pulled over to scope it out.

"I—I am not part of the church," Catherine was protesting.

"Then why are you wearing a habit?" the other woman said.

"This is my, um, identity? I'm……a Saint."

"Saint?! Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Uhhhh?"

Unable to watch, Rogue rolled his window down and called out, "Hey!" Catherine spun around, startled. "Sorry, she just likes dressing up. Not trying to convince anyone she's with the church. Can you let her off the hook?"

The woman grumbled but went away. There was a church nearby—she must work there.

"Th-thank you…," Catherine said, climbing into the back seat. She looked exhausted. "I was looking at empty houses and bumped into her on the way out…"

"What a nightmare! We must get you some chocolate to make up for it. Rogue."

"Don't have any," he snapped. He looked at Catherine. "You find anything?"

"There was a gate on the floor. What about your end?"

"Same. With bodies."

"It was so gross. Catherine, you should have come."

"You are incorrigible," Catherine said, reaching up and yanking Miseria's earlobe. "Why do you always have to be mean?"

"Rogue, Catherine is attacking me." He ignored her. "She's pulling my ear! It hurts! Why must I be subjected to this? I haven't the faintest idea!"

"I warned you! You have a lecture coming! This is it!" Catherine yelled.

"No, this is merely corporal punishment. If you *are* a Saint, you should defeat me with logic."

"If I let you speak, you'll hurt my feelings!"

"Incidentally, you're stronger than you look. I'm actually crying."

"Let the tears flow! Sob into your sleeve!"

"My, my, such a twisted mind. Today may be my last day alive."

He balefully watched Miseria shrug.

So dumb.

"Rogue, you are betraying me! You swore you would come to my rescue!" Miseria wailed.

"Don't remember doing that."

"Well, once she's torn my ear off, you're going to have to live with that regret. I imagine it'll take its toll on your sleep."

"Your ear isn't coming off, and even if it does, I'll sleep like a baby."

"You'll have bad dreams. Nightmares of my torture!"

"Sounds like a good dream to me."

"Cruel! Heartless! You would abandon a weeping maiden?" Miseria cried, but Rogue felt absolutely nothing.

They could see the Sixth Precinct now. Having realized ear pulling was getting her nowhere, Catherine was now grinding her knuckles against Miseria's forehead. Miseria vainly tried to elicit sympathy, toying with Catherine. The futile squabble continued until the car stopped. It was out of his hands.

Wondering what was wrong with them, Rogue shook his head.

Still, the witches had done good work.

They'd found weapons at the Lifetaker's lairs. Destroyed sigils set as traps and made it possible for personnel from other divisions to cover the rest. Even the trap that had worked so well on Catherine proved no obstacle to the witches now that they were motivated. His phone was lighting up with photos of the scenes.

Meanwhile, the street gang's graffiti attack was effectively disrupting the gate network. Someone believed to be the Lifetaker was beginning to appear on city cameras—because they were forced to get around on foot. Literally.

They had golden eyes.

The one distinctive feature Catherine had identified. Eyewitness reports were coming in from across the city—not just the cameras. Rogue felt sure it would not be long before the crook was under arrest, in jail, and on the receiving end of his fist.

Lying on a bed in the nap room, he threw a punch at the ceiling. There was a knock at the door. That was unusual. The witches usually spent the night in their private chambers, and none had ever visited the nap room before. Rogue sat up in bed.

"Come in."

"Er, pardon me…"

It was Catherine.

"Whatcha need?"

"Er, um…" She stopped in the doorway, fidgeting.

"Take a seat," he said, exasperated.

"Uh, okay."

She settled down on a cushion a few steps away from Rogue.

"So? What?"

"Um, well…"

Catherine's brows drooped. Her mouth flapped, and her eyes wandered. She'd come to him but seemed reluctant to speak. He waited patiently.

"……Oh! Good work today! I hear you made a lot of progress!" Catherine finally said.

"Mm-hmm."

"That's nice! I mean it…"

"Right."

"……" He shot her a look, and she blinked rapidly—anxiously. "Er, um! Sorry I didn't warn you about Miseria. Testing you… That's not right!"

"Under the bridge. The upside is we're making good progress."

Catherine groaned.

"You have something to say or not? 'Cause I need to get some sleep."

That got to her.

"I do! I have something!"

Catherine realized how loud her voice got and blushed.

"……I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

Not like anyone else is sleeping here. Rogue and Rico were the only nonwitches in this precinct.

Catherine's gaze dropped to her hands.

"……Why did you become a detective?"

He wondered where that had come from. He looked her over, but there was no smile on her face. She was staring him right in the eye.

"Why do you wanna know?"

"……You came to my rescue. There was no good reason for you to do that, but you did. I've never been able to save anyone, but if I can, I'd like to make your wish come true."

Rogue gulped, then dropped his gaze. And instantly regretted it. He braced himself for what she'd say next, but she said nothing further. Not pressing this point. But also not about to leave.

The only sound was their breathing. It felt like time was moving slowly, and that soon got to him.

"……No real reason," Rogue said. "That's how things turned out."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I got nothing. No wishes. Just doing the job I got." He got off the bed, standing up. "You can be a detective without some grand motive. All you have to do is show up to work. Now, we've got an early morning tomorrow, so let's wrap this up."

"Detective," Catherine said, standing up and moving toward the door. With her hand on the knob, she finally smiled. "I'm on your side. If you find a wish, just say the word."

With that, she left.

◇

Three days later.

The whiteboard in the briefing room was now covered in gate routes and victim photographs. Occasionally tapping the board, documents in his free hand, Rogue was busy getting the cooperative witches up to speed.

Miseria was in the front, while the others were leaning against the wall or spinning in office chairs. They were all over the place. They might not have looked like they were taking this seriously, but they were lending an ear, and that was oddly satisfying.

"We've ruined the bulk of the gates in town. Beat cops are watching their lairs. If this isn't enough…then the Lifetaker is just

better than us. Even then, we've definitely got them on the ropes," he concluded.

The witches began filing out. Humafu was still nodding off on her chair, but Catherine grabbed her hand, hissing, "Get up. On your feet!" so no problems there.

"You're on a roll, Rogue," Miseria said.

"Let's hope so."

"A loaded statement."

"You just ended my 'roll.'"

"That can't be! My presence is comforting!"

"Don't make me puke."

Rogue turned to Angene, who was lurking in the corner. She'd been standing there the whole time, like a ghost, but that was comparatively harmless. She was a ghost who did her job. A hundred times more reliable than Miseria.

"I take it you're done?" he asked.

Angene nodded, her gaunt frame swaying unnervingly.

"Tee-hee-hee-hee, I looked into it. Care to hear?"

"Lay it on me."

"Hee-hee-hee-hee. The imperial database shows *no one* with golden irises."

"No one?" he repeated.

"Not a one."

"……Right."

"Tee-hee. Hee. But that's according to the database. It doesn't mean no one living here has them. There are people who haven't registered their eye color. Tee-hee-hee. Hee-hee. Good news, yes?"

"Hmm, tell me, Rogue, do you have any friends with golden eyes?" Miseria asked.

"I don't think so. As far as I know."

He dug through his memories, but nothing rang a bell.

"Not even one?"

"No. I think I'd know. Detectives are trained to remember faces. If we were waiting for our check and a wanted criminal passed us by

unnoticed, we'd be the laughingstock of the force."

"What a coincidence. I've lived a very long life and have never once seen anyone with golden eyes," Miseria said. "Isn't that curious?"

She was acting like this was profound.

A vein throbbed on Rogue's forehead.

"'Curious,' huh? You got a point to make?"

"Clever boy. Shall I extol your virtues?"

"No, thanks. Spit it out."

"Ha-ha, as you wish."

Miseria took the dry-erase pen from the whiteboard and began drawing something. In less than a minute, she had a picture of a droopy bulldog.

"The Lifetaker is still on the run. The lairs we've found may not be all they have. That brings us to this man! Let us interview him once more."

Miseria was very confident.

"Who is he?"

"Gasp!" Miseria tapped the bulldog with her pen. "You can tell at a glance!"

"Never seen him before."

"Y-you're kidding, Rogue?! Do you have amnesia?!" Miseria had never looked this distraught. "Zack Knoll! The first man our investigation discovered! Can you not tell? I drew this myself!"

"Oh? This creature's meant to be him?"

"Huh?" Miseria froze.

Does she not know?

Rogue finally figured it out.

"Do you think…you're good at art?"

"N-no, R-Rogue! How could you say that?!"

"Tee-hee-hee-hee. A chimpanzee could do a better sketch," Angene muttered.

"See?"

"N-nooo! I refuse to accept this! If I don't, then I can remain a good artist in my mind!"

Rogue would have loved to rub more salt in the wound.

"Doesn't matter."

"You beast, Rogue!"

"You think Zack Knoll's gonna talk?" he asked, lowering his voice. "He seemed ready to take his secrets to the grave."

The grim note in his voice made Miseria quiet down.

"He'll talk," she said, narrowing her eyes.

"Why?"

"You'll have me with you. Trust me, Rogue. I can get him to spill the beans even without magic."

Zack Knoll's residence was old, even by Sixth Ward standards. No elevator, only stairs. Bathed in the flicker of a dying fluorescent light, they ascended.

"Think he'll resist?" Rogue asked when they stopped on a landing.

"I doubt it, but it can't hurt to be careful."

Zack Knoll's room was the third from the stairs on the second floor. At least it wasn't all the way up.

When they reached the door, Rogue rang the bell. They soon heard footsteps, and the door opened.

Perhaps he'd been napping. Zack Knoll was rubbing his eyes.

"Gimme a sec…," he said, then gulped. Eyes locked on Miseria, he turned pale. "……You again."

Feeling almost sorry for him, Rogue persevered.

"I see we need no reintroduction. Got a few questions for you, won't take long."

"……I already told you everything."

"You know you didn't."

Rogue glanced at Miseria.

"He did not. Zack, everything you hid from us has come to light. We're simply here to verify those facts. Would you be so kind?"

She spoke like every word she said was a fact.

"……Come on in," Zack Knoll said, waving.

"Don't mind if I do," Miseria said.

The interior was full of stacks of books, with barely anywhere to stand. They picked their way through, trying not to knock anything over. Zack Knoll headed to the kitchen and came back with some tea.

"It's cheap crap," he warned.

"Thanks," Miseria said, taking her cup and gulping it down. "That hit the spot! Shall we get down to business?"

Zack Knoll's brow furrowed.

"You're protecting someone," she said.

"I ain't protecting—"

"No, that's quite all right, Zack. We know," she said, as if she was comforting him. "It's a heavy burden for a former soldier to carry. Let me ease that for you."

This visibly rattled him. His eyes darted every which way, as if he was searching for help, and when they finally settled on Miseria again, his voice shook.

"N-no, I got nothing."

"It must have been hard. But that's over now."

"Y-you're bluffing! You don't know nothing!" he yelled, knocking over a stack of books.

Miseria looked ever so sympathetic.

"I know. You can't refuse an order from nobility. You're not to blame. It was just a bad situation."

"——How?!"

Zack Knoll's eyes were bulging.

"An order from the Two Great Noble Houses is like a meteor strike to the head," Miseria said sorrowfully. She thumped her chest. "——But don't worry! We're here to free you from that man! I swear!"

Quivering, Zack Knoll sank to his knees, his head down.

"……He's a devil. Not human."

"I'm aware. His soul is black as night."

"……I tried to get out of making all those gates. And the mana boosting drug."

"It's impressive you even tried."

"……But I had to put my own life first…… Can you really arrest Chronos?" he asked anxiously.

Is that our killer's name?

"You see, our precinct is tasked with bringing in the big guns. Criminals other stations can't lay a finger on. Don't worry. You're free."

"F-free…"

Zack Knoll buried his face in those big arms and wept. Hard to believe he was ex-military.

She really did it.

She'd pried info out of the man just by talking circles around him. He completely believed she already knew the whole story.

Miseria was gently patting his shoulders.

"We are fully prepared to place him under arrest, but we want to ensure the cleanup goes smoothly. Could you provide a list of the gates you made? The main ones alone will suffice."

Their eyes met, and she raised her brows.

"Doesn't have to be today. Take your time. We'll get back to work."

She got ready to leave, but Zack Knoll shot to his feet, grabbed a piece of paper, and put it to the wall.

"Gimme a minute!"

"Doesn't have to be now."

"That devil ran me ragged! I gotta get some payback!"

He began furiously writing, then handed over the notes. Miseria watched closely until it was in her pocket. Like a benevolent goddess.

"It's safe with me," she said. "We'll be going now. Thanks for your help."

"Y-your name?"

"Lillia."

"Th-thank you, Lillia! You've done so much for me!"

How touching.

Zack Knoll saw them out, and they exited. On the way down the stairs, Rogue said, "Was that all a bluff?"

"More of a hunch, really. We had his identity narrowed down," she said. "Before we arrived, I was fairly sure our killer was from the Two Great Noble Houses."

"Based on what?"

"The lack of golden eyes in the database bothered me. We've been acting on the assumption that our killer was ex-military, but if he'd served, his eye color would be registered."

"But that alone won't get you to the nobility."

"You remember the day Catherine was almost burned alive? I discussed that with her in detail. The Lifetaker called her a *witch*. And made it sound like he knew her history—but that's very odd. Our profiles are a secret even to the bureau detectives. So how did the Lifetaker acquire this information? Why did he know she was a witch the second he laid eyes on her?"

"Because—"

Rogue remembered what Velladonna had told him before he came to the Sixth Precinct.

"The rank and file aren't told about it. Only important *people. Like me!"*

Even at the bureau, only the precinct chiefs were aware of the witches. No ordinary soldier would have the intel.

"Naturally, if we're talking status alone, high-ranking government members also know about witches, so I couldn't completely rule them out. But…"

"The eyes?" Rogue said, feeling very stupid.

He'd seen the evidence himself in the chief's office.

Photographs of members of the Two Great Noble Houses. Every one of them had golden eyes. He'd stood there thinking about how

creepy that was.

Seeing the look on his face, Miseria nodded.

"Exactly. Only members of the Two Great Noble Houses have the power to erase their own biometrics. Not that I can say *who* actually did it." Miseria pointed back up at Zack Knoll's place. "Fortunately, he jumped the gun, and we confirmed it."

"You said 'that man,' but did you know for sure?"

"That was a blind guess. If he'd turned out to be a woman, I had no backup plan."

"……Luck was with you, then."

"I know!"

They reached the car.

Feeling like a weight was off his shoulders, Rogue took a moment to look up at the sky. They'd been walking a tightrope, and his body temperature was running high. But it wasn't a bad feeling.

Inside the car, he didn't start the engine. "Gotta call the chief," he said, putting his phone to his ear. Velladonna let it ring a full ten times before picking up.

"Hello, Rogue. How's it going? Headed back here?"

"Chief, got a quick question for you."

"Mm-hmm?"

"Any member of the Two Great Noble Houses named Chronos?"

"Haah……" Velladonna let out a very long sigh. *"There is,"* she answered.

He almost jumped to his feet. He glanced at Miseria, flashing his teeth at her, and she blinked once, then smiled back, giving him a thumbs-up. *What the heck am I doing?*

"Rogue?"

"Uh, yeah. Brace yourself for a shock. This Chronos is the Lifetaker—"

"Yes, I know."

"Um."

What?

"First, let me say, well done, Detective Rogue."

Velladonna's syrupy tone had vanished completely.

"What do you mean, Chief?"

"Chronos Drakenia. I'm already aware that he's the Lifetaker. He's the cause of our headache. For a serial killer to come from the Two Great Noble Houses…"

"I-if you know that, we haven't you stopped him?"

"It's a long story, Rogue. First, the two houses are enemies, and we at the Magic Crimes Bureau are under Drakenia's control. But Chronos is from their house. Having one of their number placed under arrest will make them look bad. The Ligtons will make a field day of it. And we can't allow that."

"So we're letting a criminal remain at large?"

"Not at all," Velladonna said. *"If the case is handled by a team that doesn't exist—yes, your Sixth Precinct—then no one can interfere. Since we can't go public with the information that we're secretly harboring witches, even if you arrest Chronos, the Ligtons and Drakenias can go about their business as if none of this happened."*

"So you knew but did nothing."

"Exactly. The bureau investigating this officially would be a betrayal of the Drakenias and leave them exposed to Ligton attacks. Our only choice was to put this in your hands."

"Uh-huh."

For the first time, Rogue caught a tremor in his voice.

"Chronos stole Drakenian magic secrets and fled. The very spell used to lengthen the lifespans of the heads of their two houses. It melds with the skin of the caster, granting them control of biological time. They are free to be as old or young as they like. There were other highly fatal spells stored there, so had he stolen something else, my head may well have left my shoulders."

Now she was just grumbling.

"But here he stole this great secret, and he's using it to commit crimes. Such a waste."

"……Right."

"Rogue, I'm grateful to you. I'd love to take you out for dinner. But that aside, once you resolve this case, I've got a seat for you in management. You'll have earned it. I pray you can resolve this swiftly."

She hung up.

There was a storm in his heart, but he could not quite put a name to it.

First on his mind were the Lifetaker's victims. If the Bureau had ignored the power struggles and put their weight behind the case, they could have solved it easily. He punched the wheel, and the horn went off. A bit loud for a residential area.

"……Sorry," he said.

It didn't feel like his voice.

The bureau's whole purpose was bringing criminals to justice.

At least, that was why Rogue was a detective. If a crook was within his arm's reach, he wasn't about to let them go, no matter who said so. He didn't give a damn about reputations or money. Neither of those had any place in an investigation.

But a thought nagged at him.

——*Is that true?*

There was a villain right next to him. A really nasty one. Should he be letting her off scot-free?

"Cheer up, Rogue! We've almost cracked the case!" the witch said. "This is an achievement you should be proud of."

Her placid tones really got under his skin. Not just her—he was mad at himself. For being consoled by a witch.

Witches were evil.

They had to be.

He wasn't lost in thought for long, but he spent that whole time about to explode.

"Is that the sort of thing you said before you killed your victims, witch?" Venting that made him feel much better. "Crack the case? Yeah, we'll do that. Far too late."

He was lashing out at her—harsher each time.

“Maybe it’s hard for a witch like you to grasp, but these victims aren’t coming back.”

He was so mad, he starting saying things he shouldn’t simply to hurt her. He couldn’t stop himself.

“Witches killed my parents. Not just them. The old man next door, my friends from school, my teachers, every relative I had—and they made them suffer. Really messed them up. Did anyone even spare a single thought for the lives they ruined? Wonder how it felt to see their parents no longer themselves? People who’d been laughing with you a day before acting like someone else entirely! Tell me, what should I have done? Not like what you did is any different.”

He’d put it all out there…

…and it only made him feel empty.

“Ha…you don’t even care. Humans are nothing but toys to you.”

Rogue shot Miseria a baleful look, and her smile hadn’t even flickered. Not one word he’d said had got to her. And that felt like proof witches weren’t human.

As he looked away, Miseria broke her silence.

“There’s nothing I loathe more than an apologist,” she said. “Sadly, our world is full of them. So few people willing to decry what is clearly wrong.”

“……What about it?”

“In my eyes, you’re doing the right thing.”

“……Talk does no one any good.”

“Right. You know that, so how long are you gonna sit here?”

Miseria grabbed Rogue’s chin and forced him to look at her.

“Hnnngh?”

“What you should be doing is sharing this intel with everyone so we can catch our killer as soon as physically possible.”

Her blue eyes bored right through him. There was no anger there—simply his face reflected in them.

“……That’s a twist. Getting lectured by a witch?”

“Lecture? Please. I’m merely stating the facts.”

"……Facts? What's even real?" Something hot came rushing up his throat. He tried to fight it off and failed. "An achievement? I ain't looking for praise! I don't need a witch consoling me! That just makes it worse!"

He slapped her hand away from his chin.

The crack echoed.

"Oh…"

He saw how red the skin on her hand was and gasped.

"Sor—"

"Don't be. You said nothing wrong."

Miseria shook her head.

"But we don't have time to waste. As the net tightens, the Lifetaker may resort to desperate measures."

She was a witch, a goddamn witch. But right now, she felt like a detective first. And like a veteran officer coaxing a greenhorn through a psychological wound.

"I hit you! At least let me say—"

"You hit me? When?"

Miseria crooked her head, playing dumb. Shutting him down.

He had never been so humiliated.

Power struggles at the top weren't Rogue's problem. But learning about them had shaken him. Even though he had better fish to fry.

He felt something on his head. *It feels like…a hand?*

"You're a hard worker," Miseria said. Running her fingers through his hair, like she was straightening it out. It wasn't the worst feeling. It was actually kind of pleasant. His own reaction made him freeze, and her voice purred on. "And that hard work is what made me want to help. Where no one else managed it."

"……Stop that, you're embarrassing me."

Miseria pressed her fingers softly into his scalp.

"If you want me to stop, try slapping my hand away again."

That wasn't fair.

"……Now I can't stop you."

He turned away, and she chuckled.

"Just let me have my way with you."

"……Shush."

"Oh, your ears are red! My, my!"

His brow furrowed. In lieu of answering, he closed his eyes.

He wondered if she really was a witch. She said she'd killed five detectives. He knew she'd brought calamity upon the empire. She tortured people. She said all kinds of awful things. But Rogue himself was uninjured. That's why he was finding it hard to believe she was a witch, that her crimes were real.

It wasn't like she had him wrapped around her finger…

…but right then, he felt like letting her rub his head a while longer.

Once this case was solved, he'd be leaving the Sixth Precinct behind.

◇

A painter located at the border of the Fifth and Sixth Wards—that was where Zack Knoll's note lead them. Unlike the previous hideouts, this one was neatly kept. The shutter out front was open, but the interior was dimly lit, so it was hard to make anything out. Rogue gave Catherine a sidelong glance, directing her around the back, then ducked under the shutter, heading in alone.

Once inside, he soon spotted someone in the corner. Their eyes gleamed in the darkness, catlike. The golden eyes of the nobility. Forcing himself not to rush, he moved slowly forward.

"Why, hello," a voice came. A man's voice, far too friendly. "This is our first time meeting face-to-face, but I've heard all about you, Detective Rogue Macabesta."

"Put your hands up and face the wall," Rogue said, ignoring the man's greeting.

The man laughed and flicked a switch. The lights came on, momentarily dazzling the detective.

"I've been waiting so long. Dying to see who was pursuing me."

The Lifetaker—Chronos Drakenia—stood there, hand still on the switch.

He was a handsome young man, golden eyes gleaming with a pleasant smile on his lips.

"Put your hands up," Rogue said again.

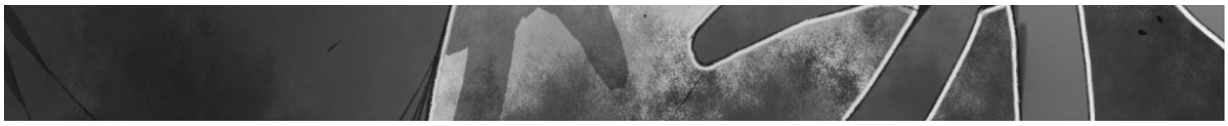
"The detective and the killer, together at last! You mustn't rush it." Chronos took his hand from the switch, moving slowly forward. "We should talk."

"What about?"

"If we do not speak, we cannot reach an understanding. I'm sure what I have to say will change your mind."

Chronos stopped his advance a good five meters out. He did not appear to be armed, but with that sigil inscribed in his flesh, he could attack Rogue regardless.





When Rogue frowned, Chronos spread his hands, emphasizing his empty hands.

"*'If you misbehave, a witch will come get you.'* I'm sure you've heard that saying," Chronos said.

For a moment, Rogue locked up.

He had no clue why he'd bring that up, here. Besides, it was—"Just a tall tale," Rogue said dismissively.

Something parents said to make their children behave. Unrelated to real witches, a lie only little kids believed.

Chronos nodded.

"Yes, a tall tale indeed. But what if there was a way to make it something else?"

"……What do you mean?"

"Think about it. It's only a tall tale because the threat of witches has been forgotten. It's in the distant past and no longer feels real. But if witches existed here and now, no one could laugh it off."

He sounded very sure of himself. Confident of the outcome. Rogue himself could not refute it. After all, he already knew what witches were like.

"Evil will never go away," Chronos said. "But, Detective, we *can* control the volume. Create a precedent, a single all-powerful being who *will* come to punish those who do wrong. Passing judgment on the world. The fear of that will be a significant deterrent."

"……And that's your goal here?"

"Indeed. That is why I've been killing people. Re-creating the age of witches. Making the world a better place."

I should never have bothered listening, Rogue thought. The man's argument was insane. Not one part of it was acceptable.

But he pondered whether it had some truth to it.

If the witches in the Sixth Precinct had no collars and full use of their powers, would Chronos's argument hold water?

"……"

He soon dismissed that idea. This was a deal-breaker. How many innocent people would have to die before that equation balanced out?

When Rogue said nothing, Chronos smiled.

"I'm confident my plan will work. And I'd like you to join me, Detective Rogue."

Like passion had gotten the best of him, Chronos touched his left arm without even realizing it. An odd gesture. Careful, like he was handling something dangerous, even though it was his own arm.

——Secret spells monopolized by the Two Great Noble Houses. Velladonna had said they were activated by melding with the caster's skin.

"Witches have melded with their magic. Accomplish that, and the necessary condition is achieved. Yes, my melding is yet incomplete. Only my skin has melded. But in time, I will become a true witch. And bring back the ages of witches. You may share in my feat…"

At this point, he crooked his head.

Catherine had slipped in through the back door and stood behind him.

"Don't move," she said.

She must have heard his speech. She seemed to be trying very hard to control herself.

"The same witch as before? I'm pleased you survived. I'd prefer to keep all the witches alive."

"……We have nothing to discuss," Catherine said.

Chronos held out his hands.

"Would you be willing to help me? With a witch on my side, we could improve the world in no time. Well, Saint? Are you inclined to bring salvation again?"

Catherine looked appalled. Rogue was too furious to speak. He batted aside the outstretched hand, took out his cuffs, and fixed the man with his most contemptuous glare.

"You're under arrest."

"You can join me any time," Chronos said, even as Rogue grabbed his wrist. "I'm a patient man."

"……You quit talking," he spat, slapping the cuffs on. "It's just making me wanna punch you."

◇

"——Uh-huh, good-bye."

Rogue wrapped up his call to Velladonna. All the witches' eyes were on him.

He spoke up, loud enough to reach each corner of the briefing room.

"The Lifetaker will be turned over to a member of the Two Great Noble Houses tomorrow. Unclear whether he'll face a proper trial, but either way, the case is solved. Thank you for your help."

Everyone started shouting at once.

"You should be grateful!"

"Pay us!"

"Lap pillow!"

It was raucous.

"Fine, fine, I'll do what I can, so settle down," Rogue said. "Can we even manage a quiet finish?"

"Detective…are you really leaving?" Catherine asked. Like a puppy watching her owner head to work.

Rogue hesitated for a moment.

"——Yeah, that was the plan all along," he insisted.

"But…but you can solve cases right here! Why go somewhere else…?"

"'*One should not overreach.*'"

"Huh? Where'd that come from?" Catherine tilted her head curiously.

"It's a saying we detectives have. If you've got goals in life, then quit the force before it kills you. Every rookie gets taught as much. This job carries no guarantee of survival."

"Then…" Catherine trailed off, possibly seeing where he was going with this.

"The chief's got a desk for me in management. I won't be completely avoiding the scene, but it's a lot safer than going toe-to-toe with the bad guys. Basically, I've had my share of close calls."

Catherine hung her head. Rogue scratched his.

"Yeah, can't blame ya," Humafu said, nodding off even as she spoke. "You're only human. You ain't like us. Best to get out before you croak."

"A sound argument," Miseria said, looking right at Rogue. "If you don't run when you've got the chance, the door might slam shut. Once you turn in Chronos tomorrow, forget this place even existed. I'd suggest you shift your mind to bigger problems, like where you'll have lunch next."

"……Yeah," Rogue said, poker-faced.

Miseria was speaking normally, but remembering how she'd patted his head in the car made him want to scream. He couldn't believe that wasn't affecting her at all. Did she have nerves of steel?

"Ladies," Miseria said, raising both hands. "Let us applaud the fortunate newbie who survived his term at the Sixth Precinct. Put your hands together!"

The witches clapped.

Humafu was yawning through hers, Catherine was sniffing even as she clapped, Angene was grinning—even Rico was quietly applauding in the corner.

Feeling uncomfortable, Rogue turned away.

Behind him, he heard Miseria say, "Aw, he's blushing! Whoop it up!"

That damn fool.

Then Rico brought in an oversize pizza. She set it on the table and sliced it up. There were bottles of wine, too.

Celebrating a successful case didn't feel like the witches' idea.

His head still spinning, he felt someone putting a glass in his hand and pushing him into the crowd of witches. Miseria filled his glass, and everyone gave it an expectant look.

"Ch-cheers……"

He had to say it.

◇

When the party ended, Rogue was looking positively unkempt. He went and washed his face, trying to reorient his thoughts. The time for fun was over.

Rogue still had things to do.

He headed for Chronos's cell to ask him a few questions.

It wasn't that long a walk. Chronos was sitting on the bed, leaning forward, eyes shut.

"Hey."

Chronos opened one eye.

"You? What do you want?"

"You had leverage on Zack Knoll. What?"

"Oh, him. I merely said that if he didn't help set the gates, I'd tell his family and friends about the massacre." Chronos shrugged. "I'd read the records on the Cleansing War. He killed everyone in a place called Mizica Village. Unrelated to any strategies. No need to attack the place at all, but one thing led to another…"

Chronos opened his other eye.

"I felt bad about it, but I made use of it. He had a lot of regrets, so I merely had to hint. He's a pitiable man."

He spoke sympathetically, but Rogue couldn't tell if he meant it. Best to wrap this up quickly. He got to the point.

"You must have had other help. Zack Knoll alone could not have set that many sigils."

"I figured it was best not to rope in too many. He was the only one."

"Don't bullshit me. It'll all come to light soon enough."

"I can't help it if you choose not to believe me. I'm resigned to that."

"……You seem unfazed. You think the Drakenias will get you off the hook?"

Rogue clenched his fist tight, out of Chronos' sight. He didn't like this, any of this.

"Who knows? Perhaps they will, perhaps not."

Chronos brushed back his hair, looking Rogue in the eye.

Son of a bitch.

He looked just like the witches. Above it all—like he thought nothing of humanity.

A chill went down Rogue's spine.

Chronos Drakenia was in prison, but he had not given up.

He's still scheming?

"Nice of you to offer concern, but what about yourself?" Chronos asked.

"Me?"

Chronos frowned, worried.

"I heard about it when I was still part of their ranks. Supposedly, every detective assigned to this precinct winds up dead."

Rogue looked surprised, then snorted.

"I thought as much, but it turned out to be horseshit."

Chronos shook his head.

"I don't mean they're killed while working the case. That would mean the witches get less time outside. They're killed once the case is wrapped."

That made Rogue's heart skip a beat.

What did that mean?

"Last night, a witch named Miseria came to see me. What do you think she said? That the detective would be shot in the head the moment he left the precinct. I'd look out if I were you."

"N-no, she w-wouldn't…"

His mouth felt dry.

Would she kill him?

He pictured her face. Always cackling away. Sarcasm and spite, with a touch of tenderness, all mixed together. Just the previous day, she'd been patting his head— "It's a sad story, but they are witches. They kill like they breathe," Chronos said.

——*No, they don't.*

Something didn't add up.

But what?

"——The collars."

The missing piece snapped into place.

The witches wore collars. How had he forgotten? As long as they wore those, they couldn't kill anyone. Doing so would mean their own deaths, so why would Miseria kill Rogue?

"You're ly—"

But even as he started to yell, Rogue's knees buckled. All strength left his body, and the world became blurry.

What the—?

It was like he was drifting off. If he closed his eyes, he really would fall asleep.

"Thanks, you're a lifesaver," Chronos said cheerily.

Someone was approaching.

Summoning all his strength, Rogue turned his head.

A figure was looking down at him. Backlit, so he could not make them out.

Then they took another step forward, and it was like she'd pulled off the veil.

"I *am* sorry."

It was Catherine.

Chapter 3
A Witch's Collar Can't Come Off

His consciousness was fading in and out, but Rogue knew he was being driven somewhere.

He smelled something antiseptic. The floor beneath him shook. He was bound hand and foot, so he couldn't move. Even if he opened his eyes, it was too dark to see.

Is this a trunk?

His consciousness cut out again.

When he next woke, he could hear wind blowing.

Rogue felt it on the nape of his neck. Smelled the sea.

He realized the surface he'd been on was gone. Catherine was walking next to him. Rogue was still lying down, but he was high up, right alongside Catherine.

A levitation spell?

He wasn't thinking straight, but he worked that much out.

Chronos was ahead of them. As was the horizon. The sky was dark, the air cold. It was night now. They were on the bluffs… He wondered how much time had passed.

"This is legitimately my last hideout," Chronos said. "I bought these warehouses from overseas using a different name. I feel bad for those who worked here, but life is full of surprises."

He was speaking to Catherine, not Rogue.

"I suppose so."

"You should be happier. Thanks to you, I've been rescued."

"But…"

A massive warehouse came into view. It was big enough to fit multiple whales. The shutters were down, so they headed around to the back entrance. Chronos punched a number into an electronic lock and opened the door.

The interior was full of shipping containers. Rogue was guided in, still unable to move. They stopped only when the door was long out of sight.

"All right, put him down," Chronos said.

Rogue was lowered slowly to the floor, on his face.

"You can release the hypnosis. I want him listening with his wits about him."

"……Thanks, fairy," Catherine said.

And then the fog on Rogue's mind lifted. His vision cleared. Catherine and Chronos were looking down at him. He tried to get up but failed and his forehead hit the floor. When he checked, he found his limbs were bound.

"That is impressive. No prep needed. I can see why they call you the Saint."

Chronos knelt down and shook Rogue's shoulders.

"Pick your head up."

"……Why?"

Why were Chronos and Catherine together?

"Um…Detective…"

Catherine had her hands over her face. Her shoulders quivered. She seemed ready to faint. What had driven her this far into the corner? Even when Miseria had been on her case, she hadn't been this cowed.

"What did you do to her?!" Rogue snarled, thrashing in the dirt.

"Nothing." Chronos shrugged. "I simply know a bit more about her than you. I've seen the empire's *Historia* in the Vault of Records. And it just so happened to be opened to the page about her. So I know what she did."

"……Please," Catherine sobbed. "Don't tell him."

"But we must," Chronos said ruefully. He turned to Rogue. "Detective, do you know *why* we began calling them witches?"

"……'Cause they bring calamity to the empire."

"True. But not strictly accurate."

"……They have power."

"No. I suppose you wouldn't know. But what makes a witch a witch is their state of mind." Chronos tapped his temple. "Wolves prey on sheep. It is their nature. But what if a sheep ate another sheep? They have no need to eat meat, yet they cannibalize their own kind. Detective, that's the point I'm trying to make. Witches are cannibals. They've turned on their own kind. What powers they have are beside the point. Even if their powers are inadequate, witches live only to satiate their own appetites."

Here, Chronos pointed at Catherine.

"Catherine the Saint could not save her hometown from the volcano's fires. But that is not the truth of the matter. She *could* have saved them—she simply *didn't*."

"……No more…… I'm begging you……," she pleaded.

Tears were streaming past Catherine's palms.

"Oh, drop the act, Saint. You're *enjoying* this. Betraying people is what you live for."

Chronos forcibly yanked her hands away from her face—revealing the smile behind those tears. Like a child on their birthday.

"Don't look at me, Detective," she burbled happily, even as the tears fell. Her lips curled in a brilliant smile.

"Cath…erine?" He could not believe his eyes. "You're kidding… Say you are!"

"I-I'm sorry, Detective! This is very real. I'm *so* excited right now!"

"Wh-why? You said we couldn't let this vicious killer remain at large! Was that a lie?!"

"Not at all!" Catherine cried, shouting over him. "Horrible things are happening to innocent people! Of course I pity them! These crimes are unacceptable!"

She sounded anguished.

This did not feel like a lie. She sympathized with the victim's pain, and she genuinely wanted to rescue them. He could sense those emotions.

And that was *why*.

"But that's what makes it so good! There's nothing I love more than seeing people who trusted me with their faces twisted in sorrow or rage as the life ebbs out of them!"

He had no clue what she was on about.

"Th-th…," she stuttered. "The guilt just feels so *good*! I—I really did try to stop myself! B-but you're just such a righteous man, Detective Rogue! I started imagining what it would be like to betray you and couldn't get it out of my head!"

Her voice was getting louder and louder. The tears were still flowing. Proof her grief, too, was genuine.

"I'm so, so sorry! I can't apologize enough for betraying you, for bringing about your death! Despise me all you like! Don't ever forgive me!"

She clearly meant every word.

But…

…the more she talked, the colder his heart grew.

"I'm sorry… I'm so, so sorry!"

Catherine was smiling through her confession. Looking him right in the eye, with a grin on her lips.

Oh…I get it.

Rogue finally understood what Miseria had said to her.

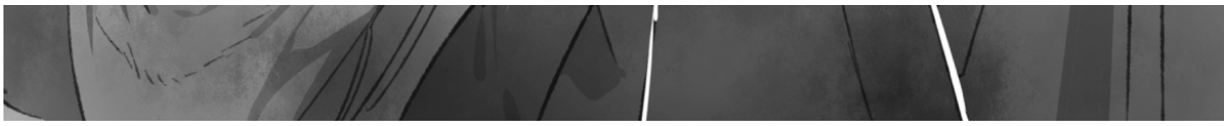
"I love honest people. And I loathe you. You get why, yes? 'Saint' Catherine? A sad little witch, unable to offer any form of salvation."

That was entirely correct. She'd known Catherine's nature all along. Catherine could offer no salvation, and she never intended to. And that gave her infinite sorrow——so very dishonest.

As he lay stunned, shoes came closer to him.

"She's the one who knocked you out. Cast Hypnosis on you. Then she released me from the cell. I thought the witches would be on our trail, but she took care of that, too—with Hide."





As he spoke, Chronos knelt, putting his face close to Rogue's.

"I said Miseria came to see me yesterday, but I made that up. It was the Saint who came to me. I remembered what *Historia* said and asked for her help. She turned on you so easily. A most unexpected stroke of luck. I'm meant to take other measures entirely, and that brings us to *you*."

Chronos began rolling up his sleeve. His arm was covered in a dark red sigil. But was it a sigil? The writings were crawling all over his arm, like they were alive.

"It's called Control. Meld with a secret spell, and one ends up like this. I'm sure the real witches have melded far better than I have."

With a rueful grin, Chronos put his hand on Rogue's head and spoke a word he could not comprehend.

"■■■■"

It was unlike any language used in this world.

Was that an incantation?

"A word of purity to command a spell. And the order I gave was to reverse the flow of time."

Reverse it? So he wasn't aging him? Rogue was confused.

"Let's make a deal. With this spell, I can extend your life indefinitely. Do you know how old the heads of the Two Great Noble Houses are? It's absurd. Join me, and you can reap that benefit."

"……A deal?"

"Indeed. An ally of your skill would be a real asset and grant me access to information from inside the bureau. And you'd be immortal. Not a bad offer, is it?"

Chronos smiled with something approaching benevolence.

For a second, it almost got to Rogue.

But there was one point he could not abide.

"……One question."

"Go ahead," Chronos said, smile broadening.

"……You said you planned to bring back the age of witches. How many sacrifices has that incurred?"

That smile crumbled. Chronos arched an eyebrow, as if searching his memory.

"I think it's over a hundred, but I've rather lost count. I aged most of them prematurely with Control, but I eliminated a few of them by reversing time. Including the people who once worked here… My count may be off."

The more he talked, the faster Rogue's heart raced.

The Lifetaker had a *purpose*. And Rogue didn't give a damn. Chronos was fooling himself with flimsy veneer, justifying the games he played with his newfound spell.

And now that he was sure of that, Rogue was done.

"……You."

"Oh? What?"

"You piece of shit!"

Rogue tried to bite Chronos's ankle, but he was easily dodged and got a kick to his chin instead.

"————————!"

"Oh dear. No deal? I really thought that would work. Now I suppose I *must* eliminate you."

Rogue's head shook, his vision rocked.

The fury lit a fire within him, but his body was turning cold. He felt no heat at his fingertips.

——*Is this how I die?*

Betrayed by his own side, accomplishing nothing?

"Hngh?"

Chronos looked baffled.

"What are you doing?"

Rogue didn't answer.

Instead, he kept on wriggling. His limbs were tied, but this way, he could move a little.

"You can't get away. Are you that desperate to flee? You're such a disappointment, Detective."

He could say whatever he liked. If Rogue died there, who would know what this crook had done?

He wasn't about to die without exposing this asshole's crimes.

He had to leave *some* trace behind—

"The fun is gone. Die now."

Chronos raised a hand.

——*Oh.*

And then pain burst in the madman's shoulder. Blood gushed out, raining down on Rogue. Chronos fell to the ground, rolling.

"Aughhhhhhhhh!"

The man looked horrified.

"Nice to see you still alive, Rogue."

A familiar voice came from above.

"I didn't think guns would be so easy to aim," Miseria said. She was perched on a shipping container, looking over the pistol in her hand.

"M-Miseria!"

"At last, you use my name. But you didn't need to wait for *this*."

She flashed an impish grin at him.

"N-not the time!" Rogue yelled, his emotions in turmoil.

"That's fair enough."

Miseria jumped down from the container, landing without a sound. Her blue eyes were on Chronos.

"——Eek!"

"Now, now, don't be frightened! You're a man!" Miseria shrugged.

"……You're the Puppeteer! You brainwash people!" Chronos yelped, backing away. "But the effective range is limited!"

"Hmm, so it is. But I already have your mind in my clutches."

Miseria took a step forward, then frowned. "Hm? You're going to get in my way, Catherine?"

Catherine had stepped forward as well, placing herself between them.

"……I've released the spell," Catherine whispered.

"R-right! Slow her down! I can't afford to die here! I'm bringing back the age of witches!"

Chronos got up and ran off.

"Wait! Come back here!" Rogue yelled, but Chronos vanished into the maze of containers. "Dammit!"

Even as he swore, Miseria snapped her fingers, and his bindings were severed. He looked up at her, surprised.

"Go after him." She grinned. "You're longing to give him a piece of your fist, yes?"

"You bet!" Rogue grinned back.

He wanted nothing more.

◇

Watching Rogue run off, Catherine said, "He's going to get himself killed."

Miseria was doing stretches, not even glancing his way.

"I feel like I've heard that before. Our Rogue is a tough cookie. I'm not concerned." Catherine's waterworks had dried up. She glared at Miseria, not even bothering to dry them. "Oh, did I say something to vex you? Apologies, I never could read emotions."

"You never shut up anyway. How'd you even get here? I made sure detection spells wouldn't work."

"Ask your bosom," Miseria said, thumping her own chest. Catherine checked hers without really taking her eyes off the other witch. She soon found a fly-sized gadget stuck to the outside of her underwear.

——*One of Angene's bugs!*

"But how……?!" Catherine wailed.

"You should really make friends with the people around you. Especially the girl who does our laundry."

Rico.

Catherine gritted her teeth.

Miseria was a powerful foe. Not just in spellcraft—she was adept at getting one step ahead of people. Better not let her keep talking.

"Fairy…," she whispered, spreading her arms, palms upward.

On her left—wind howled, the light orbs appearing just above her palm. A swirling vortex centered on the light, pulling all the dust into it. It started like a dust devil but soon grew to reach the warehouse roof.

On her right—a red orb appeared. It was as small as a baseball at first, but it grew by the second from the size of a baseball to a volleyball to a balance ball, stopping only when it was as large as a car.

The wind whipped both their hair, and the heat of the red orb scorched their skin.

"Nice spells," Miseria said, impressed. "Blade and Shining? Is that not over the collar's limitations?"

"Not a problem. You should worry more about your fate."

"Oh, I'm very concerned. Once you've ground me into mincemeat, you might as well bake me into a hamburger."

"Why are you like this?!"

Misera made a joke of everything, deftly dodging Catherine's emotional outbursts and infuriating her further.

And those *eyes*.

…That blue gaze shot through her, like she already had a handle on everything about Catherine.

She'd always been like this. Catherine enjoyed betraying people who trusted her. How much it hurt her to hurt them. She adored it. Catherine lived to inflict suffering upon herself. But Miseria just peered into her with those eyes, those cold blue eyes. Like pouring cold water on her head.

She wanted to betray her.

She wanted to hurt her.

Catherine had realized she was a witch two thousand years ago. Her friend had been attacked by bandits, and she'd tried to save her

but been too late. An arrow had gone right through her stomach. She wiped out the bandits and cradled her friend in her arms, feeling her body go cold, her eyes going empty.

At the time, she was still alive.

But the coldness of her touch, the fear that her friend might die—it left Catherine stunned, and before she recovered, her friend had passed.

There was no taking this back. Her heart filled with grief and guilt.

But also joy.

It had been a point of no return for Catherine, too. From that point on, she was always betraying people. Wearing a mask of benevolence, fooling herself and others, and reveling in it.

That's why Miseria had to die. Catherine had to kill anyone she couldn't deceive.

Catherine crossed her arms. The two spells shot toward the Puppeteer.

◇

Rogue was running flat out. He could hear Chronos's footsteps up ahead, and that was his guide.

He had no idea where in the warehouse the nobleman was.

Damn, this place is big!

He heard an explosion behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a tornado. Their battle was underway. Several more booms followed.

Are we really the same species?

The scale was too different. It was hard to believe there were any restrictions on their magic.

Then Chronos's footsteps abruptly disappeared. Rogue skidded to a halt. He looked around the passage between the containers. No signs of Chronos.

"Done playing tag?" he yelled, checking each container in turn.

"Tag?" Chronos's voice came from somewhere. "I was never trying to run at all. I intend to kill you here. While she's dealing with that irritating witch."

"All you've done is run. You really think you can win?"

Rogue was just keeping him talking. If Chronos lost his temper and his cool, great. And Rogue himself was too angry not to talk back.

"You're asking me that? A foolish question. Have you forgotten your time is flowing backward?"

Startled, Rogue glanced down at his arms. His sleeves were getting longer— No, he was getting smaller. Checking further, he found much amiss. His gaze felt lower to the ground, and his shoes were too roomy.

"Go on, shrivel away! See if you find me."

"Dammit! Where are you?"

He knew the man was close.

He could hear him but not see him. Miseria had shot him, but he must have staunched the wound; there was no blood to follow.

Rogue kept running. And Chronos kept calling.

"Not that way!" and "Where are you going? You're getting colder!" then "Better hurry, before you disappear!"

That voice was always in his ears. One moment behind him, the next ahead. It would come from his right, then his left.

Sweat poured down Rogue's brow.

He was out of breath, starting to struggle. He tried to take a hard left, and his shoe went flying off.

"Hah…hah…"

Out of breath, Rogue came to a stop.

His feet no longer fit his shoes. They were far too big, like they belonged to a giant.

His jacket was loose. He'd have to fold the sleeves multiple times to get his hands out.

……Shit.

His body had shrunk too far to ignore.

He couldn't believe the reversal of the biological clock happened so quickly. A wave of panic hit him. But he knew Chronos must be nearby. He hadn't left the warehouse. He'd be close, waiting to verify Rogue's death.

"What, have you given up?"

The voice came from a container on the left.

That's where he is. Rogue didn't budge.

He'd had an idea.

Chronos's footsteps had vanished…not because he'd stopped and hidden, but because he'd taken off his shoes.

Rogue listened closely.

Rustling cloth. Even though he wasn't moving himself.

I thought so. He's right there.

The faint sound of his breath. Soil shifting. So soft, someone would never catch it if they weren't listening very carefully. He'd never have managed it while he was running around.

The sound of shifting soil came closer.

Shhh, shhh.

——*Wait. Not yet.*

Rogue began to walk.

Shhh, shhh.

He moved forward, resisting the impulse to turn around.

——*Still not the right moment.*

The sound behind him changed from a *shhh* to a *crunch*.

——*Almost.*

He was close. He could hear Chronos breathing.

Feel it on his neck.

And when he did, Rogue flung his jacket behind him. It landed on the *invisible* man, floating in the air, and Chronos appeared, like a splash of color on a blank page.

"——Huh?! Clear's gone?" Chronos yelped.

Rogue tackled him with all his might. Chronos fell over backward. Rogue clenched his glove and punched Chronos in the face.

“Drop dead, shitstain!” Rogue roared. He was relieved. It had been a close call. If he’d blown the timing, he’d be dead now.

Then there was an even bigger explosion. It rocked the entire warehouse, and the light fixtures sounded ready to shatter.

Is Miseria okay?

No, his priority was subduing Chronos. He tried to grab the man’s arm to cuff him, but he felt a sharp blow to his left cheek and was thrown backward.

——Wha—?!

Rogue was knocked off balance.

Unable to catch himself, his back hit something hard. It took his breath away.

Chronos was up on his feet.

“That hurt…a lot,” Chronos spat. There was blood in his spittle. “You cut the inside of my cheek!”

Rogue’s head spun. He’d soaked a counter?

All he could do was watch Chronos approach.

“Is that disbelief on your face? I’m not sure why. You have a pebble’s worth of magic. I mean, you’re a *child* again.”

Backed up against a container, Rogue tried to stand. His legs were shaking and refused to support him.

Chronos was blathering on.

“I told you I was turning back your time! No child can defeat an adult. Think it through!”

Pushing himself against the container, he finally made it to his feet, fists raised. His legs were still shaking, but he forced them to stop.

“Give it up. It’s over.”

“……I’m just glad you didn’t cast some invulnerability spell.”

“What? Do you still think you can win?”

“……And what if I do?”

Chronos threw up his hands, appalled.

"Inconceivable," he declared. "Resign yourself. I was born in the Two Great Noble Houses. I'm inherently superior to *you*. I have a purpose to fulfill! Only I can change the world! If I am to restore the age of witches, I cannot let myself be stopped—"

Rogue rushed in close, his fist slamming into Chronos's unguarded nose.

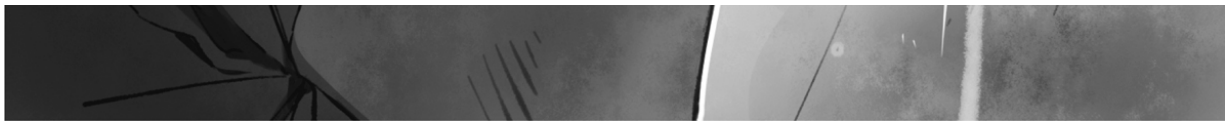
"Gah?!"

Chronos was on his heels, clutching his nose.

"A fluke hit won't—"

Rogue didn't let him finish. He was in the air, a roundhouse kick striking Chronos's brow. The man staggered and failed to catch himself, landing on his ass.





"Huh? How…are you? What?"

Rogue had gone up against crooks of all calibers with just his fists. He'd taken his share of blows and spells alike and survived.

"You use that spell on yourself so much, you got a child's brain, too? You're up against a detective! Running your damn mouth off…" Rogue snarled. "On your feet, scumbag. One punch isn't nearly enough for you."

◇

Temperatures were so high that iron melted like hard candy. Wind blades sliced grooves in the ground. Each time Catherine waved an arm, the spell paths changed, keeping them on Miseria's heels. Yet she dodged, as if she was reading Catherine's mind, escaping by a single step each time. Miseria was rolling, jumping, scrambling up the sides of containers, and leaping off them. Catherine tried to hit her while Miseria was midair, but she'd kick flying rubble into the path of Shining and avoid the attack with merely a few singed hairs.

——*How?!*

Catherine split the tornado into multiple Blades, making them converge on Miseria's position. Invisible blades pelted down, like guided rain.

Miseria momentarily hid behind a container, then slid under the rain, running directly at Catherine—the last thing she'd expected. There was a gun in her hand, at her hip. She pulled the trigger. Catherine redirected several of the Blades into the air before her, batting the bullet aside before it reached home. By then, Miseria had disappeared.

This was the problem. Any time Catherine tried to land a finishing blow, Miseria had a counter ready. She could never fully commit to an offensive.

I can't afford to play it safe.

Catherine went for her biggest gun.

She elevated her mana output just a smidge.

Blade and Shining both got a massive boost, like she'd shifted gears.

This was really skirting the limit of what the collar allowed.

If she put even a bit more mana into it, the collar would go off—and she'd be dead.

Perhaps she didn't need to risk it.

But she had a bad feeling about this. Miseria was *just* running. And that felt like she was up to something.

I have to finish it before her plan comes to fruition.

Catherine slapped her hands together.

The Blades flew around Shining. That miniature sun began to shake. Extreme heat swirled, the rotation growing steadily faster. Just as the howling of the winds became too great a toll on the eardrums…

…the sun burst.

Lumps of metal-melting heat flew at a wind speed of 105 knots, opening holes in containers, floor, and warehouse alike. Everything in Catherine's view turned red.

This attack would keep going as long as Catherine still had mana—and she *never* ran out.

The sound of the wind, of melting metal, of the ground cracking—listening to those, she reveled in the destruction. Few things did more damage than this spell combo. Perhaps the boys would get caught up in it! That'd work for her. She'd feel *so* guilty.

The relentless destruction went on for a solid thirty seconds.

Then she began lowering the strength of both Blade and Shining. Like rotating tires, if she hit the brakes too hard, the excess energy would burst. But eventually, the spells on her palms were each no more powerful than a light bulb—and then they blinked out.

Catherine looked over what she had done.

The warehouse was no longer intact.

Everything before her was in shambles, like it had been run through a blender. She could see the night sky through the collapsed roof.

"……It's all over," she murmured.

Rogue, Miseria—everyone was gone.

She'd eliminated them.

She felt a pang in her chest. She almost fainted.

Detective, oh, Detective!

Catherine clutched her habit above her heart.

He might have saved her life, but she'd ended his.

"Ahhhhhhhh……"

Joy and grief mingling, Catherine collapsed to the floor, only snapping out of it when Miseria said, "Pleasant dreams?"

"Huh?"

Miseria's blue eyes were right there.

"You're drooling," she said, eyes twinkling.

Catherine tried to speak, but her body defied her, refusing to budge.

"Uh-oh, can't have that. Your magic *is* rather formidable. So I've already shut down that option."

There were no signs of the warehouse's destruction. The ceiling loomed oppressively—offering no view of the night sky.

Wh-what's going on?!

"'Wh-what's going on?!' A perfectly natural question!" Miseria said cheerily.

"Huh? How—"

"——am I reading your mind? Yes, I'm linked directly to it. You've been dreaming this whole time."

Miseria shrugged.

Linked? Impossible! She hadn't had time to cast! I heard no incantation, saw no sigils.

"It's certainly typical to use incantations or sigils when casting spells, but there are other means. As long as your orders are conveyed to the magic itself," Miseria explained. "It's a simple trick if I reveal it, but Dominate is actually cast through my eyes."

Miseria pointed at her dazzling blues, leaning closer.

——*Their eyes* had *met when I was casting Blade and Shining. But how could…?*

"Oh, but I *can*. You're a witch yourself. Witches do what no one else can. You know that."

It felt like she was falling into Miseria's eyes.

——*Terrifying.*

She saw everything Catherine was. Controlled it.

Catherine felt no joy or grief. Only fear.

"You adore guilt, yes? That's why you can happily kill those you care about. I'm happy to provide your share of those thrills—in your dreams."

It felt like she'd been kicked off a cliff.

Catherine sank into darkness.

◇

Chronos tackled him. Rogue was a child; Chronos must have assumed he could soak a few blows but would win if he pinned him down.

That was naive.

The detective batted away the grasping hand and ducked under his left arm, slamming the man's knee with his elbow in passing.

Chronos lost his balance. Behind him, Rogue landed a kidney blow. A jab. The man blindly kicked backward, but Rogue easily sidestepped it into a high kick to the man's back.

"——Gah!"

The breath was forced out of Chronos, and his spine arched. Rogue got his feet under him, then aimed behind the knees. The top of his foot connected, and the man buckled, then toppled over forward.

Just as Rogue had intended.

With the man's center of gravity lowered, the detective could now reach his head.

He grabbed a fistful of Chrono's hair, ignoring the strands that he pulled out, and dragged him closer, swiftly slamming his elbow into the man's skull. Two hard objects made for a satisfying *crack*. That must have hurt. Another— "Gahhhhh!"

Chronos finally lost his nerve and started screaming and flailing. *Was the hit too shallow? No, that wasn't it. I'm still shrinking.*

"——Ahhhhhh! Damn you! Arghhh!"

Screaming, Chronos turned his bloodshot eyes toward the detective. Rogue was free to keep punching. No problem there. He cut off an attempted spell with a liver jab, sway, step, duck under a big swing kick, then turned that opening into a nut punch.

"——Hnggggggggggg!"

Legs turning inward, Chronos howled. *Nice.*

Chronos raised his arms, so Rogue switched targets, kicking his shin. Another howl.

……Not enough, not nearly enough.

A hook to the right cheek, then to the left on the snap.

……You're not getting off this easily.

One swing, and another. Each rather weak, but the damage mounted.

But the longer he swung, the less air he had, and the more his lungs hurt. But still, he kept punching. Blocking Chronos's blows, parrying, deflecting, countering, punching till his fists bled.

……You're not getting off the hook!

He was on the verge of collapse, but his mind was clear.

He had to take Chronos down. Before he killed a lot more people.

"Rahhhhhhhhhh!"

Rogue had no clue where he'd found the air for that bellow.

Chronos was still on his feet.

The tendons in his arms were aching, but Rogue kept swinging.

Still, Chronos stayed up.

Rogue's vision blurred. Something was flowing from his nose.

Chronos was still…

Chronos—

His consciousness almost cut out, but Rogue bit his own lip to wake himself up. Weight on his hindquarters. Swing on the left foot, speed up the right, lock the toes, hard upward kick.

Crack.

Chronos's head snapped back. Chin high, hands flailing like he was dog paddling.

That's all Rogue saw before toppling over backward. He had no strength left. His chest was heaving, lungs desperate to restore oxygen.

……Go down!

A prayer.

He heard heels click.

Tap. Ta-ta-tap. Offbeat.

……Go the fuck down!

His blurred vision caught Chronos swaying. Still swaying, he made a fist and turned toward Rogue, lurching his way.

You've got to be kidding me.

Rogue couldn't move. Couldn't fight back. The fist coming his way got bigger, and he was about to close his eyes when the fist curved to the right, and Chronos came crashing down. Flat on his face next to Rogue, shoulders brushing.

"……Hahh, hahh! About goddamn time!" Rogue cried, exhausted.

He found himself covered in blood. Earning that nickname of his once again.

Didn't think I'd wind up like this again.

His body felt like lead, but he sat up.

He rolled Chronos over, face up. Those handsome features were now a fright. He cuffed him and stuffed a cloth in his mouth to stop him from casting.

"Hellooo? Rogue? Are you still with us?" Miseria cried out. She was running his way.

He looked up, and despite the racket, she did not have a scratch on her. She seemed rather pleased with herself.

"……You done, too?"

He needn't have worried.

Meanwhile, every bit of him hurt. For lack of options, he heaved himself upright to face her.

"Rogue, must you sound so disappointed? I would think you've got something to say to me."

Miseria grinned expectantly, a hand to her ear.

He sighed.

"……Thanks."

"Hmm? Thanks? For what? I don't know what you mean."

"……You do."

"I do? I really don't."

"Augh, dammit!" Rogue yelled. "Thanks for coming to save me! I owe you my life! Satisfied?!"

"Aside from the exasperated tone…it'll do." Miseria nodded happily.

"Shush. I'm fresh outta wherewithal. Look how tiny I am."

"Oh? I thought you'd had a makeover."

"Do I hafta punch ya?"

"I'm kidding! Let's release this spell before your life runs out."

"Can you?!"

"Who do you think I am? It's easier than boiling water. I have one hundred and fifty ideas."

"……Okay, that's not true."

"It isn't, but I do have some. Bring me his head?"

She was talking about Chronos. Rogue grabbed the unconscious man's head. In his current body, that was quite hard work.

"I'll cast Dominate on him, then have him undo the spell himself. Reverse the flow of time once again and stop when you hit a good age."

"……Right," Rogue murmured. "You really can save me, then."

"Oh? Does that not please you?"

"I wouldn't say that. Just…if we could have caught him faster, there'd have been far fewer victims."

Miseria closed her eyes and sighed. A very long sigh.

"I had a feeling, but you really bottled everything up. A bedeviling personality."

"……Anyone would think as much."

"Your problem is that you *say* so at the wrong time! Take a lesson from me. I'm *always* blowing off steam! It's so much better."

Miseria reached out and poked his nose with her fingertip.

"……Sorry," he said.

She sighed again.

"Never mind. We'd better hurry. You don't seem to have much time left."

That made him look, and he was even smaller than when he'd fought Chronos.

Shit.

He turned back to Chronos and froze.

What the—?

Something was writhing beneath Chronos's clothing. Like a snake caught inside. The fabric was rising and changing shape. Chronos himself was still sound asleep.

"Damn, he had another trick up his sleeve?"

"Afraid not," Miseria said, sounding tense for the first time. "I think…the spell is out of his control. It's running wild."

"Can that happen?!"

Magic didn't happen unless someone willed it to. There was no one to give the spell direction. Someone could carve a sigil to

activate after a delay, but Chronos hadn't had time to do that.

"There's much we don't know about the secret spells. If passing out makes him lose control, then perhaps the spell is activating itself. Even I'm not sure what will happen," Miseria said. "We'd better hurry."

She pried open Chronos's eyes with her fingers and peered in.

"Domi——"

Miseria was flung back. Like a pebble, she flew through the air, landing several meters away.

"——!"

"Miseria!"

Chronos lurched upright, as if ignoring gravity. The cloth Rogue had used to gag him turned to dust, and the cuffs crumbled away.

"■■■■■■■■"

Spewing words of unknown origins, Chronos swiveled his head around. Black smog filled the air around him, and something snakelike was took shape in that smog. But the most uncanny aspect was his head.

Chronos's head was rapidly aging and de-aging.

Shrinking and expanding, it was a chubby baby's face one second, and the next, a wrinkled old man's head, then a little boy's, then the original young man's. Like using the seek bar on a video, his past, present, and future faces all shifted in and out.

——*Is this what happens when Control goes nuts?*

"■■■■■■," old man Chronos chanted.

His eyes lit up and released rainbow-colored light, which opened a hole in the ceiling. The light flew skyward and burst like a firework.

The aim might be wild, but the force of the blast was considerable.

Rogue ran over to Miseria, helping her up.

"You okay?"

"Technically. Bad news," she said, leaning on his shoulder. "Dominate has failed. Control is deeply embedded in his mind. I can't access it."

She was white as a sheet.

“You sure you’re okay?” Rogue asked.

“This happens when someone resists a spell. First time in five centuries.”

Her confident manner put an idea in his head.

“——You have a plan, then?”

“You can’t open a door if your key doesn’t fit the keyhole. We need merely approach this situation with a different spell.”

Miseria whistled.

That unknown language echoed again, and a blizzard blew a shipping container away.

“As you can see, he’s lashing out wildly. No clue what he’s looking at. Getting close is risky. In which case, we should decide the target of his attacks for him.”

“You mean, be bait?”

“Yes. I’ll sneak around behind him, and you draw his attention to the fore.”

“Got it. Don’t die!”

“Who do you think I am? I’ve survived one thousand two hundred __”

Chronos turned his head toward them, his face coming up, turning from a fetus to the young man.

“■■■——”

“Run!”

Rogue went right, and Miseria went left. A laser shot through the space they’d vacated, scorching the ground.

“Over here, asshole!”

Rogue scooped up a piece of rubble and threw it at Chronos. It hit his face, and a jowly old man winced.

“Snap out of it! Look at me!”

Chronos’s face twisted in fury.

He’d been moving sluggishly—but now he shot toward Rogue. Time on his face ebbing and flowing, but all ages of him were glaring at Rogue.

“Shit, that worked too well!” he yelled, running away.

He heard an incantation behind him and threw himself into a forward roll. Purple fluid sprayed, passing over his head and hissing as it dissolved a container.

Rogue righted himself and regained momentum.

But Chronos was much closer to him now.

Being so small was detrimental to Rogue's running speed. But Chronos was fully grown. It wasn't a great matchup. Rogue was likely to die before he bought enough time.

"■■■," Chronos chanted, and a black sphere appeared in front of him.

Rogue tried to anticipate the man's aim. *Where? Up? Left? Right?*

None of the above.

Woosh. His small body floated into the air and was pulled toward the sphere—it had its own gravity. Rogue's feet were off the ground; flailing in three dimensions, he barely managed to grab hold of the edge of a container. His fingers burned with pain.

The pull was so strong, they were damn near tearing off.

Scraps of bric-a-brac were flying past him. When they hit the sphere, they were flattened like they'd been put in a compactor.

He heard the deep groan of metal scraping. The container he was hanging on to started to move. He was getting closer and closer to Chrono's freakish spell.

The containers near him were rolling like dice, bounding across the ground. Those things were several size the mass of a human, but they were crushed instantly, like tin cans. He wondered how much force would make that possible.

Rogue didn't even notice the sweat on his brow.

He'd used up what little strength this child's arms had for fighting the man—it was only a matter of time before he "fell."

C'mon, Miseria!

Then something shot past Chronos. It touched the sphere, and the air shook. A shock wave. Rogue was blown away, like a leaf on the wind.

He bounded off the ground a few times, scraping the hell out of his arm, and finally slid to a halt.

The gravitational pull was gone.

"Save him, abandon him, save him, abandon him…"

Catherine was stomping on Chronos's face.

She was not in her right mind.

She was clutching her head with both hands, shaking it wildly. He could hear her muttering to herself.

"Catherine…?"

"Oh, Detective!"

She spun round, like she'd just now spotted him. Her lips quivered, and a fountain of tears ran down her face.

"Detective…Detective…I've got to save you!"

"——Look out!" Rogue yelled.

Chronos was chanting. Light flashed at Catherine's feet.

"Hrk!"

She staggered and clutched her throat. There was a hole in it.

Chronos rose slowly to his feet. A baby's face stared at Catherine. She paid that no attention, staggering toward Rogue.

"Detective…I'm coming to save you…"

And then she fell.

"Catherine!"

Chronos stepped on her—like getting payback—but kept walking.

A smile on his ever-shifting face.

He likely wasn't conscious, but the grin was ear to ear.

Anger burned through Rogue's body.

His time was still flowing backward, and Chronos was looming over him. Rogue's limbs were so small, he could barely remain upright.

But he put every ounce of fury he could muster into that glare. Big hands reached for him, wrapped around his neck, then lifted him off the ground—and still, he glared.

Chronos's lips opened, chanting an unsettling phrase.

"■■■"

The chant ended, and Chronos's eyes began to gleam with the same light that had hit Catherine. Just before the focused beam of light fired…

"Your tantrum ends here."

…Miseria put her hand on the back of Chronos's head.

"Reading."

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo! Aaaaaaughhhhh!"

Chronos let out an earsplitting shriek. He let go, and Rogue hit the ground. The detective groaned.

"My, my, there's nothing worthwhile stuffed in here," Miseria said. "I'll clean this out for you—thank me later."

That spell again. The one she'd used on Zack Knoll. She'd used Reading on his mind, but the side effect of it scrambled his memories, shattering them.

"——Is this Control?" Miseria murmured, like she was searching for a jewel in the dark. "Hmm, fascinating." She nodded. "I get it now."

Rogue watched in silence. If he lost focus at all, he'd pass right out. He was already a toddler. His thoughts were confused, unrelated ideas coming and going, like watching his own past through cloudy glass. He was likely on the verge of vanishing for good.

"Relax, I've got you," Miseria promised, though he hadn't said a thing.

His lids felt heavy. *Relax? Sounds good.*

He tried to smile and felt his mind fading fast. Didn't seem like he could stave it off. Just before he went under, he saw Miseria smiling. Her face alone was always beautiful. If that was the last thing he saw—well, it wasn't the worst way to die.

When she saw Rogue fall asleep, Miseria whispered, “Forgive me, Rogue.”

She brushed his head and chanted, “■■■■■■■”

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The heat on his face made his eyes open slightly. He had no clue where he was, but it soon came back to him. Things had changed a lot while Rogue was under.

A pillar of fire was blasting the ceiling. Half the containers were already alight.

This was way worse than Chronos’s trap. Had they been storing something flammable here? The fire was clearly raging out of control.

——*Right, how’s my body doing?*

He stretched out his arm. Nicely muscled—when he flexed, it bulged.

He looked at his legs. They did not look juvenile. They were his original legs.

Rogue was relieved. The time reversal had stopped, and he was his own age again.

But now was not the time to revel in that. He had to get caught up.

Chronos was on one knee, head down as he drooled, looking totally out of it. Catherine was behind him, unconscious, a handkerchief round her neck. Had Miseria taken care of that? But he didn’t see her anywhere. He got to his feet, looking around…

…and found her soon enough.

Miseria was sitting in the shadow of a container, legs splayed out in front of her.

“What’s going on?”

She turned her head his way.

"Chronos's rampage must have ignited something. I finished tending to you, and before I knew it…"

"Well, thanks!" Rogue said.

"I tried to put it out. If it wasn't for this mana limit, I might have managed it."

"No time to grumble! We've gotta get through a wall and get out."

"Mm-hmm, you do that, Rogue."

"What, like you aren't coming? Get up!" Rogue turned to go but did not hear her following him. "What's wrong?"

Perhaps she wanted him to take her a hand again. Like on the first day. She had saved his life, so he couldn't really spurn the suggestion. He turned back and reached for her, but she didn't take his hand.

"What? Why won't you stand?"

"It's less that I won't and more that I can't. Don't mind me, you go on."

"Don't be ridiculous. Come on—"

But what he saw then made him stop.

The right half of Miseria's body was gone.

Just nothing there.

No arm, no leg. Seen from the left, she was uninjured—but from the right, she was crumbling away, as if her blood were made of sand.

Hard to believe she was still alive.

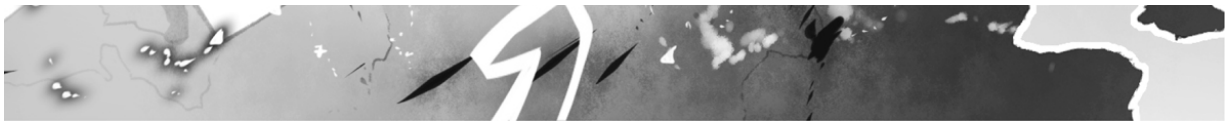
"Wh-what's going on?"

"Oh, this?" Miseria said, like she'd simply gotten her hair cut. "Blowback from the Dominate resist. Control certainly is a formidable spell. It turned me to stone!"

"N-no, why are you acting fine? How'd it get so bad?"

"I was hardly fine. It turned my organs to stone gradually. Quite hard to endure, I assure you."





Was that why she went so pale?

Still—

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Perhaps they could have saved her.

Miseria chuckled.

"Hardly the time or the place. Or did you have a means to heal *this*? You know you don't. Even I can't do it, which is why I'm in this predicament."

How he wished she was kidding. Like she always was.

"……What can I do?"

"There's nothing to be done. Rogue, all you can do is get those two out of here."

Miseria waved a hand, dismissing him.

Rogue just stood there. His feet refused to budge.

"But…but…"

"Are you feeling sorry for me?" Miseria raised an eyebrow. "I don't deserve it. I'm a witch and a serial killer. I've slain any number of your predecessors. Crumbling away to dust… Well, it's a suitable end for an awful person. Don't ruin my dramatic death."

"Stop…you shouldn't say—"

"I will not stop. Not until you get out of this inferno. Should I tell you about the murder in Eld? I thought that was a particularly fine…"

Miseria trailed off.

Rogue was rubbing his eyes, head down.

"…I want you to live. Please…"

Miseria made a face, snorting. "Oh dear. You think tears will change my mind?"

"…That's not it. I just…"

"You're like a child! And you call yourself a detective!"

There was nothing he could say, so he was silent. Couldn't even look her in the eye. He knew full well this was not how any bureau detective should act. It was like his rational mind had gone on vacation.

"I must revise my opinion of you. You should quit this job right away. Go work in a bakery or something."

Miseria was trying very hard to drive him away. That much was clear. He was the one in need of persuading, and she was right—he should be evacuating. And yet here he was, running his mouth off.

"I don't think you're an awful person."

Miseria's eyes briefly widened, and she blinked several times, as if trying to hide it. But her lips trembled anyway, rising and falling—and then she burst out laughing.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You *are* a delight, Rogue. Ha-ha-ha! Are you trying to make me die laughing?!"

She was gasping for air, and this was making the dust fly faster. Rogue yelped, and Miseria worked out why. She took a few deep breaths to settle herself down.

"Come here," she said, smiling and beckoning him.

He knelt, his eyes at her level.

"There's nothing to be sad about. You solved the case. You have a bright future ahead of you. Your life will go on. Nothing wrong with that."

Another spray of dust. Miseria patted his shoulder.

"Hang in there, Detective. You can't let my death get you down. Put on a brave face!"

The tips of her fingers were crumbling away.

She did not seem the least bit scared to die.

"……This is a first for me," he said.

"Well, consider it good training. A chance to toughen up!"

"……"

"Rogue, perhaps this isn't the time to say it, but I really did enjoy our time together. That's to your credit. Perhaps my one regret is that our time together is ending so soon."

"……Are you *trying* to make me cry?"

"So sorry. I just felt like going for the tear-stricken farewell."

"……It could be arranged."

"But I meant what I said. Thank you, Rogue." His eyes went wide. "I'm not lying. I said as much. I can't stand liars. I *am* grateful to you. And I'm fine with this ending."

Miseria chuckled and closed her remaining eye.

"I've never felt better."

He could no longer hear the explosions or the roar of the flames. All his ears caught was her gentle breathing. The sound of a witch slowly fading away.

He had to make a choice.

Rogue made to take her hand—though it was no longer shaped like one—but got to his feet instead.

"……I'm leaving you here."

"Oh? What changed your mind?" she asked like she didn't know.

"……I've had a long day, and I'm very sleepy. I'm gonna go home and go to bed."

"Mm-hmm, the correct decision. Children need their sleep!"

"I'm gonna get it."

"Good night, Rogue."

"Good night……Miseria."

Rogue turned on his heel. He scooped both Chronos and Catherine up, cradling them in his arms. He heard a voice behind him.

"To Rogue Macabesta's future happiness."

And he ran off, never once looking back.

Epilogue

Velladonna was poking Rogue's cheek, sickly sweet perfume wafting with every move. Rogue stayed put in his chair, letting her have her way with him.

"You're *sure*?"

"Yep, no issues here."

"Such a *waste*. I had that seat in management all set up for you, you ungrateful man."

There was an official document on her desk, formally requesting that he remain posted to the Sixth Precinct.

"How many times did you almost get yourself killed?"

"Quite a few."

"No guarantee you'll survive the next. This is your last chance to take it back."

The syrupy tone had vanished, and her eyes were boring right through him. For once, she was acting like a bureau chief.

"Fine with me. Post anyone there but me, and it'll just be a waste of human resources."

Velladonna raised a brow.

"You sure are confident."

Rogue only shrugged.

She picked up the document next to his letter.

"This one's been approved as well."

"Yeah, they're letting her stay on."

"Hmph. She'd have been exiled, but it was a chance to get away. Tensions are mounting between the Two Great Noble Houses, and they're not likely to make this offer again."

The Chronos incident had escalated the feud between the houses. To the point where even the rank-and-file officers were gossiping about it.

"I don't get how witches think," Velladonna murmured.

Rogue entirely agreed.

They finished the paperwork, and Rogue left the chief's office.

On the elevator, he hit the button for the ground floor and leaned against the wall. There was no one but him there. The glass walls offered a grand view of the bustling streets of Elayl. Cars streamed down the roads like red blood cells, and high-rise buildings loomed like a pincushion in the noon sun, glittering like they were craving attention.

The light hurt his eyes, so he shielded them with his hand. His sleeve fell away, revealing the black choker on his left wrist.

A collar.

It had been two weeks since the climax of the Lifetaker case.

They'd scoured Chronos's warehouse but found only Miseria's collar and some scraps of her clothes. Everything else had been burned to a crisp.

Once Forensics was done with it, Rogue had pulled some strings and obtained the collar. Even he wasn't sure why he'd wanted it; perhaps he was just being sentimental. He wasn't planning on flaunting it, so he normally kept it inside his sleeve.

He had no clue what became of Chronos after the Reading. The Two Great Noble Houses were keeping a tight lid on it. But from what he had seen, the man was hardly in sound condition.

……Karmic payback.

The punishment fit the crime. He wondered if that applied to everyone.

He reached the first floor and left the building, shaking off those foolish thoughts. He knew full well plenty of crooks never paid the

price.

In the parking lot, he found a girl waiting at the car. When she spotted Rogue, her eyes lit up.

"Welcome home, Detective!" Catherine cried.

"It's hardly *that*."

"But there was still a chance you'd leave the Sixth Precinct behind! I mean…"

Catherine didn't finish, acting shifty.

"If you're aware, then restrain yourself."

"Ah-ha-ha…" She chuckled awkwardly.

This is like carrying a bomb around, Rogue thought. But it was his decision not to report Catherine's treachery to Velladonna.

They got in the car. Catherine's driving was deeply worrying, so he took the wheel.

She settled in next to him, twiddling her thumbs.

Likely remembering the night of the fire.

They'd just escaped the flaming warehouse.

Catherine woke up to find herself in his arms, coughing blood.

"D-Detective…"

"Just you wait, we'll get you to the hospital!"

"L-leave me here! No hospitals… I deserve to die!" she pleaded. "As long as I still live, I'll be compelled to betray people. B-but I don't *want* to be a traitor anymore! Please…just let me die."

"Hell no," Rogue snapped.

"Why…why not? Why won't you let me perish?"

"I ain't offering assisted suicide. You're gonna live and repent. We've got crimes to solve. Don't think you're getting off the hook that easy."

"That's…so not fair!" Catherine wailed, her face crumpling. "Now I *have* to live!"

She grabbed his shoulders.

"I betrayed you!"

"Yeah, and I suffered for it."

"……I'm sure I'll do it again. I'll try not to, but I can't promise anything."





"I'm not a fan."

She looked up at him through her lashes.

"……So why are you forgiving me?"

He didn't think he was, but he rolled with it for now.

"Well, someone else changed my mind. Don't care what you witches think—I ain't ready to quit just yet."

Catherine hung her head, gnashing her teeth.

"……You'll be living in fear of your life. Does that not bother you?"

"What about it? I'm gonna work you all to the bone, witches or not. Once you're healed up, you'll be back on the job."

That seemed to finally make her mind up.

"……I want to be there when you die," Catherine said. "Until then, I'll make myself useful."

How he wished she was joking, but Catherine clearly meant every word.

But when she thought about it, that was like a con artist telling their mark they were about to run a con. Realizing that, Catherine turned red and got very shifty. *"I want to be there when you die"* was a pretty cringe pronouncement.

They drove another fifteen minutes, and as they neared the Sixth Precinct, he got an alert on his phone from Velladonna.

A murder on a golf course in the Third Ward. Using a spell the likes of which they'd never seen, so she was requesting the Sixth Precinct's assistance.

Damn, no rest for the wicked.

◇

A short, black-haired officer was their guide at the golf course. Maybe the officer was a newbie, because his voice cracked.

"This way!"

A male golfer was lying on the green.

"I have no clue *what's* going on!"

The man's body covered the whole green. The same body, repeating, arranged neatly like a jigsaw puzzle.

A duplication spell? But what for? No, duplication spells can't copy anything biological, so what else could this be?

As Rogue scowled, the officer stammered, "Er, um…are you the one they call Bloody Rogue?"

"Yeah, that'd be me."

He'd almost forgotten that name.

"Um"—the officer bowed—"I'm a fan! Can I get your autograph?"

"Huh?"

Rogue was stunned.

"I keep a scrapbook of all the cases you've solved, Detective! You do such brilliant work. I really respect you!"

"R-right…"

The officer had a card made of colored paper, and a pen. All ready for his autograph.

Rogue glanced at Catherine, but she was asking Forensics where the restrooms were. Perhaps the bodies had made her ill. The forensics officer led her away, and the other officers on scene were busy numbering the bodies, some distance from them.

The gleam in this officer's eyes broke through Rogue's reluctance. No one was looking—might as well just get it over with.

"Why not?"

He took the pen, then popped the cap off, and as he signed the card, the officer asked, "Um, is that a choker?" pointing at Rogue's wrist.

The collar had peeped out from his shirt.

"Yeah…gift from a friend."

"It's kinda cute."

Rogue nodded and looked back at the card.

"Right, what's your name? Should I make it out to you?"

"Oh, sorry, I completely forgot!"

In the corner of his eye, he saw the officer bow again.

"My name's Miseria! If you could write '*Miseria, keep working hard!'* on it, that'd be swell!"

His heart skipped a beat.

"Mis…eria?"

He looked up.

"Yep! That'd be me!"

The officer swept off his cap, then gripped his black hair and flung it away. The white hair hidden beneath the wig came tumbling free.

Rogue froze to the spot.

"Cat got your tongue, Detective?" the officer asked, removing some colored contacts. Blue eyes pierced through him. "Keep those hands moving! Best to get that signed before anyone else comes over here."

The officer's voice had changed completely from a young man's pitch to a girl's.

"Or will you not sign it unless I call you Rogue?"

"……You're supposed to be dead."

"Hmm. I expected you to shed tears of joy!"

His voice rasped. "……I'm not crying."

"Aww! Even though you've turned my collar into a keepsake? A 'gift from a friend,' was it?"

"……Shush."

"I had no idea you thought so highly of me. I'm touched!"

Miseria cackled. That mocking tone was clearly the witch's own.

Rogue let out a long sigh.

"……You've got some explaining to do."

"Roger that! First, I *did* die. My body crumbled to dust; no healing spell could possibly help. So why am I hunky-dory? Can you guess,

Rogue?”

Miseria was clearly hell-bent on making him participate.

She was definitely done for. If she came back from that… A resurrection? Rogue felt suddenly very dumb. *Why hadn’t I noticed?*

Miseria picked up on his train of thought.

“Figured it out?”

“Yeah. You carved Control into yourself, right? Once you were dead, you reversed the flow of time, restoring your body.” He pressed the autographed card against her. “Right?”

“Got it in one!” Miseria clapped for him with a spitefully dazzling smile. Unlike incantations, a spell cast via sigil could be activated after a delay. If she gave orders to the spell in advance, it would still kick in even if she was dead. “What now? Are you mad at me?”

Miseria studied his face.

“Shush.”

He knew the answer, but it didn’t sit right. Something was bugging him at the back of his mind. *Why hadn’t Miseria cast Control while she was still alive? If she was so certain Control could heal her, why let herself die first? Miseria had* chosen *to die, but what for?*

Miseria was just smiling, watching him. There was more to this.

She had a goal in mind. Something she had to die to accomplish.

The answer was on the tip of his tongue.

He raised his left hand, brushing back his hair. The goal likely wasn’t anything that complicated. It wouldn’t take more than a few words to convey. Before the other cops came over.

Something simple…that a witch like Miseria would want…

His gaze landed on his wrist.

And he had his answer.

Rogue sighed.

“You let yourself die to get the collar off?”

“Well done,” Miseria said with a vicious smirk.

In hindsight, it was obvious. The collar would only come off when she was dead. To get it off, she had to die. The motive was even more transparent—the collar was robbing her of her power and freedom. No one would let a chance to escape slip through their fingers.

"So the reason you were so hell-bent on getting me out of there was so I wouldn't see the collar come off when you died?"

"Clever boy. Exactly," Miseria said. "I'd successfully put the collar out of your mind, but if you saw it roll away, you might well have worked out my intent."

She'd expected he would try to save her. How long had she been planning this collar trick? He felt betrayed—and his tongue and throat were very dry.

She sure was a witch.

"……This was your goal all along?"

"What if it was?"

"……I thought you hated liars."

"I do."

Miseria merrily skipped away. Then she turned back to him.

"I *did* have a lot of fun with you. That's why I put in an appearance here."

Rogue said nothing.

Instead, he took a step toward her. She showed no signs of budging.

"You're not running?"

"You're not arresting me?"

Again. She was still testing him.

Rogue bit his lip and moved close enough to grab her.

"……Puppeteer Miseria. You're under arrest."

"Go right ahead."

Miseria held out her wrists. Like she meant it. *Was escaping the collar not her goal? My head hurts. Argh, she is so—* Rogue turned to his left toward the field of corpses. He could no longer see the witch's face.

“Rogue?” she sounded puzzled.
“You wanted out, right? Go on, get. Before I change my mind.”
“Er, no, I was more here to enjoy your befuddlement.”
“My mind’s made up. Scram.”
She’d sounded genuinely rattled, and he was enjoying that.





This is the right choice.

"……You are *far* too nice," she said.

Then she grabbed his jaw, turning his face toward her, and he felt her lips on his. His mind went blank.

"That's to say thank you."

Miseria pulled away, but her face was still so close, he could count her long lashes.

"Heh-heh. That's quite a look on your face."

She let go of his chin.

"Wh-wh-what are you—?" Rogue spluttered, his mind rebooting. "Y-you can't just—"

"It's not that big a deal. You're so inexperienced! I don't mind teaching you a thing or two, Rogue."

"Teaching me what?!"

He got a bit loud, and she put her hands to her ears and started walking.

"I'm concerned for your future. Can you get by, when you're so wet behind the ears?"

"Leave me be!"

"Oh, right. Keep an eye on Catherine. I gave her a million punishments, but her issues run deep. That's all the advice I have, really. The rest is up to you."

"————Wait!"

Miseria stepped behind a tree. He made to follow her, and she stuck her head back out, giving him a bashful grin.

"Maybe you'll catch me next time. I'm looking forward to it!"

Yeah, right.

Witches can't be collared.

The End

Afterword

I'm Yuri Yumemi.

I thought of the idea for this after reading *The Silence of the Lambs*. Solving a case with someone as scary as Dr. Hannibal Lecter would be thrilling and a lot of fun. That was five years ago.

I love stories with thrills. I'll read *anything* with horror vibes. Even if it isn't strictly horror! For that reason, I just can't stop myself from adding horror-inspired elements or twists to my own work. I've submitted fourteen previous novels for the Dengeki Novel Prize, and someone died in nearly all of them. Only three of them didn't! I'd say that shows just how hard it is to escape your own tastes.

For that reason, in this series, the witches serve in lieu of the cannibal.

They're scary. Powerful. And badass.

That's the kind of novel I wanted to write.

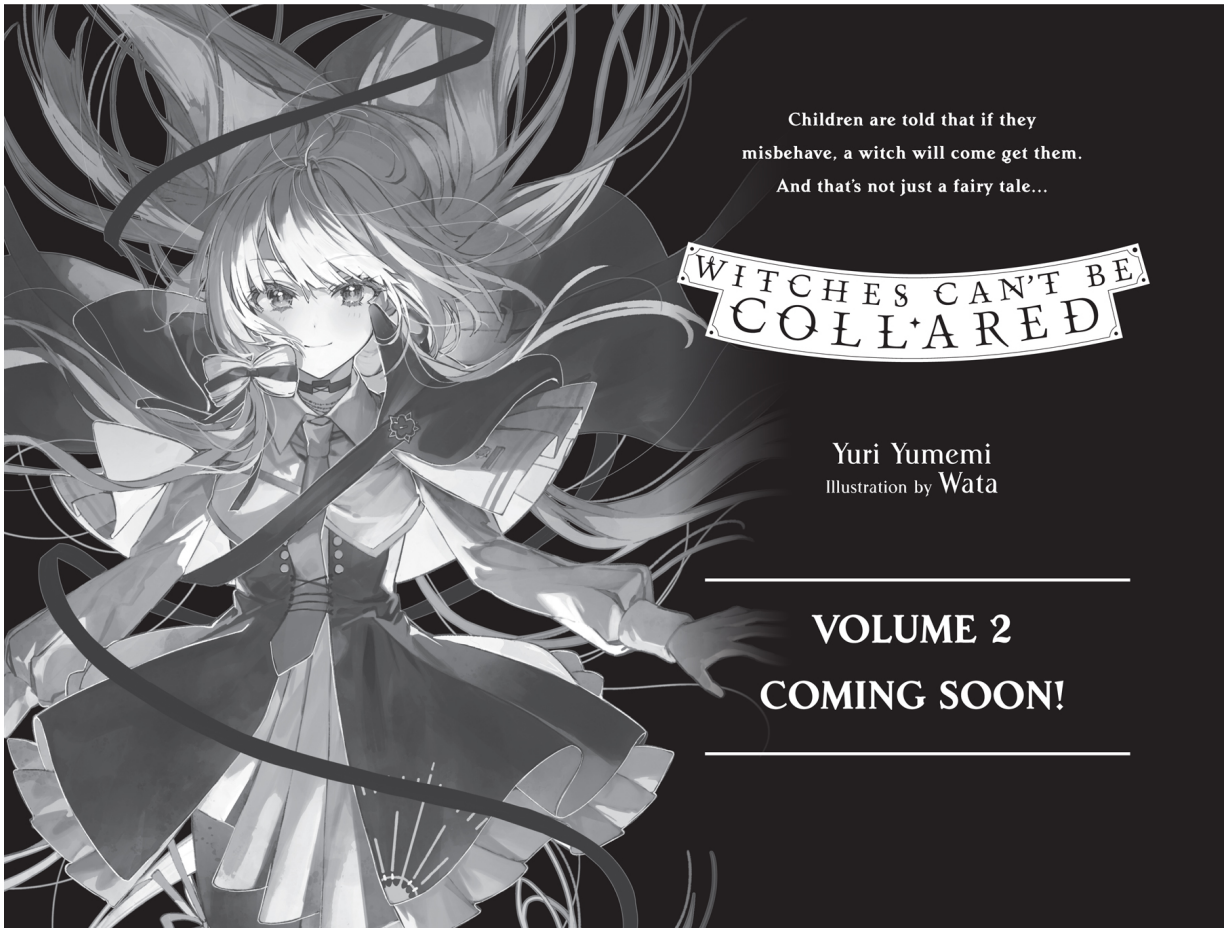
Every witch in that prison did something *wicked*. With no more hesitation than a giant anaconda has toward devouring humans. Rogue's life will always be in danger. But he's not allowed to run away. Not only because he's a detective, but because his own code of ethics won't allow it. And if our protagonist runs for the hills, we're in trouble. Or I am anyway. Thank god he stuck it out!

Three cheers for Rogue!

To my editors, Mori and Kobara, you used a ton of your time helping me, and I'm very grateful. To my illustrator, Wata, I'm sorry the revisions were so late. The rough sketches you sent kept me

going. To my family, I'd love to say I can rest easy now…but I plan to keep going.

To everyone who picked up this book, a heartfelt thank-you. If you enjoyed this story, nothing would make me happier.


Children are told that if they
misbehave, a witch will come get them.
And that's not just a fairy tale...
WITCHES CAN'T BE COLLARED
Yuri Yumemi
Illustration by Wata
VOLUME 2
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