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JOUGI SHIRAISHI


ILLUSTRATION AZURE





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RIVIERE AND THE LAND OF PRAYER



“Well! I guess I did a
pretty good deed.”

MACMILLIA

An employee at
Rivière Antiques.
A redoubtable
assistant Rivière
can always rely on.
(At least by her
own account.)

CARREDURA
A mysterious
antiques dealer who
sells dangerous sancta.

“Allow
me to
grant
your
wish.”



CURURUNELVIA
The Witch of
Prayer. On a journey
to help people.

“I’m a
witch drawn
by an intense
curiosity.”





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Illustration by Azure

Translation by Kevin Steinbach

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Rain

Standing quietly along our country's main thoroughfare is a shop bearing my name: Riviere Antiques.

On that particular day, a man in a black uniform walked through the door.

"Henri," I said, and after he had set down his umbrella, he gave me a quick bow. He was with the police department that kept Cururunelvia, the land of prayer, safe. Me, I helped handle cases relating to sancta, and if Henri was visiting my shop, there could only be so many reasons.

"Let me guess. Carredura's on the move again?" I said as I brewed some black tea.

Henri nodded, looking grim. "That's right."

Someone working under the name of Antiques Carredura had been going around sowing misery in this country for some time now. She seemed to appear out of nowhere and disappeared just as suddenly. Neither the police nor I had had any success in catching her. I could see from Henri's dark expression how much that galled him.

"Another case we only learned about after the fact," he said. As he spoke, he handed me a sancta—an old object imbued with a special power. In this instance, an item Carredura had sold to her victim. "By the time we realize what was happening, it was already too late. She's gone without a trace. In search of new prey, I can only assume."

I took the sancta from him, inspected it, and then took it to the storeroom in the back of my shop. In my store, I actually sold only the least dangerous sancta. More perilous items, like this one, I put under lock and key, until the time came when I would disenchant them, removing the power bestowed by the prayer that had been put upon them. It was an ability that I alone in this country possessed—and it was the one thing I could do at this moment to oppose Carredura.

My “vault” was packed with other sancta that Carredura had sold, patiently waiting their turn to be disenchanted. I added the sancta Henri had given me to the collection.

How long could this go on?

“I just don’t know,” I answered myself with a sigh. All I could do was say a silent prayer for this country.

Please let Antiques Carredura do no more harm.

Let no one else experience grief because of a sancta.

As I wished with all my heart, my gaze drifted out the window once more. It was raining and had been for quite some time.

It felt like it had been raining forever.



Look-Again Cigarettes

“Dammit!”

In a corner of a noisy bar, Julio drained another beer in an attempt to drown his sorrows. How many had he drunk? He’d lost count. He couldn’t even taste the beer at this point, but that didn’t stop him from knocking back one after another.

The bar was full of carefree patrons enjoying a chat after work. Julio spotted someone who looked like him, another man in his midthirties. He must have been doing big things at the office, because his coworkers were showering him with praise, younger women were shooting him desirous looks, and he was in the middle of it all, red-faced. He was taking a big bite of food, trying to cover up his embarrassment by declaring how delicious it was.

In the bar’s bustling kitchen, Julio could see the chefs with their frying pans. They looked up when the man expressed his appreciation for the food at the top of his lungs, but they went right back to work. Julio caught the slightest smiles on their faces. Well, who wouldn’t be happy to have someone be grateful for their effort?

Julio got that. He got it so hard it hurt.

Because that was where he’d been until a few hours ago. He’d worked in the kitchen, serving up food for the customers with his fellow chefs. He’d worked his ass off at this restaurant.

Until today, when the manager had chased him out. “Julio, you’re fired,” he’d said, and that was it. His job was over. He had been right in the middle of helping his colleagues whip something up.

“Huh?” Julio had said. At first, he thought it must be some sort of joke. But the manager heaved a sigh that came out along with a cloud of cigarette smoke; he didn’t look like he thought this was funny at all.

Most striking of all, though, was the complete lack of interest in Julio or anything about him that he saw in the owner’s eyes.

“You, you’re just not any *help* at this restaurant. Everyone else has a job to do, but you just sort of back up whoever’s around you. Frankly, this restaurant can run fine without you.”

And so he was fired. No need to come in tomorrow.

“N-no, I... But...but, sir!”

How could he just drop that on Julio like this? How was Julio supposed to muster a response? Wasn’t he going to ask for Julio’s side of the story? He couldn’t just *do* this, could he?

Julio struggled to put the words together and tried to get the manager to reconsider. But it was no use.

“You don’t have a single actual talent,” the manager spat. “You’re an assistant at best. The one thing you’ve got going for you is a long history here. If I asked for your ‘story,’ you’d just grin and laugh and produce no useful ideas whatsoever. You have no principles, no guiding motivation. You’ve got nothing.”

Each and every word that spilled from the manager’s mouth cut Julio like a knife. Had this man always seen Julio as deadweight? Was his existence not worth anything? It was then that he knew: There was no place for him here anymore.

“What do you want to *do* with your life?”

That was the last thing the manager said before stalking away, and there was nothing Julio could do to stop him. Julio turned in his chef whites, and before

the day was over, he had been summarily shown out of the restaurant.

It was agony.

Julio hadn't been able to come up with the words on the spot—it was all too sudden, and he couldn't think of what to say—but he certainly wasn't *zero* help in the restaurant.

In fact, given the length of his tenure, he had more experience with the place than anyone else. He took every care so that his coworkers standing in the kitchen could cook comfortably. He prepared every ingredient thoughtfully so that his coworkers wouldn't have any unexpected surprises. And when someone made a mistake, he was usually the one who managed to fix it.

He was certainly not unnecessary.

“Damn, damn, *damn!*” Julio slammed his mug onto the table, furious. It was already empty. He called for the nearest waitress to bring him another beer. How many did that make? How many had he gone through?

The moment he was out of alcohol again, the anxieties he had been trying to drown resurfaced once more: How was he supposed to survive? What was he going to do tomorrow? What about the rest of his life?

Then a woman sat down across from him and said, “Good evening.”

Julio looked at her, puzzled. “I’m pretty sure I ordered a beer. Where’s my beer?”

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t work here.” The woman smiled at him.

He couldn’t help staring at her. Her face was very beautiful. She had long black hair and wore a black dress, almost like mourning clothes, that looked out of place at this bar. But she sat very properly, like a doll.

“*This* is where I work.” She bowed and handed him a business card. As Julio bowed back, he took it.

“Antiques Carredura?” he said, peeking at the card.

“That’s right. And I’m the owner, Carredura.” She smiled again. *So she named the store after herself?* “I’ve been watching you here, and I can’t help thinking you seem to have something on your mind. Would you like to talk to me about

what's going on?" Carredura peered at Julio, and her eyes seemed as dark as the lightless depths of the sea.

For a moment, Julio was quiet, but then he found himself opening up to her about everything that had happened that day. Maybe he had just been waiting for someone who would listen to him. There must be something wrong with him, he thought, to tell a stranger he'd just met about all this. Even as he had the thought, though, he couldn't stop talking. It was just tragic. Tragic that she couldn't have seen him hard at work. Tragic that the owner had thought he was doing nothing.

Nobody looked at Julio and saw who he truly was. Nobody looked at him at all. That was the tragedy.

"How very painful that must have been for you," Carredura said, and she smiled gently as if to dispel the dark feelings besetting him. "But I must say, you're very lucky."

He was lucky? Strange thing to say to a man who'd just gotten fired. Julio glared at her reflexively, but there was a smile in her dark eyes.

"You met me here today, and that's very fortunate indeed." Carredura took his hand gently. "As a matter of fact, I have a sancta that would be perfect for you."

"Perfect for me?"

"Yes, indeed. It will make everyone notice you and cast envious looks upon you. It's a wonderful sancta."

Perhaps he'd like to give it a try? She let go of his hand and gave him a questioning look.

Julio let his gaze fall to the table, wishing she hadn't let go. A beautiful woman, holding his hand. *His* hand. His hand, flush with heat from the alcohol.

Into his palm she had pressed a cigarette case.

Back at home, Julio sat at his table with his head in his hands. "What in the world am I doing?" he asked himself. The first things he'd experienced once the

alcohol wore off and he had his wits back were a vicious hangover and a flurry of regret.

He'd had way too much to drink at the bar. And then he'd gone and bought... whatever this was.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" He looked down at the cigarette case on the table and sighed. He'd bought the sancta without a second thought.

He remembered what the woman had said to him: "These are Look-Again Cigarettes. They amplify the presence of the person smoking them, making him linger in people's minds. Oh, but don't worry. They may be called cigarettes, but none of the ingredients are addictive."

This sancta was used just like regular cigarettes: You breathed in, breathed out, and stared into the middle distance. That would be enough to get the people around you to notice every little thing you did and shower you with approbation.

"If you smoke the Look-Again Cigarettes, your smallest achievements will come to the notice of an entire crowd of people. You'll be the envy of everyone you meet."

Carredura had smiled, there amid the commotion of the bar. Behind her, he could still see the man about his age being lauded by his coworkers and those young women.

"Don't you want people to see your work for what it's really worth?" Carredura almost whispered. Even now, back in his room, Julio could hear the words echo in his ears.

He'd bought the sancta on the spot out of sheer excitement, but the truth was, he didn't even know if they really worked. Yet he couldn't simply ignore them—he couldn't get Carredura's words out of his head, even after he got home.

Neither would those of the manager.

"What do you want to do with your life?"

He had been chased out of his restaurant by someone who didn't understand

that his contribution was less overt than some, and now he asked himself what he wanted to do.

He wanted people to see what his work was worth.

It was too much. It broke his heart.

“I’ll make them pay,” he said, the words bubbling up from deep inside. “Everyone who never so much as looked at me... I’ll make them all pay!”

That was what Julio truly wanted to do at that moment.

He reached out and grabbed one of the cigarettes from the case, put it in his mouth, and lit it.

He must be crazy. It wasn’t like him to resort to something like this, instead of doing a job himself. There was no telling if a random sancta he’d bought at a bar would even have any effect at all.

Julio knew all that, and still he breathed in.

Then he exhaled again, like he was sighing. A cloud of white smoke came out of his mouth, and he had the distinct sense that it was erasing his anxieties, covering them over with mist.



The sancta’s effect, as it turned out, was real enough.

As he walked through town the next day, Julio almost couldn’t believe it. Everything around him seemed completely different. For example, when he picked up some trash lying by the roadside—something he made a habit of always doing—a nearby citizen spotted him and came over, saying, “Did you just pick up some trash? What a good person you must be!” Julio gave her a shy bow.

He heard some women say:

“Hey, you see that guy over there? Doesn’t he look kind of...cool?”

“Yeah, he looks amazing!”

Julio was just walking along, but apparently the women had noticed him. In

fact, he felt like everyone seemed to be noticing him, far more people than usual.

Then there was the moment he went to what he hoped would be his new job, the restaurant across the street from the place where he used to work.

“I see. You want to work with us?” The owner listened Julio’s story, even though Julio had simply walked in off the street, and then he said, “We’ll start with a three-day probationary period. We’ll make a hiring decision after that, depending on how you perform.”

In other words, he had three days to impress them, and then he would have a job. So Julio set about supporting his colleagues’ work just as he’d done before. It wasn’t flashy or obvious, but it was Julio’s specialty. A specialty that had gone, it was fair to say, completely unappreciated at his previous place of employment.

Julio was just doing what he always did, but the owner said, “What fantastic work, Julio! Please come work for us immediately!”

That had to be the Look-Again Cigarettes doing their thing.

Every time Julio lifted a finger at his new restaurant, someone seemed to notice and appreciate it. Not just the owner but all of Julio’s coworkers were full of praise for him.

“Mr. Julio, you’re the most thoughtful person!” said a junior staff member, eyes shining.

“Having you around makes life so much easier,” a veteran chef told him with a pat on the shoulder.

“I just love working with you!” said a young waitress, her face flushed.

I knew it! Julio thought, savoring his joy. *I knew I was doing the right thing all along!* He saw that a little acknowledgment was all it took to make him want to do work that lived up to everyone’s expectations.

He passed the probationary period with flying colors and was promptly hired on as part of the restaurant’s main force. Julio continued to smoke his cigarettes on a daily basis and receive people’s adulation with equal regularity.

Yes, the Look-Again Cigarettes had exactly the effect he had been promised. Everyone around him took note of everything he said and did.

And then, about a week into his new job, the Look-Again Cigarettes he'd bought to try ran out.

"It seems everything is going well for you."

Julio didn't even have to work to summon Antiques Carredura; practically the moment he wished he could talk to her, she appeared.

Julio was surprised, but he thanked her. "I feel like I've been reborn!" he said.

When he walked around town, people took notice of him; at work, his colleagues greeted him with smiles. The owner continually praised his talents; at every opportunity he got, he would pat Julio on the back and say, "You're going to be running this place one day!"

It was a life Julio could hardly have imagined after the cold treatment he'd been used to.

Carredura smiled as Julio gleefully told her about all this. "That's wonderful," she said. "If I may, it seems you've used up your trial cigarettes. What do you say? Would you like to buy some more?"

Julio already knew the answer to that. "Please! I would love to."

He was only just getting used to this new life of his. Most importantly, he still hadn't made his old manager and his coworkers regret their decision. He would work harder, achieve even more, and make them wish they'd never run him out of their restaurant.

So Julio practically begged for more cigarettes.

"Of course. Of course," Carredura said, and she granted his wish.

Every day, Julio would smoke one of the cigarettes and go to work. This continued for a while.

One day, the owner patted him on the back and said, "Hey there, Julio. Good to see you." But there were no special words of praise to speak of.

He went ahead and got to work, when the veteran chef came up and said, “Ah, Julio. Think you could take care of this for me?” and gave him something else to do. Again, no particular expression of gratitude.

“Oh! Mr. Julio. Let’s work to make our customers happy today, just like we always do!” That was the young waitress, who smiled at him—but didn’t say anything especially appreciative, either.

Julio was quiet. Somewhere along the line, his days of being outstanding had become just...ordinary, and now no one really had any words of thanks for him. The effect of the Look-Again Cigarettes didn’t seem to be enough anymore.

“Maybe,” Julio said slowly, “I’ll try smoking one more.”

He went out to the smoking area in front of the restaurant and lit up.



The moment Julio came back from his smoke break, the other employees were full of praise for him again.

Amazing! Fantastic! Such a performer!

It felt so good to hear those words. “Oh, I’m just doing what I always do,” Julio said modestly. But modest or not, he enjoyed hearing them recognize his work.

No sooner had Julio started smoking more cigarettes than things around him changed again.

“Please let me interview you!” A reporter showed up at the restaurant, heaping praise on Julio’s appearance and work ethic and excitedly talking about how they wanted to write an article about him.

“Ha-ha-ha. Do I really stand out that much?” Julio asked. He hadn’t done anything special to make himself look different. And he really was working about the way he always had. But the reporter insisted, “I’ve never covered such an incredible person!” and produced a rapturous article about him.

Evidently, increasing the number of Look-Again Cigarettes one smoked also strengthened their effect.

Within a few days, people who had seen the article were forming a long line outside the restaurant.

“Is that *the* Julio?” some asked.

“Wow! Talk about handsome.”

“Maybe I can get his autograph!”

The restaurant was packed for days on end. The customers could be heard all the way in the kitchen. With every shout, the waitress would puff out her cheeks and say, “How nice for you,” jealous. Julio would reply with a wry smile.

This went on for several days.

Not too long after the newspaper had introduced him to the world, Julio heard some customers talking:

“Huh? Is that the guy who was in the newspaper?”

“Somehow he doesn’t look quite like I imagined.”

“Yeah. He’s kind of...plain.”

That was strange—until a few days earlier, he’d been getting spontaneous applause for doing pretty much nothing at all. Maybe the effect was wearing off again? On his break, Julio hustled to the smoking area.

“Bah,” he muttered as he lit another cigarette.

When he went back inside, the customers were once again looking at him with starry eyes. He did his usual job. The owner patted him on the back. “I always know I could count on you.”

Ahh, there was that recognition of his worth. Although he was privately relieved, Julio replied with his customary humility. “Oh, I’m just doing what anybody would do.”

With each Look-Again Cigarette that he smoked, Julio became more convinced of how *right* he was.

A few more days passed, when from the customer seating Julio heard:

“You see that guy? I guess he was in the newspaper.”

“Huh. Why? He looks like a normal guy to me.”

Julio immediately took his break and went to smoke.

A few days more.

“Julio... Not that I really mind, but don't you think you've been smoking a lot of cigarettes lately?” the waitress asked him, uncomfortable. Julio promptly smoked another.

Several more days.

“Something's been strange with you lately. You spend your entire shift smoking. I thought you were a harder worker than that,” the owner told him in a warning tone. Julio lost no time smoking another cigarette.

Finally, one more day went by. The owner called Julio out behind the store and gave him the news.

“I'm sorry, Julio. I have to let you go.”

His services wouldn't be required, starting the next day.

Julio didn't understand.

Was this some sort of joke?

Maybe the sancta's effect had worn off—he lit another Look-Again Cigarette.

“For God's sake, enough is enough! You do nothing but smoke those cigarettes!”

The owner snatched the cigarette right out of Julio's mouth, threw it on the ground, and ground it under his heel. Smoke didn't even rise from it; it lay there looking like a smashed earthworm.

“You always used to do at least a bare minimum of work, so I didn't care if you had a smoke here or there, but these days you spend more time smoking than working! Frankly, you're just in the way. If you're not going to do your job, then go home.”

Those words, they were...so cold.

“But...but...!”

If you let me go now, you'll regret it! Are you sure you can live with this decision?

Julio spoke desperately, trying to stop the owner from doing this. Behind his words, there was anger at the other man. Who did he think had made his restaurant so successful? Who kept it running? It was all because Julio worked so hard to support his colleagues.

“What in the world are you talking about?” the owner spat, oblivious to Julio’s thoughts. “This place would run just fine without you.”

Julio watched him go, unable to say a word. Instead he crouched and looked at the ground. “I wonder if I could still smoke this...”

He reached down and scraped up the cigarette. The leaves had come out, but if he could get it into a halfway decent shape, it might still be possible to light it up.

Still squatting there, he lit it. White smoke drifted through the narrow back alley and into the sky.

“Ahh, who cares? There are plenty of places out there that will appreciate me.”

Julio stood up and walked off into town, still reeking of smoke.



How many places had he gone? Julio looked back over the time since he had started smoking the Look-Again Cigarettes.

Things always went well at first. He would join a new restaurant. They would say nice things about the work he was doing; his colleagues would wax enthusiastic about what a great new coworker they had. But as they got used to having Julio around, they stopped sounding so grateful.

Even though I'm so capable!

Eventually, people always stopped noticing what he was really doing. Julio, unable to bear it, would smoke more cigarettes. More and more and more.

Each time people stopped paying attention to him, he would reach for a cigarette. Again and again he found them in his hands.

But again and again the result was the same:

“You’re fired.”

“Try to actually *do* your job.”

I *am* doing my job!

“You’re no help at all!”

You only say that because you don’t notice me.

“You do nothing but smoke your cigarettes!”

Because none of you will even look at me!

At each place, Julio would end up in an argument with the owner and ultimately be let go. It was the same story every time.

And every time, Julio burned through more cigarettes.

So he would have to go to Carredura to buy more.

“Please, Miss Carredura, sell me more Look-Again Cigarettes.”

Julio intended to keep doing this until he finally found somewhere that acknowledged his brilliance.

Carredura gave him a smile. “I’m so sorry. I’m completely sold out.”

“What?”

He must not have heard her right. Sold out? He couldn’t buy any more Look-Again Cigarettes? He couldn’t believe it.

“Look, without them, I... Well, I have to have them!”

“I’m afraid that puts me in a rather awkward position. What’s gone is gone.” Carredura was still smiling, but her tone brooked no argument.

Julio couldn’t process it. He felt like reality was going fuzzy in front of his eyes. No Look-Again Cigarettes? How was he supposed to survive without them?

“D-do you have anything else? Some kind of substitute? You must have

something! Or I...I..."

"No, nothing." A smiling refusal.

Still Julio begged. If he didn't have his Look-Again Cigarettes, nobody would be able to see what he was really worth. Everyone around him was too stupid to notice on their own.

"Without those cigarettes, no one can see the real me! Please! I'm begging you..."

"I'm sorry. Did you say something?" Carredura looked at him as if puzzled.

All she saw was a man who looked like he was about to burst into tears. A pathetic man. A man with no special abilities to speak of, not even capable of putting forth a little effort. A man in complete denial about his own lack of talent, unwilling to listen to others' frank assessments of him, and yet still sure that someone, someday, would give him the credit he wasn't even due. And he himself did nothing. A sad, empty man living a sad, empty life.

Carredura regarded him with her sweetest smile. "I believe you're showing me the real you *right now*."



The Weird House

"What? Again?"

Olivia gave the picture stand a funny look as she picked it up. It had fallen on the floor yet again. Several times today, in fact. A picture of her family that seemed to be on the ground every time she looked over.

It was a photo she'd taken with her husband and daughter shortly before moving into this house. They were all smiling happily together; it made her heart sing and filled her with longing in equal measure.

For she'd had all too few reasons to smile like that since moving here.

Her husband had to do a lot of overtime and was often late coming home. That left Olivia and her soon-to-be six-year-old daughter, Carrie, alone in the house most of the time. That wasn't such a bad thing, except Olivia was plagued by an anxiety she couldn't put her finger on.

Ever since they'd come here, strange things seemed to keep happening.

The first time she'd felt something might be wrong was the very day they'd moved in. She found a doll she didn't recognize lying in the hallway. It wasn't one she'd bought for her daughter. Left behind by the previous owner, maybe? Whatever the case, the battered old doll frightened her husband, and they threw it away that evening.

The next day, Olivia found her daughter playing house with the same doll.

Things only got more unsettling after that. Dishes fell from shelves seemingly for no reason. The couch wasn't where they'd left it. Carrie started talking to the walls, and in the night they heard footsteps rush down the hallway.

Words went through Olivia's mind, words she wished she could ignore: *Ghostly phenomena. Poltergeists.*

And then there was the family photo, toppled each time she went by. Another day, another inexplicable occurrence.

There seem to be no end in sight to the happenings. Olivia asked herself when the bright days she saw in that photograph would come back to them, and she sighed as she put the photo back on the shelf yet again.

"Hoo-hoo-hoo..."

At that moment, she thought she heard someone laughing behind her. She spun around, but there was only an empty hallway. Nobody there. She felt a chill run down her spine. Whose laughter had that been? She didn't recognize the voice, she thought. It wasn't Carrie. Fear, fear of some *thing* she couldn't see, burgeoned in her heart.

Down the hallway, the door opened with a creak.

"Mommy?"

Her daughter, Carrie, emerged through the door. Her beloved daughter, looking perplexed and worried. She must have been disturbed by the tension on Olivia's face. Olivia shook her head as if to push away the bad feeling in her mind and smiled at her.

"Carrie, sweetheart. Did you knock over the picture?"

Yes, that had to be it. It was just her daughter being naughty. There was no such thing as ghosts—or so Olivia kept telling herself. As she crouched there in front of her little girl, she dearly *wished* it was just her daughter misbehaving a little.

Carrie, though, met her mother's eyes and shook her head, mystified. "Uh-uh. I didn't do it."

Of course not. Carrie was nowhere near tall enough to reach the shelf.

Well, it must be coincidence, then. Because it couldn't be a ghost.

Olivia felt like the picture was on the floor every time she saw it, but that had to be a trick of her imagination. She shook her head, trying to make herself believe that.

That was the moment Carrie picked to say, "But you know, this house's ghost told me something."

"I'm sorry... What?"

Ghost? The word Olivia had been trying so hard to get out of her head came straight out of her daughter's mouth.

Her daughter, who spent so much time talking to the walls these days.

"The ghost let me know that the picture fell down again today."

That was it. This was the day when Olivia confronted the fact she had been trying and trying to ignore: This house was haunted.

"And that's the story. Do you think you might be able to stop the paranormal phenomena happening in my house?"

It was several days later, and Olivia had brought her husband and daughter to a small shop on the main thoroughfare of Cururunelvia, the land of prayer. The place seemed to have every conceivable kind of merchandise for sale: umbrellas, plates, a vase, a cabinet. There was no discernible method to the madness, except that everything was antique—and almost everything in the shop had a price tag on it.

"I see. Yes, I see." Having heard their story, the shop owner looked at them and nodded. The tea set she had put on the table with a thud seemed like it might be another item from her store's stock.

Olivia looked at the other woman with the faint hope that she might be able to do something for them. The shop's red-haired owner gave her a smile.

"I think you've got the wrong place."

We aren't that sort of shop.

At least she had the good grace to look apologetic.

The name of the place Olivia and her family had come to was Riviere Antiques.



“Let me make sure I understand what you’re saying,” Riviere said from her spot on the couch. “You have a ghost in your house, and you want me to do something about it? Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“And do you understand what kind of shop we are?”

“Yes.”

“I see...”

Each time she answered, the client, Olivia, nodded quickly. Riviere, however, gave a deep sigh. She didn’t seem upset so much as unsure what to do. Finally, like she was talking to a child, she said, “Okay, you see... This is Riviere Antiques. We buy and sell sancta.”

“Yes.”

“That means we don’t deal with matters like this. It’s outside our expertise, for one thing. It doesn’t sound like there’s a sancta involved, so I wouldn’t even know what to do.”

Very sorry, but we won’t be able to help.

Riviere shrugged.

Riviere Antiques dealt in sancta, objects with special powers. We bought and sold them, or otherwise held on to them for Riviere to disenchant. Ghosts? Those were for other people to deal with. Like, say...

“A spiritual medium might be better. Maybe you could try asking, you know, someone like that?” I piped up from beside Riviere, giving a quizzical tilt of my head.

“Right...,” Olivia said, looking at me. “We thought of that, too. The first thing

we did was have a famous medium look at our house.”

“Really? You did?”

So this person had come and gone already?

When I asked how it went, Olivia’s answer was as simple as could be.

The medium, it seemed, had visited their house just that morning. She had looked up at it and begun to laugh. “Ahh, no way. Not this one. Impossible! No, not happening.”

“What?” Olivia had asked. What was *impossible* supposed to mean?

The medium had patted her on the shoulder and said, “I can’t do anything about this one.”

“I’m sorry... Are you sure there’s nothing you can do to help?”

“Like I said. Impossible.”

“I see...”

“Try someone else.”

“I...see?”

And that was it!

This was a famous spiritual medium?

“She sounds less helpful than shit on your shoe!”

“Stop that, MacMillia.” Riviere gave me a nudge.

“You can understand why we were a bit shocked,” Olivia said, her shoulders slumped. “But the fact that a famous spiritual medium threw in the towel so quickly did tell us one thing. Our family all agreed.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Riviere said at the same time.

“If a medium couldn’t deal with the problem, it suggested that whatever is happening in our home isn’t caused by a ghost.” For the space of a breath, Olivia looked at us, and then she said, “And that made me think that maybe it was some kind of sancta instead.”

“How do you figure?” I asked.

“I had exactly the same thought,” Riviere said at the same time.

“If it’s not a ghost, then it *must* be a sancta’s doing,” said Olivia.

Wow! Very definitive.

“I grant that it’s impossible to rule out a sancta from what you said,” Riviere said, furrowing her brow. “But you have to admit, it really, *really* seems like a ghost...”

“But the medium said she couldn’t deal with it.”

“Couldn’t that just mean, say, that the spirit is so evil that it’s beyond her powers? Like I said, I don’t know too much about these things...”

I agree, Miss Riviere!

“Plus, there’s always the possibility that the medium was a fraud,” I said. “Why don’t you try a different one?”

“We can’t!” Olivia exclaimed. “We can’t take any more of this! We finally get our own home, but strange things keep happening, and we don’t know why! We’re going to go crazy if we can’t do something about it!” Then she burst into tears.

“Mommy, are you okay?” The little girl sitting next to her, Carrie, offered her a handkerchief.

What a sweetie, I thought. Olivia’s husband, sitting on the other side of their daughter, bowed his head. “Please, we’re both asking for your help. The phenomena occurring in our house could be completely natural, or they could be a sancta—or maybe it really is a ghost. It’s hard to go on; we don’t even know what’s causing the problem.”

People fear things they don’t understand. For example, suppose you see eyes gleaming in the dark. You don’t know what’s lurking there, so you’re paralyzed with terror. When you discover it’s just a stray cat, though, maybe you’ll even crouch down and offer it some food.

The unknown is frightening. Once you know what it is, it’s not so scary. If they could at least find out whether this was a sancta at work, that knowledge alone

would improve their situation.

“Please. We’re begging you. Could you at least come look at our house?” Olivia’s husband asked, his head low.

“Yes! Please!” Olivia added, bowing, too.

Even sweet little Carrie, perched between them, bowed to us and said, “Pretty please?” The family of three almost looked like they were praying.

At that, Riviere finally heaved a deep sigh. She still wasn’t upset, and she no longer looked unsure of what to say. “All right, fine. But a look is all I promise.”

It was a sigh of resignation.

After that, we went straight to Olivia’s house. It wasn’t even that far from Riviere Antiques—a thirty-minute walk, maybe. It stood on a pretty nice piece of land not far from Cururunelvia’s main thoroughfare. It couldn’t have been cheap, I thought.

“That’s it,” Olivia said, pointing at a weathered old two-story. The brick walls were covered in creeping vines that shivered gently in the modest breeze. At first glance, it didn’t look like the sort of place where you would expect to see a ghost. In fact, it was a very attractive house.

At least, I thought so. Beside me, however, Riviere seemed to be observing something else entirely.

“At least we know that medium of yours was the real deal,” she said, and she looked at Olivia and her family with another small sigh. Then she went on: “A sancta’s aura is radiating from this house.”



Now that we knew what was causing the problem, it should have been simple enough to break the curse and get rid of the paranormal phenomena. Riviere possessed the ability to remove the power of prayer from objects imbued with it, so a quick disenchant should have been all we needed, right? My feeling was that we should go ahead and help these people, and I suggested as much.

Riviere, however, replied, "I'm afraid not. I can't do anything without knowing *where* the sancta is."

Apparently, it wasn't as simple as that. Riviere had to know what the object she was disenchanting actually was, but the aura emanating from the house was just too strong.

"This sancta must have had a very powerful wish placed upon it. Its aura is too overpowering for me to be able to tell exactly where it might be."

And so there was nothing she could do.

We had determined that the source of the matter wasn't ghostly, but once again we found ignorance standing in our path.

Still, knowing that it was definitely a sancta at work was a step in the right direction. I looked at Olivia. When Riviere gave her the rundown, she looked at the ground and almost groaned out, "I see. So that's what's going on..." Then, with a small smile and a sort of *Eureka!* look, she said, "Could we ask you to live here for a while, then? Surely you'd be able to figure out what's causing this eventually."

I cocked my head and said, "Uh."

"We would be perfectly happy for you to live here as long as you needed to find the source of the problem! Our family could stay in a hotel in the meantime!"

"Listen, we—," said Riviere, nonplussed.

"Isn't this wonderful, my love? Carrie! The nice antiques dealer is going to help us!"

"Um, excuse me...", I said. This conversation seemed to be getting away from us.

"Yay! Thank you so much, miss," Carrie said.

"Yes, I simply don't know how to thank you! We'll pay whatever you ask, just please help us!" Olivia's husband said, shaking my hand.

So it was that, somehow or other, by means I didn't fully grasp, we ended up as the new residents of Olivia's house, starting that very day.

Riviere and I stood in the silent entry hall.

I didn't say anything.

She didn't say anything.

At least not for a moment.

"Of all the ways I thought this would go, this wasn't one of them," Riviere groused.

"Well, that makes two of us," I said with a sigh. The sound of our voices seemed to filter through the whole big house.

So it was that the staff of Riviere Antiques had found ourselves involved in trying to untangle the strange phenomena occurring in Olivia's house.

It was then that we heard a voice, neither mine nor Riviere's.

"Excuse me..."

Who in the world could that be? We looked at each other.

A girl was standing there.

"Not that I care, but why did you drag me along for this?"

It was Elaina, looking very annoyed.

There was a pause as we both looked at each other again.

"You just seemed like you had time to kill," I said.

"Also, I was oddly annoyed by the thought that we would be the only ones staying in this haunted house," Riviere added.

"You're just taking it out on me!" Elaina said.

So it was that the three of us would face the paranormal together.



Riviere had me and Elaina sit down on the sofa, then talked at us—our standard working arrangement.

“I think we should split up to do this job,” she said. She was the same cool, collected Riviere she always was; she seemed immune to the fact that we were in a freaky house afflicted with some kind of haunting. “First, I’ll try to pinpoint the sancta that’s causing these phenomena. If it’s really in here, then all I should have to do is search the whole place and disenchant it.”

“Sounds good.” I nodded.

Elaina asked, “And what are we supposed to do?”

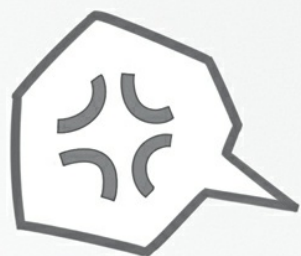
Guided by Riviere’s cool, collected example, we, too, went about our business as if we weren’t in a freaky haunted house.

“You can assist me with my work. MacMillia, I want you to search this house from top to bottom. It’s possible the sancta is somewhere that isn’t immediately obvious, so make sure to take a good look.”

“I’m on it!”

“And, Elaina, I want you to investigate the previous occupants. If there is a sancta in this house, there’s every chance it was left by the last people to live here, or someone associated with them. Go to the real estate office and see what you can dig up.”

“Roger that.” Elaina nodded—but then she immediately gave a tilt of her head, puzzled. “What you’re saying is you want me to search *outside* the house.”



“Yes, that’s the general idea.”

“If that’s the case, I don’t really need to stay *here*, do I?”

“Oh, yes, you do.”

“Why, exactly?”

“Because it sucks having to stay here by ourselves.”

“I knew you were just taking it out on me...” Elaina’s shoulders slumped.

With the labor divided, we stood up and went about our respective tasks. I don’t mind saying I got goose bumps when I heard that some kind of haunting was going on in this house, but just sitting down with the other two and talking about work had been enough to banish my fear.

Three heads are better than two, after all!

“Basically, we just have to do what we always do, right? Solve an issue involving a sancta,” I said. Thinking about it like that made me feel like there was nothing to be scared of at all. And heck, our jobs didn’t usually come with a whole house to stay in!

In spite of the modest, weathered exterior, Olivia’s house looked pretty rich inside. I’d guessed the family was doing all right for themselves based on the location, and now I felt sure.

“Miss Riviere, are we working in paradise this time?” I said. I couldn’t keep the grin off my face.

“I guess it’s possible,” she said, drawn into a smile herself. She looked kind of relieved, too—like she was starting to believe there was nothing to be scared of. “The assignment is simple enough. Really, all we have to do is find this sancta. I think we might be going home a lot sooner than—”

Bam!

She was interrupted by a crash from behind us—but there shouldn’t have been anyone behind us. It sounded like something heavy had fallen over. With a good dose of dread and some very disquieting thoughts about what I might see, I turned around.

My eyes were drawn to a bookshelf in the corner of the room. It was lined with lovely, fancy-looking books—one of which was lying on the floor.

Almost like it was warning us not to get too optimistic.

“Yikes...,” I said, shivering. Yes, Olivia had told us all about this before we arrived, but seeing it for myself was still frightening. “B-but since we know it’s a sancta doing that, there’s nothing to be scared of, right? Right...?” I asked the other two hopefully.

“W-well... No, I suppose not,” Elaina said, doing her best to nod. After a second, she added, “You know, I think I’m glad I got the job outside the house.”

Finally, Riviere said...

...nothing.

Huh?

Riviere was gone. She’d been standing right there until a second ago, but she had vanished like a puff of smoke. Where could she be?

I shared a look with Elaina, then called, “Miss Riviere?”

“Yes?” asked an annoyed voice. A beat later, we saw her face, too—from under a nearby table.

“Um, what are you doing?” I asked. She sort of reminded me of a turtle.

“Oh, it’s just—that noise just now, it made me drop something.”

Nice try.

“Miss Riviere, are you sc—?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yeah, but you—”

“I told you, I’m not scared.” She crawled out from under the table as if nothing had happened, then stood up. “I’m the owner of an antiques shop, remember. A few jumping books mean nothing to me. If I got terrified every time a sancta did anything, how could I do my job?”

“You’re talking really fast.”

“I’ve dealt with lots of much, much deadlier sancta than this in my time, and I’ve disenchanted them, and I’m not about to let some overblown inanimate object—”

Bam!

“Eeeek!” Riviere gave the most adorable shriek and huddled back down. A second book had fallen off the shelf behind us.

I narrowed my eyes at her.

“I told you, I’m not—”

“Yeah, but you—”

“I’m seriously not!”

Similar strange events large and small continued to occur. For example, immediately after we split up to tackle our respective assignments.

I was doing as Riviere had told me, investigating every corner of the house. It was two stories tall and had a basement, and the obvious thing to do was to start from the top and work my way down. I went up to the second floor.

There were four rooms up there. Starting from the far end, they were the master bedroom, the husband’s office, the guest room, and Carrie’s room. I decided to begin my investigation in the master bedroom, because it had the least stuff in it.

The door creaked as I opened it. “Sorry, don’t mean to intrude...,” I said.

“Wowee!” I exclaimed when I saw the room. I couldn’t help myself. The bedside table had toppled over, and the bed was leaning at an angle definitely not conducive to sleeping. I guess the paranormal phenomena in this house continued whether anyone was there to witness them or not.

Curious, I took a peek in the other rooms. The office was a mess, too, and so was the guest room, even though presumably nobody was using it. Only in Carrie’s room was there no sign that anything had been disturbed.

“Huh...” Why would the daughter’s room be the only one to go unscathed? I

stood there, pondering this discovery.

Just then, I heard someone laugh. “*Hoo-hoo-hoo...*”

Where was that coming from? I looked around. I could see a set of stairs at the far end of the hallway.

“*Hoo-hoo-hoo...*”

There it was again. This time the laugh was clearer than before. It was coming from the first floor. I obligingly trotted toward it, down the stairs. I came back into the living room to find Riviere silently patting down every chair and table. Maybe she was checking to see if she could disenchant them.

“Miss Riviere? Is something funny?” I said, and then I asked her why she had laughed just now.

“What?” She looked at me, thoroughly confused. I pressed: She *had* laughed, hadn’t she? But her expression only darkened. “No, I can’t say I did...”

“What, really?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” she said with a shrug.

This was a different kind of experience from stuff falling off a shelf, and it made me shiver.

Here’s something else that happened.

It was while I was hard at work.

I heard a knock at the door of the house. *Knock, knock. Knock, knock.* Was Elaina back already?

“Coming!” I said, and I opened the door to let her in.

Except she wasn’t there.

Instead, there was a little old lady in an elegant outfit. She was leaning on a cane and giving me a perplexed look. “My goodness. Whoever might you be?” she said.

That was what I wanted to know. Who was *she*? I gave her a puzzled tilt of my

head and studied her with a deep frown on my face. She studied me right back with an even deeper frown.

Finally, she said, “What are you doing in this house?!” And then, *whack!* She slapped me on the cheek with an open palm.

“But whyyyyyyyy?” I wailed. Why should I get slapped out of the blue?

Before I could figure out what was going on, the old woman brandished her cane at me. “This house belongs to me! You thief! Get out of here right now!”

Bap, bap, bap! She batted me on the arms and shoulders with her cane.

“Whoa, wait— You can’t just— Ahh!” It didn’t really hurt, but suddenly being accosted by a perfect stranger left me all in a tizzy.

“Don’t argue with me, just go! Get!” The old lady, who was proving very energetic for her age, began to shove me. Before I knew what was happening, I had let her into the house.

“Hold on, wait! You can’t just barge in here!” I said. This wasn’t even my house!

I was definitely starting to panic.

The moment she crossed over the threshold, though, the woman stopped short. She looked at the walls, she stared at the ceiling, she gazed at the floor, and then she looked bewildered. “Where...am I?” she asked, genuinely confused.

“In...in your house, I guess?” I said.

“I’ve never seen this house before in my life.” She shook her head. She looked around in perplexity one more time and said, “Do pardon me for bursting in,” and promptly left again.

Huh... Ookay.

“And that’s what happened,” I concluded. “Do you think it’s another paranormal phenomenon, Miss Riviere?”

“I don’t want to sound mean, but I think maybe it was just an old lady who forgot where she lives.” Nothing paranormal involved. Riviere shrugged.

“But Miss Riviere didn’t know, not then,” I intoned. “She didn’t know that the woman who had visited the house was in fact one of the strange happenings herself...”

“What are you talking about?”

Of course, stuff like that kept happening.

Like when I was working in the guest room.

Bam! Bam!

The bed suddenly started shaking! It was like someone I couldn’t see was jumping up and down on it.

“Eeyipes! Eeyiyiyiyipes!” I exclaimed, and I fled to the living room where Riviere was doing her job.

“Goodness. What’s come over you?” she asked.

“Oh, n-nothing. It’s nothing, really.”

“*Really?*” She smirked at me. “You came down here in an awful hurry for ‘nothing.’”

“Gee, what *are* you talking about? I just don’t know!”

“Oh?” Riviere gave me a triumphant little look. But this was not a battle I could afford to lose.

I went back to work—when only moments later, I heard a scream from somewhere in the house.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

“Miss Riviere?!”

When I poked my head into the living room, Riviere greeted me with a pouty look. “It’s nothing...”

Thump, thump, thump!

I’d only been back at work (again) a few more minutes when something near me moved.

“Yahhhhwawawawa!”

“Well, now? What’s all the fuss, MacMillia?”

“Uh, no fuss! No fuss at all.”

We had this sort of back-and-forth several more times, and the longer it went on, the more strongly we both began to feel that we wanted to solve this mystery and get home as soon as possible.

Why? Very simple.

We were scared out of our wits.

Incidentally, when humans are faced with profound danger, they sometimes discover abilities they never would have under normal circumstances. Riviere and I were no exceptions. That day, we both learned that we were stronger than we had ever thought.

“I’m all done!” Riviere announced. Several hours into our residence at the house, she had finished her exhaustive search of the first floor. I’d done at least a decent pass on the entire second floor, and when I went downstairs, I had found Riviere looking very pleased with herself.

“Did you find a sancta?” I asked.

“Nope, not a thing. I wasn’t able to disenchant anything I touched.”

“Huh, okay.”

“How about you? Anything jump out at you?”

Heh-heh! What a question.

“Prepare to be amazed,” I said. I puffed out my chest, and then, with a flourish, I placed something on the table in front of Riviere—a small box.

“Uh... What’s this?”

Allow me to explain!

“I found it when I searched Olivia’s husband’s office,” I said. Admittedly, almost completely by chance.

The office had been packed with difficult-looking paperwork. I had looked up

to see a small door in the ceiling, and when I opened it—mostly out of a desire to snoop—I had found this box. Sitting there, covered in dust. Hidden away, as if someone didn't want anyone to see it.

“What's in it?”

“See for yourself!” I said, and I popped the box open.

Inside was a collection of small objects—some rope, a comb, a blade, a bottle, a mirror. Okay, so it wasn't clear *why* all those things were in a box together, but still. If they had one thing in common, it was that they all seemed to come from an earlier age.

Riviere caught her breath. “Look at this...”

Olivia and her family had only started living in the house recently, but this box was dusty and full of old stuff—so it had almost certainly been here before they had moved in.

“Maybe something in this box is causing all the trouble,” I said with confidence.

“I see...” Riviere nodded quietly. But then she looked a little puzzled. “Why would somebody hide this?”

“That's, uh, a good question.”

Very odd.

“If this is a sancta, we still don't know who put it there and why they—”

Thud, thud, thud!

A crash came from the living room, almost as if to deliberately interrupt Riviere. We looked in to find a chair shaking all by itself.

She didn't say anything.

I didn't say anything.

Thud, thud, thud!

“Well! Who cares why they hid it, right?” Riviere said.

“Not me. Definitely not me!”

If one of the items in that box was a sancta, Riviere just had to disenchant it, and then boom! Case closed. And good-bye, house full of weird happenings!

Riviere and I, both bursting with the desire to solve this problem and get out of here, shared a quick look and a nod. Time for some disenchantment. If one of the objects was a sancta, it should emit a pale blue light. Riviere shoved her hands into the box so she was touching all the junk at once.

“Yah!” she said.

A light!

“Yes!” I exclaimed. Hooray! I jumped for joy and gave her a big hug.

So something in that box was a sancta. What was its effect? At this point, I didn’t give a fig. We’d succeeded in breaking the curse.

We’d cracked the case!

The front door opened. “Sounds awfully lively in here.” I guess Elaina was back from her research. “Good news?” she asked, walking over to where we were celebrating. She probably wouldn’t have dreamed that we’d already solved the case of the crazy hauntings.

“Hoo-hoo-hoo... Ahh, my dear Elaina, today all your work has been in vain,” I said.

“In vain? Why?” Whereas I was puffing my chest out proudly, she looked very suspicious. She hadn’t yet absorbed the reality of the situation. How should I break the news to her?

I grinned and thought about it.

Which was right when she said, “Oh, the box. You found it.” She was looking right at the box by Riviere. “I was just about to tell you about that. Phew!”

Hmm?

“What do you mean?” I asked, sharing a surprised look with Riviere.

She wanted to talk about the box? What was there to say?

Riviere and I stood there, the question marks practically visible over our heads. Elaina explained: “I’ve been out and about today. I asked the real estate

agent to find any materials about the people who used to live in this house, and then I went and talked to Olivia and her family again. That box just happened to come up.”

“This box—,” I began...

“—‘came up’?” Riviere finished.

Elaina nodded in affirmation. “That box, I guess it’s full of sancta that Olivia’s husband collected as, like, his hobby or something.”

“Sancta he collected—”

“—as a hobby?”

Elaina blithely elucidated the situation. According to Olivia, her husband had collected sancta as a hobby since before they were married. Olivia found it unsettling, and when she was pregnant with their daughter, she took the opportunity to ask him to throw them away. Her husband had appeared to agree, but a hobby isn’t that easy to just cut out of your life. He’d continued collecting sancta in secret.

“So his collection was causing all the paranormal phenomena in this house?” I said, a little too eager to jump from this new information to a nice, upbeat conclusion.

Elaina shook her head firmly. “No, he never collected anything particularly dangerous. There’s no sign that his sancta are related to those phenomena in any way.”

“In *any* way?” Riviere and I chorused.

“No, and they respectfully ask that you not touch them under any circumstances. I mean, not that it should matter, as long as you don’t disenchant them.”

Very long pause.

Sadly, those sancta were no longer sancta, thanks to us and our hasty assumptions. In a word, they were already disenchanting.

“I see...”

Moreover, performing that disenchantment meant that Riviere's body would return to a physically younger state tomorrow, and there was almost no chance we would be able to disenchant the *real* problem *sancta* in the next couple of days even if we found it.

In our desire to get home as fast as possible, we'd only succeeded in trapping ourselves here longer.

Riviere gave a resigned look and sighed. "Maybe I can borrow their daughter's clothes if I have to."



The next morning.

"Gee, Elaina, you're a really good cook!"

I sat at the table, stuffing my face. Elaina sat across from me while I showered her with praise. She looked very pleased with herself, her hair billowing dramatically.

"Do you know the secret? Why my cooking is so good?"

"No, I don't!"

"It's because I'm *so beautiful*!"

"Now it makes even less sense than it did before."

I just didn't understand what she was saying.

"All right, enough silly jokes," Elaina said. (That had been a joke?) "Is Miss Riviere up yet?" She glanced at the table—where there still sat an untouched breakfast.

Elaina usually got up earlier than either me or Riviere, and by the time I was awake, she had already made breakfast.

"Well, good morning, sleepyhead," she'd said, looking surprisingly perky despite the early hour.

At first, I'd wanted to wait until Riviere was up to start eating—it only seemed right—but there was no telling when she would be up, and besides, performing

a disenchantment took so much out of her that I thought it might be better to let her rest. What a very thoughtful employee and assistant she had! I could almost be smitten with my own brilliance.

“Do you need something with her?” I asked. It seemed to bother Elaina that she wasn’t there.

“Well, you know. I’d like to fill her in on the results of my research about this house.”

“Like what?”

“One thing I learned yesterday is that this house has had a story attached to it for a long time. Apparently, these paranormal phenomena started occurring back when the previous residents were still living here.”

“What?!” That seemed like very important information. “I’m impressed you were able to find that out.”

“Hee-hee. Do you know the secret? How I was able to find out about the previous tenants?”

“Is it because you’re so beautiful?”

“Oh, no. I just bribed the real estate agent and had them look into it.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Armed with the information from the real estate agent, Elaina had gone to the library and looked up old newspaper articles. I could almost be smitten with a brilliance even greater than mine.

“And... Well, this is the important part, so I’d like to wait until Miss Riviere is up to talk about it.” Was she still asleep? Elaina wondered out loud. She rested her chin in her hands, looking bored.

At just that moment, the door creaked and opened on its own...or so it appeared. It was actually just Riviere, a good bit shorter than usual. “Hup!” she said as she hoisted herself into a chair. “By all means, tell me the important part,” she said.

“Well, well. Speak of the...well, you know. Good morning,” Elaina said, giving her a little wave.

Riviere looked like she was about six years old, so the *I'm so serious* look on her face as she said "Tell me everything about what you learned yesterday" came across as incongruously adult. It didn't help that she was dressed in an adorable pink dress that perfectly matched her apparent age. She must have raided Carrie's closet.

Elaina didn't say anything.

I didn't say anything.

"What?" Riviere did not look pleased.

I thought maybe I should tell her that dress looked good on her. But she was way ahead of me: "Not a word about my appearance, please."

"Oh, okay. It looks good on you, though," Elaina said with a smirk.

"Ooh, you'll pay for that..." Riviere muttered and grumbled to herself, but finally she snapped, "Make with the details, please."

"Yep, sure." Elaina nodded like a grown-up humoring a little kid. "Like I mentioned, these mysterious phenomena have been going on since the house's last owners lived here."

"Yes, I heard you," Riviere said with a nod.

"When the previous owners were here, it seems this house was somewhat notorious. Enough that people had a nickname for it." Elaina placed a sheet of paper on the table—a newspaper clipping. She'd gotten the library to make a copy. It was a front-page headline accompanying a photo of this house.

The headline gave the nickname Elaina had alluded to.

"People called it the Weird House."



It was nearly seventy years ago now. A family of three had bought this house—a husband and wife and their six-year-old daughter.

When they walked through the door, they were amazed:

"What a beautiful house," the wife said.

“Yes, it’s lovely,” agreed the husband.

They explored every corner of the place and were impressed by all of it. They didn’t make that much money between them; normally, they would never have been able to afford a place so close to the main thoroughfare.

So why had they been able to buy this one? Well, because it came with...a history.

“It sure doesn’t look like the kind of place where there would be a murder, let alone a whole series of them,” the husband said.

Indeed, some years before this family bought the house, it had been owned by a woman who committed murder. On rainy days she would get her umbrella and go for a walk around town, where she would chat up men and invite them back to her house, then strangle them in a basement room. She followed the same routine each time, entertaining herself with her killings; soon, she became known as the Rainy-Day Strangler.

In the years after the house was built, she murdered all kinds of men in that basement. Her first kill was her own boyfriend. Her last was herself. The police had worked out her MO and had her surrounded, so she went down to the basement, so full of memories for her, and hanged herself.

After the case was closed, the house was cleaned from top to bottom, then put on the market—but it turned out no one wanted a house with such a troubled and troubling past. The real estate agent kept lowering and lowering the price, but still the place wouldn’t sell.

The agent only found a buyer years later, and only after the house was listed for barely half its original price.

“We’ll just try to stay out of the basement,” the wife said.

“Yeah, good idea,” the husband agreed.

“And don’t let our little girl know what happened here. You’ll only scare her.”

“Sure, of course not.”

The case of the Rainy-Day Strangler was well and truly a bygone matter for the people of the town; this family felt a little funny buying the house, but they

figured that as long as they stayed out of the basement where the murders actually took place, it would be fine.

“Daddy? Mommy? What are you talking about?” their six-year-old daughter asked.

They looked at each other, then mussed the girl’s hair.

“It’s nothing, sweetie,” her mother said.

“Won’t it be great to live in a new home?” her father asked. They smiled their best smiles for her.

“Yeah!” their daughter said, smiling back.

So began their lovely life in their new home.

Once they started living there, they discovered that even a house that was once the site of a series of horrific murders was still, on a day-to-day level, just a house.

The first few months were quite nice. They were close enough to the main avenue to make shopping easy, but far enough away that the place was quiet at night. People had mostly forgotten about the Rainy-Day Strangler by that point, so there were no unsavory rumors about their home. The three of them, in fact, lived a very pleasant life.

“We shouldn’t have worried. Turns out nothing funny happened at all,” the husband remarked.

“Yes, you’re right,” his wife said with a smile.

They lived full, happy lives without a care.

But not for very long.

“Daddy! Mommy! The ghost is being mean to me!” their daughter said out of the blue one day. “I was trying to play with my dolly, but the ghost kept laughing at me.”

The husband and wife both went pale. In the months they’d been living there, neither of them had encountered anything that could be described as a ghost.

“The, uh, the ghost, huh?” the husband said, swallowing heavily.

His wife asked hesitantly, “How long has this ghost been here, sweetie?” They both tried to smile at their daughter.

“Always,” she said as if it should have been obvious. “Since the day we moved in.”

The husband and wife were speechless, but that was nothing compared with how they felt when their daughter said, “She’s here right now.”

It was, she said, right behind Mommy and Daddy.

She was pointing at empty air.

The ghost never did anything to directly harm them, but sometimes it seemed to play pranks on their daughter.

One rainy day, their daughter said, “The ghost says she wants to go outside.”

One sunny day, their daughter said, “The ghost says she’s been friends with lots of different men.”

One day before she went to sleep, their daughter said, “The ghost says she wants us to change the air in the basement room. She says it’s a very important place.”

The more they heard, the more terrified the husband and wife became. Everything their daughter said matched what they knew of the house’s former occupant—the Rainy-Day Strangler.

They had finally bought a house! They finally had a lovely life! And now...

“The ghost always says the meanest things. Yesterday she said she was going to strangle you, Mommy and Daddy.”

Their daughter’s words became more and more worrying. Finally, the husband and wife had a discussion and agreed that they wouldn’t allow their daughter to talk about this ghost anymore.

How? Simple. The husband said to her, “Now, listen, dear. What you’re seeing is not a ghost. It’s just an illusion, a trick this house is playing on you.”

“The house is?”

“That’s right. It’s being mean because it wants to get your attention.”

“But I don’t like when people are mean to me!”

“Exactly. So do you know what you should do?”

“What, Daddy?”

“Just ignore it. Even if the house says something mean or pulls a little prank on you, don’t so much as look at it. It will stop talking to you soon.”

Then he gave her a reassuring pat on the head.

The husband and wife couldn’t see the ghost that their daughter claimed to be witnessing, so if she stopped talking about it, they could stop worrying about it. That was the motivation for trying to shut her up.

“Okay, Daddy, I understand.” The girl nodded.

For a while after that, she stopped talking about the ghost in front of her parents. Her mother and father felt better, and they hoped peace might return to the household once more.

They had made one simple miscalculation: Their daughter had only just turned six years old, and she was a kind girl, and very curious. One day she said to her parents, “I wanna make friends with the house.”

The husband and wife looked at each other. She must have come up with this idea after they told her to ignore the ghost. They didn’t want her “making friends” with the place, though. Her father frowned and asked, “Has this mean house ever listened to anything you said?”

“Uh-uh,” she said, shaking her head. “But that’s why I went to the cathedral today and made a wish.”

“A wish?” her father asked with mounting worry.

By praying to the statue of Cururunelvia in the cathedral, a person’s wish could occasionally be granted. It would change one object in their vicinity into a sancta that would fulfill what they asked for. Everyone who lived in this land of prayer knew that.

“And what did you ask for?” the wife inquired.

Their daughter grinned happily and responded, “I wished that I could make friends with our house!”

The cathedral was capable of granting any wish of any kind.

Even one motivated purely by a child’s curiosity.

Whether by good fortune or bad, the girl’s wish was one of those that came true.

The day after she made her wish, strange things started happening in the house, and they didn’t stop. Things fell out of cupboards. Bookshelves collapsed. Chairs moved by themselves. Beds tilted and windows opened. Everything in the house suddenly seemed to have a mind of its own. It was almost as if some unseen person was playing tricks.

Or like a nightmare had become reality.

“Look, look! The house gave me this doll,” the girl said, holding up a doll her mother didn’t recognize. When she asked where her daughter had gotten it, the girl said, “The house made it for me.” That didn’t make any sense. The husband and wife were terrified once again.

Gradually, the husband started coming home from work later and later. He couldn’t stand to be in the haunted house any longer than he had to. The wife, meanwhile, grew emotionally unstable, unable to bear the idea that there was someone else there in the house when she was supposed to be alone with her daughter.

The couple began to fight all the time. They could be heard shouting late into the night, every night. Their neighbors started to worry. Rumors sprang up that the house was afflicted with strange phenomena, and then people began to remember the Rainy-Day Strangler.

The couple, they were sure, had gone insane because they had decided to live in a haunted house. People began to look at them with open curiosity, and this public exposure only took an even greater toll on the family.

The husband and wife spent every day worrying: Should they sell the house, or just stay there and live with it? The house only escalated its bizarre behavior, as if to mock them.

Day after day crept by, until finally something happened they could no longer ignore.

The father described the incident to a reporter: “It was the most awful thing. This went beyond furniture shuffling around. The house *changed shape* and attacked us! The walls collapsed in on us, the ceiling fell down, and the hallways twisted around so windows that should have looked outside, you could look through them and see another part of the house! You can’t imagine it!”

Having endured all the paranormal phenomena they possibly could, the family immediately fled the house. Not long after, the husband and wife divorced, with custody of their daughter going to her mother. The house they had been so pleased to buy stood vacant, and now it had a reputation as a vile place that rejected those who lived in it. For a long time, nobody did.

But time kept passing, and much like the memories of the Rainy-Day Strangler, recollections of the family’s trials gradually faded.

Which brings us, almost, to the present day.

A family bought the house—a happy husband and wife with a six-year-old daughter.

Interestingly, very much like the house’s other most recent residents.



The killer who first owned the house. The family who had bought it after that. The little girl whose wish had been granted with a prayer.

Everything Elaina was saying pointed to one fact.

“The strange things happening in this house are definitely the work of a *sancta*.”

And if everything she had said was true...

“Then I think we’ve been laboring under a terrible misunderstanding.”

Tiny Riviere sighed, looking very grave indeed.

We'd been searching everywhere for the sancta even as the strange phenomena occurred around us—but maybe all this time handling such objects had made us inflexible in our thinking. There were all kinds of sancta out there, capable of granting almost any wish or performing almost any miracle—more of them than the average person could conceive of.

But maybe the sancta causing the strange phenomena wasn't in the house at all. Maybe the reason the sancta's aura had enveloped the entire house wasn't because of the power of the prayer behind it.

We'd already found the sancta that was causing the strange occurrences.

Riviere looked up at the ceiling and said, "*This* is the sancta that was doing everything all along."

Thunk.

A single book fell from the shelf, as if to say: *Yes, that's right.*



Basically, Riviere can't do anything the day after performing a major disenchantment. Since she had inadvertently disenchanted the husband's sancta collection yesterday, it was going to be at least another day till she could do anything like that again.

"We can disenchant the place tomorrow," she suggested. "I think that should stop these so-called hauntings once and for all."

Elaina and I nodded. That seemed like the smartest thing to do under the circumstances.

But still...I felt a little funny. Just the tiniest bit.

The house itself was the sancta. I understood that, and it made a lot of sense given the story we now knew. But I still couldn't quite figure out how that caused the mysterious phenomena. The little girl prayed her prayer, her wish was granted—but why should objects in the house start moving on their own because of that? Was that the proper effect for the granting of that wish to

have? I considered the matter.

Beside me, the other two were talking.

“So what do we do today? Should we get out of here for the time being?” Elaina asked.

“Good question. We have no idea what could happen in this house, so I think it might be best to go back to the store to rest for today,” Riviere replied.

“Not that it matters to me, but are you planning to go outside dressed like that?”

“You have a problem with it?”

“I’d just hate for people to think you were a six-year-old girl.”

“You’ll pay for that...”

“Anyway, we’ve had our breakfast. Maybe we should hang out in the area. Relax a little.”

“You know, if you’d already figured out what the sancta was, you could have told us last night.”

“I was out almost the entire day, so I hardly witnessed the paranormal phenomena. I wanted to spend a night here to make sure. Besides, you looked so tired, Miss Riviere.”

“Gee, thanks. You’re so considerate,” she said. “All right, you two, we’re going.”

I heard a chair creak, and then:

“Whaaat?” Elaina said.

“Well, now,” said Riviere, surprised.

I looked up. “What’s the matter?” I asked. *Hello?* But the only answer I got was silence. Neither of them said anything; they both just looked at one particular spot.

Namely, the doorway at the end of the hall.

I followed their gazes, and that was when I saw it.

“Guh-wuh?” I said.

The front door was grown over with roses with sharp thorns—almost as if they meant to trap us here so we couldn’t run away.

My feeling that something was off got noticeably more intense.

“Does something seem, uh, strange to you?” I asked.

“I think I’d pick a stronger word,” Riviere said.

It was suddenly very tense in here. Riviere was looking around, alert.

I heard a *hrrn* somewhere, a trumpet-y noise perfectly common in any old house. Except that suddenly it seemed to be coming from everywhere at once.

Hrrrrrgh, the house seemed to groan.

And then the living room where we were standing began to change form and appearance.

“Wait... This is what the newspaper talked about, isn’t it?” Elaina asked, a bead of sweat running down her cheek.

I remembered what the house’s previous occupants had said.

“It was the most awful thing. This went beyond furniture shuffling around. The house changed shape and attacked us!”

The father had said that the walls collapsed in on them, the ceiling fell down, and the hallways twisted around so windows that should have looked outside showed another part of the house. It was something that, as he had said, I couldn’t imagine.

As if re-creating the events of the past, the hallway leading to the front door began to twist around on itself. I turned to the window, thinking we might be able to escape that way, but I saw to my astonishment that through the window there was another room, exactly like the living room we were standing in. It was like we were being sucked into a maze.

“It means to trap us in here, doesn’t it?” Riviere said quietly.

“Yeah. I think we can assume it’s not friendly anymore,” Elaina said, her brow furrowing.

Hrrrrrrgghh! the house groaned again, as if angry at what they were saying. Boards popped off the walls and fell toward us; we scuttled back out of the way to avoid them. We looked at each other, then looked toward the front door.

“MacMillia, Elaina—we’re getting out of here!” Riviere said, and then she raced down the twisted hallway.

“Sounds good!” Elaina said, running after her.

But me, I just stood there, staring.

Maybe I was the only one crazy enough to think this—but something about the whole thing just seemed strange.

The little girl in this house had offered a prayer. She’d knelt before the statue of Cururunelvia and prayed that she and the house could be friends, and it had come true. At least, if I was understanding the old materials correctly.

She prayed that they could be friends. “So why would the house attack people?”

The girl had tried to get closer to the house, and it had responded with years and years of bizarre happenings. It just didn’t make sense. The house terrified the people it was supposed to be making friends with. How was that helping anything?

Could we be missing something?

“MacMillia, hurry!” Riviere shouted, and I snapped back to myself. The other two were at the door and looking at me, afraid.

Hrrrrrrghhh! The whole house heaved and groaned, and everything that wasn’t nailed down seemed to jump into the air—glasses, cups, books, even chairs and tables.

I could definitely see how it might look like a display of anger—but I was still puzzled.

To me, it almost looked like a lament.



The house well remembered when its first occupant moved in. It was not long

after the house itself had been born.

This person had gone out one day, laughing to herself in a most unsettling fashion and muttering about how it would rain today. No sooner had she left than she returned with someone else in tow. She took this person to the basement and strangled them. This was the very first occupant the house had welcomed.

Every day, the house wept. It was simply too cruel, how the young building was forced to witness one innocent life after another snuffed out within its walls. But the house could not express how it was feeling, nor force these things to stop. The deeds might have been immoral, but in the end the house was just an object. It couldn't interfere in human affairs.

The house's first occupant expired in the basement herself not long after that. Then the house was empty and alone for many years.

After a little while, though, another family moved in. A husband and wife and their daughter, who chose the house even though they were afraid because a murderer used to live there. Their daughter wasn't afraid, though; she approached the house with abundant curiosity.

Sometimes she would say, "I wish I could be friends with you, house," and give it a friendly pat. That always made the house very happy. The house fervently wished to be friends with her, too; they were about the same age, after all.

Then one day the girl told her family, "I prayed at the cathedral today."

She had made a simple and innocent wish.

The house discovered that it could now really move the objects within it. The prayer the girl had offered had been granted by giving the house freedom.

The house was overjoyed. Now it could forge a relationship with the little girl who wanted to be its friend.

"Say, house! Let's play house today!"

The little girl was sitting in her room and talking to thin air. The house heard what she said. In response, it produced a doll right in front of her.

The girl was very happy. “Okay! I’ll play with this dolly today!”

The house couldn’t speak as such, but in some mysterious way, it almost seemed to be holding a conversation with the girl. Perhaps because they were almost the same age, they thought in much the same way.

“House? I can’t reach that book up there,” the girl said one day, straining to get to a high bookshelf. So the house dropped the book for her. “Thanks!” The girl smiled.

Once, the girl was peering into her closet, pondering. “I wonder what I should wear today, house,” she said. The house thoughtfully dropped an adorable dress on her. “Thanks!” the girl said, and she smiled again.

Every day was full of these little joys.

Around the same time, however, the girl’s parents began to seem less and less happy.

“Dear, don’t you think there’s been something strange about this house recently?” the wife asked.

“I do,” her husband agreed.

The young house had only been standing for a few years and couldn’t imagine what the matter could be. But it wanted to help if at all possible.

“Now, where did I put those papers?” the husband asked himself as he was working one day. He seemed to be looking for something, and so, helpful as ever, the house dropped the papers right in front of him.

“Eep!” For some reason, the husband looked stricken.

One day, sitting in the living room, the wife let out a sigh. “So many strange things have been happening around here,” she groaned. The house, remembering the behavior that had surprised and delighted the little girl, nudged a book off the bookshelf.

The wife, however, screamed. “Ahhhhhhh!” She stumbled backward—very much not the reaction the house had expected.

After that, things in the house started to get worse.

The couple fought seemingly every day. At night the girl would shut herself in her room, crawl under her covers, and cry.

The house thought maybe if it could distract the couple, they would stop fighting, so sometimes it would drop objects between the two of them. But each time it did that, the arguments only got worse.

Finally, one day...

"Daddy? Mommy? Please don't fight," the little girl said, opening the door of her parents' bedroom. She had screwed up her courage to go talk to her mother and father, who yelled at each other late into the night, every night.

The wife caught her breath, realizing her daughter had heard every word. The rush of blood to her head faded, and she started to get a grip on herself.

But not her husband. "Whose fault do you think this is?" he said, walking toward his daughter with a pronounced sway.

"Daddy...?" The girl looked up as her father loomed over her.

"Whose fault is it that these things are happening?!"

No sooner had he shouted that than there was a dry *crack* that could be heard throughout the room.

His daughter's cheek was red and swollen. His wife was so startled that she almost stopped breathing, and their daughter simply stood without a word. Time passed, numb and torpid. None of them spoke, but in the silence, the house had one thought: It had to protect the little girl.

The house didn't remember clearly what happened after that. It had a sense that it had fought wildly. To protect the little girl, the house attacked her father. The walls crashed down, the ceiling fell in, and the hallway twisted around on itself.

Horried, the father fled. The house was satisfied that it had managed to protect the child.

But the little girl it had meant to save was clinging to her mother, face buried in her chest, crying. "Mommy, I'm scared!" Was it because her slapped cheek hurt? In an effort to reach out to the girl, the house dropped a doll in front of

them.

But the child only whispered, “Mommy...I’m scared of this house...” She looked up and around, and the house no longer saw the kindness that had once been in her eyes.

It didn’t take long for the family to pack their bags and leave. Several times the house tried to stop them, but each time they looked as if they were witnessing something horrible.

What was it? What had the house done that was so wrong?

The house deeply regretted its own actions. Time passed. To make itself as pleasant as possible for any prospective new occupants, the house maintained itself in fastidious condition. More time passed. The house contemplated how it should greet any new residents. Still more time went by. Decades, and still the house had no answer. And absolutely no new owners appeared.

The days wore on like an eternity, long and unbearably lonely. Months and years with no one for the house to connect with. Until one day...

“Wow! What a neat house!”

A girl, about six years old, came in and looked around with joy.

Her father and mother were right behind her.

“It really is.”

“I wonder why they let such a lovely place go so cheap.”

At last, the house’s wish had come true—it had new owners.

By this time, however, the house had forgotten what it was. It had forgotten why it had become a sancta in the first place.

It had simply been waiting too long.

The house felt only one hazy, half-remembered impulse: to protect the little girl and her smile.

So the first thing it did was give her a doll. The girl was thrilled. “Wow! Where’d this come from?”

Her parents were not as happy. “Ugh. What’s this filthy old thing?” her father

said. “Maybe the previous owners left it here. Let’s throw it away,” said her mother.

How could the house make the two of them happy?

The house considered. It was desperate not to be alone again. And so it tried to keep them there—desperately.

It dropped something. The parents looked displeased. The daughter was happy, though.

It dropped something else. The parents looked even more distraught. But the daughter looked happier still.

The father came back to the house less and less often, while the mother grew to be deeply unsettled by it. The two often fought at night.

Then the house remembered its former mistakes. But by that time, it was too late.

“Of all the ways I thought this would go, this wasn’t one of them.”

“Well, that makes two of us.”

One day, three women the house had never seen before came inside. It could hear everything they said. They spoke of finding the source of the paranormal phenomena and putting a stop to them. They talked about disenchanting things. That seemed to be what they were after.

The house was afraid.

It only wished they could understand. It began to struggle, fighting as if offering up a prayer. A prayer that its unspeaking voice might reach someone.



Elaina and Riviere didn’t seem to feel there was anything fundamentally “off” about what was happening in the house. But me, I had questions.

I found it hard to believe that two such brilliant women had missed something even I had noticed, so I started to think maybe I was seeing something they weren’t.

From the above facts, I could think of one possibility.

I stood there, silent. Yesterday, I had taken some initiative to do something on my own. I'd searched every corner of the house from top to bottom. The master bedroom, the office, the guest room, and little Carrie's room. I'd studied all of it.

"MacMillia!" Riviere called from the front door, trying to get me to hurry up.

I crouched down and rushed through the kitchen, grabbing one of the knives that had fallen on the floor on my way. The house wasn't just groaning; stuff was scattering all over. Every time things went flying, a dish would break, or a chair, sending shards everywhere. If I didn't hurry and get out of here, I might be lucky to end up with just a flesh wound.

"Back up, you two!" I called.

Those were roses ensconcing the front door. If I could just slash through them, we should be able to get outside, I thought—so I held the knife tight.

"Yaaaaah!" No sooner had the two of them dodged aside than I slammed the knife down on the door. The tip lodged in the gap between the door and the frame, and I started working the blade along, following the doorframe, cutting through the roses with a *shk-shk-shk*.

Hnnnnnnnngh! From behind me, the groan came again. It almost sounded like someone in pain.

I reached for the door. "Miss Riviere? Elaina? Let's get going!"

I threw myself against the door, and the two of them piled through it—thankfully, to the outside. Even as they went, I was still thinking: something I had seen that they hadn't.

I came out with them, then turned around. A pen came falling. Then a notebook. Beds, lamps, sheets, and almost everything else from inside the house came tumbling down like rain.

"MacMillia, what's wrong?" Riviere asked, worried.

That was when I saw it: a doll dropping right in the middle of the living room.

I could tell—that was the heart of the funny feeling I'd kept having.

“MacMillia?”

The little girl had wished to be friends with the house, and yet even though her wish had been granted, paranormal phenomena had constantly assailed the family. I’d wondered again and again why the house would behave in such a paradoxical way.

“Could it be?” I said, stepping forward. I went back into the entry hall, almost as if it was sucking me inward.

Riviere reached out. “Wait! MacMillia! Hold it right there! Do you know what will happen if you go back in there?!”

“It’s all right!” I said, turning to her. “I think I get what this house is thinking, more or less!”

I told her to just leave it to me, and then I smiled at her.

I ducked down again, making my way to the living room. Even though the house was howling around me, even though objects from the kitchen and the second floor were flying everywhere in a clear attempt to intimidate me, I was careful not to let any fear show on my face.

When I was standing smack in the middle of the living room, I shouted at the top of my lungs, in a voice you could hear all over the house: “I’m not scared!”

No matter how hard the house tried to threaten me, no matter what bizarre phenomena might occur, I wasn’t scared of anything. I stood there, looking like nothing was happening.

“You can move stuff around and drop things, but it won’t frighten me!” I puffed out my chest.

I’d first felt like something was out of place when I was investigating the second floor. I’d noticed that Carrie’s room, and it alone, had been neat and tidy. There was no sign that anything had been dropped there. Which meant there was no need for the paranormal phenomena to occur when it was just her.

That meant the house *had* been able to be friends with her.

I recalled how the family had looked when we had come here to deal with this

request. Had Carrie seemed scared of the strange happenings? No. Only her parents had acted terrified.

Them, and us, when we heard the story.

“It’s scary to know people are afraid of you, isn’t it?” I said.

Carrie and the rest of us: There was the difference between a child and grown adults.

When people seek to make themselves understood by others, they proceed by trial and error. For this house, maybe these paranormal phenomena were the only means it had at its disposal.

“It’s all right,” I said. “I won’t be afraid of you.” I spoke as if comforting a child. Objects continued to go everywhere around me. The house continued to warp and bend.

Hrrrrnnnnghhh, the house said, still groaning. The flying household objects didn’t slow down in the slightest.

Maybe my words weren’t reaching the house.

“Please,” I said. “Listen to my voice.”

What was missing? What did I need?

“I won’t be afraid of you. I won’t reject you.”

If it was true that the little girl long ago had simply prayed to be friends, then the only thing standing between us was a misunderstanding. If the house wasn’t malicious, there was no need to disenchant it. If it was harmless, it could just stay like it was.

So please, house, don’t fight.

I continued to speak, my voice like a prayer. But the howling never stopped.

What was I supposed to do now?

I stood there.

That was when a voice came from behind me.

“Yes, yes! I remember. You fought just the same way all those years ago.”

The voice sounded...almost fond, somehow.

It belonged to an old woman who stood in the living room with me.



The house had always known that it had done wrong. But it had never been able to apologize or try to make things right, because it didn't possess speech. It hadn't been able to connect with anyone.

Instead, it had simply flailed around, hardly knowing what it was doing.

"Oh, come now!"

The woman rapped the house's floor with her cane.

It didn't hurt. Even so, the house stopped throwing things, dropping things, and changing its shape. It felt, somehow, that it had to. For some reason, it felt like it had to obey the old woman who had wandered in.

"You can't throw tantrums like a child forever. You'll be nothing but a nuisance to people," she said sharply.

It was strange—the house had the distinct sense that it had met this person before, long ago. The old woman had a familiar *feel*. And yet the house couldn't remember who she was.

"Who are you?" MacMillia asked, voicing the house's very question.

The old lady smiled. "Why, I'm the occupant of this house."

That wasn't possible.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but this house belongs to Madam Olivia and her family now..."

"Back before that, then."

"Before...?"

No. That wasn't possible.

The house looked at MacMillia, who was perplexed, and at the woman, who stood with a smile on her face.

The occupant before.

It was her. The very girl who had first prayed and given life to this house—decades ago. She was standing right there in the living room.

The woman had always known that she had done wrong.

Decades ago, her family had disintegrated in this house. Her father had gone mad, and her mother had taken their daughter and raised her in her own parents' home. Throughout her life, the girl had wondered how the house was doing, but she had never gone to see it. She knew that if she were too caught up with their previous home, it would only hurt her mother.

So time went on, and she never had the chance to apologize or make things right.

The little girl had become a young woman, and then an adult. She had married, bought a house of her own, had children, and raised them while holding down a job. Her life had been busy, but fulfilling.

Finally, her children moved out, and her house became a little bigger. She and her husband lived a blessed life together. When he passed, the house came to feel bigger still. She was content there by herself, in a place full of happy memories.

It was there that she began to forget.

She forgot what she had eaten yesterday. The memories of times spent with her family slipped away. She went for a walk to try to make herself feel better but found she had forgotten the way home. Then she thought she had found her house, only to discover she was somewhere entirely different. She began to get frustrated with her aging self.

After that, she slowly started to end up at the same place after each of her walks.

It was a house. It felt familiar, but she didn't remember it. She opened the door purposefully but then found she didn't know what she had wanted to do there.

She kept up her walks, though, almost every day, never quite sure why.

And then today had come.

Just as she'd walked up, she had seen a woman come rushing out, leading a little red-haired girl by the hand. They looked like a mother and daughter.

Inside, she spotted objects flying around.

It was just like something she had seen, oh, very long ago.

Everything about the house was painfully twisted, and objects were falling like rain. She could hear what sounded like a distant howling.

She remembered.

It was exactly like when she was little, when she had taken fright at the house for the first time.

"But you were just trying to protect me, weren't you?"

The woman knelt down and let her fingers brush the floor. Gently, the way one might stroke a child's hair.

Words poured out from her most secret heart, words she had forgotten long ago.

"I'm so sorry. Thank you so much."

Instantaneously, the objects stilled and the howling stopped.

Those were the words the woman had wanted to say her whole life long. They were the words the house had always wanted to hear.

The woman had prayed to be friends with the house.

And on that day, her wish came true for a second time.



The day after all the excitement, I went to Riviere Antiques as usual to find Riviere back in her adult body. Disenchanted objects could make her shrink down, but she went back to normal with the passage of time. As usual, when I arrived, she was there with dark tea in hand to greet me. "Good morning. That was some fine work you did yesterday. Thanks to you, everything ended well."

She patted me on the shoulder and congratulated me again.

I gave her a shy chuckle. "I took a peek at Miss Olivia's house today."

"Oh? And how does it look?"

"Seems like things are going great. I mean, it's only day two, but they seem to be used to it."

"Good." Riviere nodded.

It was just yesterday that we had resolved the case of the paranormal phenomena—thanks to the elderly former occupant of the house, we had finally been able to have something resembling a real conversation with the place.

The house had never wanted to harm the people who lived in it. Which meant we had two choices: disenchant the building so it could be used as just a normal house, or leave it and let the family live inside a very unique sancta.

"So that's the story, Miss Olivia. What do you want to do?"

Yesterday, as soon as the house had calmed down, we had summoned its current owners and presented them with this choice.

Olivia looked very unsure. "W-well, um... It sounds like the house only ever wanted to be friends with us...? That it was really just sweet and innocent and never meant us any harm?"

Well, yeah. That was pretty much verbatim what I had told her.

You might think the house was in disarray, but in fact it was already back to normal. We just tried asking politely, and the house put everything back as if the tempest had never happened.

"Yeah! There was never anything to be afraid of. The house actually cared for the people living in it," I said.

That was why the little girl's room had been the only one that was undisturbed: because she always said exactly what she was thinking, and it was easy to tell what she wanted. As for grown-ups like me and Olivia, if we made

any requests clear to the house, it would try to help out.

“Are...are you sure?” Hesitantly, Olivia stepped inside. “So...so if I said, ‘Please make the kitchen look good’...it would do it?”

The moment she made her request, there was a clanking from the kitchen.

“Eek!” Olivia yelped. But then she covered her mouth and her eyes went wide. The outdated old kitchen had been swapped for one that looked completely modern and new. “My goodness!” she said. This time it was a sound of admiration and not horror.

The only thing that had been missing between us adults and the house was simple words.

“W-well, all right. Would it be possible to refresh the living room as well? I’ve been thinking that the sofa is getting old, and I’d love to have it repaired! Oh, and the dining room table, too!”

The moment her first wish came true, Olivia’s eyes lit up with happiness and she began talking volubly to the house. The house, for its part, promptly did everything she asked. If you just told it what you wanted, it was happy to oblige.

Think how long it had taken us to realize that simple fact.

“How wonderful,” the old lady said as she saw the joy on Olivia’s face. Or maybe it was the house that made her smile, eagerly changing the forms and shapes of everything within itself.

I had to make sure to say thank you to her.

“Thank you very much,” I said. “Because of you, we were able to solve the mystery of the strange happenings.” I clasped the old lady’s hands and grinned.

She, though, looked a bit confused. “I didn’t do anything special, you know,” she said modestly.

Sure!

“If you hadn’t prayed your prayer, this house would never look so good now. And if you hadn’t shown up right when you did, we probably would have let your prayer go for naught.”

We would have assumed the house was hostile instead of harmless and disenchanted it. What could have been a bigger waste?

“Well, in that case, I’m glad,” the old woman said with a refined chuckle. She looked content, as if remembering the richness of the life she had led here.

That was when little Carrie trotted over and said, “Granny, come on in!” She looked at the house’s former occupant with nothing but innocence.

“Heavens, I couldn’t. I don’t live here anymore,” the old woman said, still smiling.

“Please, it wouldn’t be any trouble,” Olivia’s husband said with a shake of his head. “In fact, if you’d be so kind, there’s an awful lot of things we’d love to ask you.”

“Oh, no...”

The old lady was still hesitating—but at that moment, there was a low grumble from the house: *Hnnnghh*.

This was followed by a *bump* as a weathered doll landed in the entryway.

This house couldn’t speak; it could communicate only through its actions.

“Goodness...”

I didn’t personally know what significance the doll held—but it wasn’t hard to guess. The old woman’s face said it all. Slowly, fondly, she looked at the doll, her smile as innocent as a little girl’s.



“Well! I guess I did a pretty good deed,” I said, nodding to myself right there in Riviere Antiques. You could almost say I’d been the star of the show yesterday. It was enough to have me walking on air.

That’s when I heard the laughter from behind me.

“*Hoo-hoo-hoo...*”

Hrrm...

“What is it, Miss Riviere? What’s so funny?” Surely I could be allowed to pat

myself on the back every once in a while?

I turned toward Riviere, letting my protest show clearly on my face, but she only said, “Huh?” She sat at her desk, giving me a funny look. “What are you talking about?”

What was I talking about?!

“You just laughed.”

“No I didn’t.”

Hrrrrm?

“I definitely heard somebody laugh.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you.” Riviere shrugged.

For a moment, neither of us said anything, just staring at each other. She didn’t have to speak for me to know exactly what was going through her mind.

There was one more little memory from yesterday that I still had to recall...

“My goodness... Goodness gracious. Did you drive the ghost out of this house?”

It was just after Olivia’s husband and Carrie had led the old woman inside. Or, put another way, it was right when Riviere, Elaina, and I were feeling relief and accomplishment at a job well done. We looked at the house with fresh, loving eyes.

That was when another old woman appeared.

“Wow, who’s the crone?”

“Stop that, MacMillia.”

This woman was nothing like the refined, kindly old lady who had shown up first. She was a lot more, uh...kind of weird-seeming. We frowned at each other. At least, Riviere and I did; Elaina was watching her with interest.

“This woman... She smells like me,” Elaina said.

“Would that be the smell of a no-good troublemaker?” Riviere asked.

“How rude. It’s the smell of a pure, innocent, and wonderful person,” Elaina replied.

“I am a spiritual medium,” the woman said.

“I take it all back. She’s the opposite of me.”

Wow, talk about a quick change.

Riviere and I glowered at Elaina, but the new old woman asked us, “Are you the ones they asked to get rid of the ghost?”

In other words, this woman was the medium Olivia and her family had hired before they came to us. Now it all made sense.

“Oh, you must be the fraud!”

“I’m no fraud. My powers are the real deal!”

“So what brings you here, Miss Fraud?”

“I’m telling you, I’m the real thing!” The woman sighed dramatically and glared at me. “I was just getting a little worried. I thought I might stop by to see how things were going.”

But as she could see, the paranormal phenomena were done; now the house was changing itself to suit its owners’ desires. It was obvious that there had never been any ghost.

The old woman nodded. “I must say, I’m very surprised.” Then she turned to me. “Getting the evil spirit to attach itself to you instead? Not bad, girl, not bad.”

I’m sorry...um.

“What?”

“Hmm? Isn’t that what happened?” Looking squarely over my shoulder, the old lady informed me that a woman’s ghost was hovering right behind me.

I remembered a few other things, too.

“Miss Riviere?”

“Yes?”

“That house, right? Before the old lady lived there, it belonged to a murderer, didn’t it?”

“That’s how the story goes.”

“And she died there, didn’t she?”

“So they say.”

There was one more thing, something that seemed stranger the more I thought about it.

“Miss Riviere...”

“Yes?”

“Miss Olivia said, didn’t she? She said sometimes she heard unsettling laughter?”

“Yes, she did.”

“But the sancta house never laughed, did it?”

“No, it...didn’t.”

We both went silent.

I started to get goose bumps. It was only the two of us in the shop, but for some reason, I thought I could feel another presence.

Then the laughter came again. *“Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo...”*

Ahhhhhhh!

“M-Miss Riviere! Help! I’ve brought something terrible with me!”

Didn’t we have any sancta that could get rid of ghosts?! Please! I was begging her.

“You know that’s not really my specialty...” Riviere lost no time in putting some distance between the two of us.

“Don’t run away from me!”

“Don’t come any closer!”

“Wait!”

“Seriously, stay back!”

“Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo...”

“Noooooooooo!”

My despairing scream filled Riviere Antiques. For some time after that, I was going to learn what it was like to be beset by true paranormal phenomena.



The Memory-Guiding Specimen

“See, I...I’ve been having these terrible dreams lately.”

“Terrible dreams, you say?”

That day, the one pouring out their troubles to Carredura was a man named Willie. He was somewhere in his early twenties, probably a few years out of school. He was a clerk who stayed very, very busy at work.

Indeed, Carredura had spotted him on a dark road late one weeknight. Willie had been plodding home, a vacant look in his eyes. When she asked him what was going on, he told her, “A long time ago, I...I did something heinous to a girl in my class. It still haunts me in my dreams, even now...”

“What did you do that was so awful?” Carredura asked, as if prepared to hear his confession.

Willie sighed, and after a moment, he said, “I was part of a group that bullied her.”

“Goodness.”

“The truth is, I didn’t have anything against her. My friends told me to do it...”

“What happened to this girl?”

Another pause. “She stopped coming to school.”

“Goodness...” Carredura placed her hands over her mouth in a gesture of

shock. Not that she was really shocked. It was a mundane tale of misfortune. You could hear the like anywhere.

“I’ve always wished I could apologize to her. I still think of her sometimes, even now that I’m not in school anymore. Maybe that’s...maybe that’s why work hasn’t been going so well for me.”

Then he launched into what could only be described as a classic case of griping about his job.

He told Carredura all about his troubles: The pay was bad. The company didn’t even give overtime. He wasn’t friends with anyone at his office. He had so much work it kept him long into the night, and there was no one to help. Nor did he have anyone to whom he could unburden himself about these woes.

The women at his office didn’t like him. He tried to be friendly like he had with the girls in school, but they assumed he was getting funny ideas and kept their distance from him.

His boss didn’t trust him, either—because Willie’s isolated status in the workplace made it look like he refused to communicate with his coworkers.

It was the polar opposite of his wonderful life as a student. He had no friends, no partner, no money. Only pain, only staying at the office until well after dark and then dragging himself home through the night. The very fact that his student days had been so fulfilling only made the reality weigh heavier.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Carredura said. In point of fact, she felt no pity for him at all, but nonetheless, she reached out to Willie. “I see that you’re trapped by your past, unable to move forward. Your past is a stake that casts a dark shadow into your present days.”

“Yes... Maybe you’re right,” Willie mumbled.

Carredura said gently, “If you like, I would be happy to sell you a sancta that will change everything for you.”

Willie looked up slowly.

Carredura took out a sancta. “Just use this, and your life will be completely different.”



That night, he dreamed again.

“Please—go out with me!”

A student, a young woman, stood in front of Willie, looking like she didn’t know what to say. “M-me? Are you sure?”

Her name was Luna.

She was always reading a book in a corner of the classroom, ashamed and alone. A plain girl who didn’t seem to be close to any of the other young women. Once in a while she and Willie would talk in the library, but they couldn’t really have been called friends. They just were what they were.

“Are you sure you want...someone like me?” Luna looked at Willie, genuinely uncertain.

He shook his head. “I don’t want someone like you. I want *you*.”

He looked so sincere, no one would ever have guessed that he was joking. Certainly not Luna, who nodded back. “Y-you know, I...I f-feel the same w—”

The words didn’t make it out of her mouth before water drenched her from overhead.

It wasn’t rain. It was a bucket, overturned right over her and soaking her from head to toe.

This was no coincidence. Luna looked up to see several of the other girls leering down at her, holding the empty bucket.

“What?” She stood there, stupefied, unable to comprehend what was happening. Why was she all wet? Why were there other students above her, laughing? And why were they going over to Willie? It didn’t make sense to her, and they could see it on her face.

“You deserve an award for that performance!” somebody said.

“‘I don’t want someone like you. I want *you*’! You sure laid it on thick for a little dare!”

Somebody else turned to Luna and grinned.

A dare?

“Ha-ha-ha! What? You seriously thought someone would want to go out with *you?*” one of the students said.

“Maybe if you weren’t such an ugly bitch!”

The drenching was bad enough. Now the other girls rained abuse down on Luna.

Willie thought he might have heard Luna whisper, “But...Willie?”

Spending time with his friends was fun. What was fun for his friends was fun for him. He didn’t personally have anything against Luna—but drawn in by the laughter of the people around him, Willie laughed, too.

He laughed, and he was careful not to look at Luna as her eyes filled with despair.

Willie opened his eyes to find himself in bed, as always.

And, as always, he felt awful. He sat up and looked at the bedside table.

It turned out that one thing hadn’t been a dream: the events of the night before. The conversation with the strange woman he’d met by the roadside.

“This is a sancta called the Memory-Guiding Specimen,” the woman who called herself Carredura had said, placing it into Willie’s hands.

It was a preserved butterfly specimen.

“You need only call to mind the person you wish to meet and pull out the pin. The butterfly will take flight and guide you to where you must go.”

What he did after that, she told him, was his choice.

She had brushed his fingers: *I pray this will bring you the right outcome.*

Her touch was cold.

Willie looked at his hands, remembering the feeling. Then he reached for the nightstand. The butterfly was there.

“Luna...,” he said.

He had replayed his actions in his head so many times, regretting them each time. He had never meant to hurt her. Now that he was in her place, isolated and alone, he saw how wrong he had been to do what he did.

After Luna stopped coming to school, and then after Willie grew up, he found himself thinking of her often. They hadn't been close; they just ran into each other at the library and chatted a little sometimes. But when he thought back on it, he found himself thinking that maybe those moments when he'd been with Luna had been even more comfortable than the times when he was laughing with his friends.

"Oh, hi, Willie. Back again today?"

Luna was on the library committee, and he usually found her sitting behind the counter, where she would smile at him. He'd never seen her talk to anyone in class, so at first he wasn't sure how to react, but Willie came often enough that they naturally struck up some conversation.

"That's a great book, right? It's one of my favorites."

They shared interests, so sometimes they talked about their books. But never did they talk where anyone else could see or hear them.

For whenever Willie saw Luna at the library, she always had a dark expression on her face. Her belongings were always covered with graffiti someone had scrawled on them. Her clothes always had smudges or dirt somewhere. She was from a poor family, he heard. She always looked grim, and she was kind of gross. That was why nobody liked her.

"Her? She's, like, weird and gross, right?"

One of his friends had slapped him on the back once, looking for Willie to confirm his assessment. So Willie nodded mutely.

Because it was more important to him to keep spending time with his friends.

"Willie...?"

It wasn't until Luna left school that he realized he had begun to care for her.

Now, he held the specimen in his hand.

What was she doing now? Was she unhappy because of him?

“I’ve got to apologize...”

Willie pulled the pin out of the butterfly.

He had to, so he could undo his mistakes of the past.

So that he could move forward, even if just a little.



“It hurts... It hurts so much... Someone, help me,” Luna murmured as she sat on the bed, covering her face with her hands. A book lay beside her. It was tattered and old, written and overwritten so many times that it was impossible to tell what the words had once said. “Why me? Why do I always have to suffer?”

She wished someone would help her.

She wished someone would reach out to her.

She poured out the feelings that overflowed from her heart, repeating the same thing time and time again.

Just like the endless repetition of her days.

She was silent. Her chest hurt.

It hurt. It hurt so much.

The same words, again.

Yet still the sun rose, as it did every day. Luna looked out the window as sunlight filtered through it, and stood up.

“All right...” She let out a deep sigh.

She brushed the tears away and got ready to go out.

Then she left the house, looking at the ground, like she always did. Careful not to meet anyone’s eyes—praying that no one would see her.

On the bright, broad avenue on her way to work, Luna had a thought.

Something felt different about today.

The town looked the same as it always did. The people passing by, too. But something was definitely different.

It felt just like it had several years ago.

That day, she'd had the distinct sense that something was going to change—and it did. Her life had taken a dramatic turn.

"I want you."

To this day, she could picture him saying the words.

"I've got to hurry!" Luna looked up, her heart racing, and hurried off.

She had the sense that today was going to be a very good day.

Just then, she heard someone behind her: "Luna!"

Who could that be?

Could it be him?

Luna turned around.

To greet him, just like she always did.

"Good morn—," she began, then she froze. He rushed up to her, breathing hard, but it wasn't the boy she had somehow expected.

"Luna! I can't believe I really found you! The sancta's power was real!"

She couldn't follow what he was saying, but he sounded overjoyed. Standing in front of her was an overweight man with an unremarkable face, hair that went everywhere, filthy clothes, and an overall look that said he didn't pay much attention to his personal appearance. Maybe he didn't care how he looked to people.

Beside him was a butterfly. It fluttered toward Luna as if to flee the man with the heaving shoulders and reeking breath.

"H...hey... Do you remember me?"

He looked at her, eyes full of hope.

And to her amazement, she did know him.

His name was Willie. The one person she had never been able to forget from the past she had otherwise abandoned.

A pathetic man whom, in her lonely student days, she'd been misguided enough to be attracted to.



"It—it's me! Willie! Don't you remember? You know—the boy you always used to talk to in the library? We were classmates?"

Willie's heart was pounding as he spoke. The butterfly had led him to a woman so gorgeous he would never have known it was his plain-Jane classmate. He'd thought maybe there had been some mistake—until he'd heard her voice.

Shocked to see she had grown so lovely, Willie rambled. "I...I always wanted to apologize to you! What I did to you back then was awful, right? I want you to know, I've always regretted it, and..."

The woman just looked at him, silent.

"My friends talked me into doing...what I did, but the truth is, I never meant to hurt you. I'm sorry, really. I know it's too late to apologize. But I just had to say it..."

The words coming out of his mouth sounded like an excuse.

A moment later, the woman answered him in a trembling voice. She said just one word: "Why?"

Maybe he'd startled her by appearing out of the blue like this. He saw now that he hadn't explained clearly enough. He told her about how, just as he was wishing he could apologize to her, a kindly antiques dealer had sold him this sancta. He told her how he had mustered all his courage to come look for her today.

"I must've shocked you just showing up like this, huh? I'm sorry for that, too. But for my whole life, I've never been able to forget you, and—"

"Why are you here?" she broke in. "Why are you anywhere near me?"

Willie could see that the woman looking at him was in the grip of fear.

Why was he here? Hadn't he just explained?

"L...like I said. I wanted to apologize..."

"Now? *Now*, after all this time, you want to apologize to me?"

"Y-yes! I know I was awful to you—"

"You want to say you're sorry, here and now—and what will that do?" Luna was frightening to behold, her face a mask of contempt. Willie felt sick to his stomach. "I want *you* to know, I've forgotten all about the past. I have a job now that I work hard at. I've recovered from the bullying I grew up with, I've cut myself loose from the time when I was attracted to a pathetic man, and now I'm trying to move forward. And you come trotting up and say you want to apologize? How's that supposed to work? Are you *trying* to make me relive all that pain? Then this is just another one of your awful pranks!"

"N-no! I really didn't mean it that way..."

"I suppose you heard I was making something of myself, and that's why you decided to try this? You disgust me."

"M-making something of yourself? What are you talking about? I just want to say I'm sorry..."

Please don't reject me. Please, at least hear me out. Willie reached out to her beseechingly.

"Luna? What's going on?" A tall man walked up, putting himself between her and Willie. He was handsome and carefully attired. More attractive than the average man.

Safely behind him, Luna murmured, "Mr. Manager... I'm sorry, but could you call the police?"

"What? Yes, of course. But who's this man?"

"A stalker."

No! He wasn't a stalker. He'd done something terrible to Luna and wanted to apologize—that was all he hoped for.

The words rose up to Willie's throat, but one by one they stuck there.

"Mm." The manager gave Willie a look as if he were appraising a piece of merchandise, and then he said, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to stay away from my actors. If you promise never to do anything like this again, I'll look the other way today."

Behind him, Luna did not look very happy. "I asked you to call the police," she said.

"You have a big performance today. I'd rather not cause a ruckus if we can avoid it. I'd hate for it to impact your work."

"Oh, I'll be fine. I've been practicing all morning." Luna proudly held up a dog-eared book. The cover bore the name of a famous old play—the story of a woman who endures persecution and tears and ultimately goes to great lengths to achieve her dream.

At the end of the story, the woman falls in love with the man who supported her and they get married.

The two people in front of Willie looked very close.

"Well, anyway, we don't have time to waste standing here. Let's get going, Luna." The man put a protective hand on her shoulder, turned away from Willie, and started walking.

Luna nodded but glanced back over her shoulder. "I never want to see you again," she said. "Stay out of my life." And lastly she added, "That's the one way you can make it up to me."

Willie could hardly believe what he was hearing. The girl he'd been friends with in the library would never have said such a thing to him. Plain she might have been, but she was so kind, so sweet. That was why he'd wanted to apologize to her.

She hadn't been like this.

This wasn't her.

"Wh...what has he done to you?!"

Before he knew it, Willie was running to catch up with them.

He remembered all those years ago. He remembered pretending to ask Luna out on a dare—so that he could keep hanging out with his friends, so that he could keep enjoying his oblivious existence.

To get that, he'd said something he had never imagined saying. Did something that was the polar opposite of how he felt. Now Willie could finally see how much he had warped his own thinking and behavior, just so the people around him would like him.

"He's making you say those things! You don't really mean them, do you?" Willie exclaimed.

The man must be controlling Luna. He must be. Willie had to help her. Again, before he knew what he was doing, he had grabbed Luna's hand, his grip strong and powerful.

He had to take her away from here...

"That hurts!" she said, and her face when she turned toward him was full of pain and fear.

"You there! What the hell do you think you're doing to my star?!" the man demanded, stepping between them, separating them.

Willie's face was suddenly hot. He realized the man had punched him.

His head swam; he didn't know which way was up. The hand he had finally managed to clasp was torn away from him, and instead he felt something cold and hard.

He had fallen down.

"Excuse me! Could somebody call the police?" Luna shouted. To deal with this violent brute, she probably meant. "That man on the ground—he's stalking me!"

No!

He wasn't a stalker!

He'd just been trying to apologize...

Willie pulled his face from the cold ground. At that moment, he heard a voice

above him say, “Don’t move.” It was the man again, holding him down. “And to think, I was going to let you walk away.” He sighed.

“L-let go of me! Let go, dammit! I just wanted to apologize to her!”

He hadn’t come here for...for this! He’d wanted Luna to hear what he had to say. As Willie lined up the words one by one, he looked up.

The butterfly was flying away.

Fluttering just as if it were alive, never knowing that it had died a long time ago.

Finally, it alighted on Luna’s shoulder.

“I know what you’re thinking. You don’t really feel sorry for *me* at all,” she said, almost sighing. “You didn’t want to apologize to me. You just wanted to make yourself feel better.”

He’d always, she added, been shallow like that. That was one thing that had never changed.

As she spoke, she looked down at him where he lay on the ground, pitiful.



A crowd was gathering in the street. In the middle of it, the police were hauling a man to his feet. She remembered him—Willie, wasn’t it? She’d sold him a sancta just the other day.

“What’s going on?” Carredura inquired.

“You know, I’m not quite sure myself,” said someone nearby. The man, they told her, was a stalker; he’d been after a young actress who’d grown quite popular lately. He’d attempted to abduct her in broad daylight. Naturally, the police had arrested him—as she could see.

He was probably going to jail.

“My goodness,” Carredura said mildly. How awful.

Then she bowed and walked away.

She had no interest in and felt no concern for the man currently being

arrested. Instead she went back to work, looking for new customers.

“I-it’s you! You’re the one who sold me that sancta!” Willie cried. He had spotted her.

She turned to find him staring daggers at her.

“Th-this wasn’t what you promised me!” he said. “It wasn’t supposed to turn out like this! This is your fault!”

“Goodness.”

What an ungrateful thing to say.

Carredura, unfazed, looked at Willie, the man who had been a pathetic creature trapped by his memories of happier days—and was now a criminal.

Why, this was exactly what she had promised him.

“I told you that it would change everything for you.”



Burning Love

Once there was a school, and at that school were two students who were very, very dear friends.

One of them was a boy named Bruno. His hair and skin were both pale. He was tall and slim, and his family was rich. He always had a quiet smile on his face, and everyone at school, boys and girls both, loved him.

Beside him was Annie, a girl from his class. Her hair was red, and her skin was brown. She was athletic and always cheerful, and she, too, was beloved by all the other students.

It was six months earlier that these two popular young people had become friends. They had shared interests, and by now they were inseparable. They could always be found in each other's company. They came to school together; they spent their breaks together; and when it was time to leave, they went home together, too.

And they stopped together at the crepe shop on the way.

It seemed that things between them would always be just like this.

"Mm, that's delicious!" Annie said, taking a mouthful of a crepe loaded with cream.

Bruno, standing beside her, just smiled. "You've got cream on your mouth, Annie."

“What? Where?”

“Right here.” Bruno brushed Annie’s cheek with a pale finger.

Annie flinched at the intimate gesture. “Hey! Gosh. I can do it myself, you know!” she said, smacking him on the shoulder.

Yes, they were the picture of two friends.

Except, for some reason, today Annie’s face was flushed red.

“But...I guess, I mean—thanks,” she said softly, her fingers brushing her cheek where Bruno’s touch had been a moment before.

“Oh... Yeah. Sure.” Bruno was red up to his ears, just like Annie; he glanced away from her and stuffed some crepe into his mouth. One might almost have said he looked like he was trying to hide his embarrassment.

Silence fell upon them, like they were both trying to figure out what to say next.

This was *not* how they always acted.

Well now, when had this started? This young pair, who had begun simply as good friends who shared the same interests, had at some point become aware of each other as members of the opposite sex.

“Annie...”

“Yeah?”

“I just... Uh, this crepe’s pretty good, huh?”

“Yeah...”

They sat shoulder by shoulder, so close they were almost touching. They each stared at the ground, neither quite able to look at the other—but each keenly aware of the other’s presence beside them, cherishing it.

We have but a few short, shining days before we grow up.

A time in our lives people refer to as *youth*.

“Now you know all about it. I want you to break up their little love story.”

This request came from Cattleya, another girl at Bruno and Annie's school who had just described the affectionate couple for us. She had short golden hair, and sitting across from me, she cut a formidable figure, legs and hands primly together and looking as if she belonged here.

I nodded and said, "Sorry. Come again?"

"I want you to destroy this blossoming romance."

Right. That's what I thought she said.

Maybe I misheard?

"Their...their friendship?"

"Yes. Eviscerate it."

There was a ripping sound as Cattleya grabbed a nearby piece of notepaper and tore it in half as if to say, *Let me demonstrate.*

It was a weekday afternoon, and I had been passing the idle hours here at Riviere Antiques as I so often did, mumbling, "*Sigh!* Another day, another big block of time to kill..."

Just then, Cattleya had burst through the door, crying "I have a request!" in a voice like a warrior looking for a deadly showdown. Then she had launched into her exposition and finally lobbed her request at me. "This shop sells sancta, doesn't it? That means you must have some way of splitting up two people who are falling in love!"

And she wanted us to do just that.

Cattleya seemed to be working on the assumption that of course we would take her up on her request without a second thought. Much to her chagrin. I shared a glance with Riviere, who was sitting beside me. She gave me a puzzled look and said softly, "I'm having a little trouble connecting the dots here."

That made two of us. I nodded, turned back to Cattleya, and said, "Um... I'm sorry, but do you think you could go over that again?"

She huffed at us and said, "Which part?"

"Uh... The whole thing, ideally."

“Oh, what the shit!”

“Gosh. That mouth...”

Another day, another, uh, unique customer at Riviere Antiques.



“Look, I’m just confused about *why* you want us to break up these lovebird classmates of yours,” I said. That was the thing I wondered about the most, regardless of whether we were actually going to help, so that was where I started with Cattleya.

Maybe she could explain to us why, exactly, we should interfere with Annie and Bruno’s love affair.

Riviere nodded in agreement. “This shop doesn’t help with any dirty business,” she said. I nodded emphatically. That was the spirit! Riviere Antiques only took on the squeaky-cleanest of jobs!

“Ugh. Well, I figured you would ask that.” Cattleya shrugged as if she couldn’t believe she had to do this, but nonetheless she reached into her backpack and took out a sketchbook. She must have created it for this exact moment, because the cover bore the title *Why Annie and Bruno’s Love Must Be Shredded (for Total Morons)*.

“Is...is she mocking us? Why?” I asked.

“Kids these days,” Riviere grumbled.

Cattleya ignored us and pointedly held up the sketchbook. “All right, listen up, because I’m only going to explain this once!” *Whack!* She smacked the cover of the book, then flipped to the first page.

“Wow!” I exclaimed in spite of myself. She was nothing if not prepared. Just as the title promised, the sketchbook depicted Cattleya’s story, right up to the present day—all the reasons she was concerned about Annie and Bruno’s relationship.

Young Annie and Bruno had known each other for a long time, but it was only

about six months ago that they had suddenly become inseparable. It was clear for all to see that they were developing feelings for each other. Surely it was only a matter of time before they started going out.

That was a prospect Cattleya couldn't stand.

Let's turn back the clock a bit—about six months, in fact, to when Bruno and Annie were first beginning to get close.

"Ah... Hhhkk..."

There was Cattleya, secretly sobbing. She clutched a handkerchief and glowered at the main thoroughfare from the back alley she was peeking out of.

She was looking right at Bruno.



“Hey, Bruno! Did you wait long?” Annie asked, jogging up behind him.

“*Hhkh...* Why, Annie? Why?!” Cattleya demanded under her breath. She started crying again but kept her voice down so nobody would hear.

Cattleya could be a bit prickly and a bit angry—it would be fair to say Annie had been her only real friend.

They’d met about five years before, when Annie, the successful athlete, had trotted up to Cattleya, who was reading on one of their breaks, and said, “Wow! Cattleya, you like that book? It’s one of my favorites!”

“I-it is?” Cattleya had asked, shock and joy mingling in her expression.

She remembered it like it was yesterday. She had never gelled well with the rest of her class, and this was the first time she’d ever had a real conversation with one of the other girls.

“You knew *me* way before you knew Bruno!” she said now. And yet today, it was Bruno with whom Annie joked and chatted. Cattleya was jealous, plain and simple. “Give me a break!” she grumbled. “How could someone like *Bruno* be better than me?”

Bruno was the ideal student; his reputation was spotless, and there was nothing about him to criticize. Not a person in the whole school had a bad word to say about him.

Except Cattleya.

“Why do you even care about sludge like him?”

For you see, Cattleya had known Bruno for a long time, too. They were, to coin a phrase, childhood friends. And for that reason, Cattleya knew a side of Bruno that no one else at school was aware of.

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re so cute, Annie,” Bruno said, grinning. But that smile was just the mask he put on for the world. Bruno had another face, dark and hidden, that only those who were closest to him ever saw.

One day, Bruno had invited Cattleya to his house, and when she saw the maids serving there, she’d given them a good look. “Is it just me, or are all the maids in your house...really pretty?”

All of them were almost suspiciously young and beautiful. Not to mention their outfits all showed more skin than was typical for servants, and they exuded an eroticism Cattleya didn't normally associate with people hard at work.

"Oh, it's not just you. We do all our hiring based on looks."

"Yikes..."

"To me, you see, women are like beautiful flowers."

He always wanted to be surrounded by lovely women, he said.

Bruno made no effort to hide his appetite. Cattleya sighed, disbelieving. "If you're really that twisted, believe me, you'll never have a girlfriend as long as you live."

"Heh," Bruno said, and then he put on the cool-guy look he so often wore around school. "That's all right. I only need to appreciate flowers, not pick them."

Cattleya didn't understand what he meant.

"That's gross," she grumbled, and at the same time, she sent out a prayer: *Please don't let my dear friend Annie fall for this jerk.*

But her prayer went unheard.

"Bruno..."

"Annie..."

They were already exchanging passionate gazes. They simply oozed affection for one another. If so much as a single pebble gave way, their friendship would avalanche straight into love, and everybody knew it.

"That's why I want you to shred their little romance," said Cattleya, shutting her sketchbook with a *whack* and hiding the intensely creative pictures within.

It was a fairly straightforward story, not too long and not too short. To summarize: "Your best friend is falling into the clutches of a total creep, and you want us to tear her out of them?"

“That’s about the size of it.”

Oh, okay.

I nodded. “That’s very transparent reasoning.”

“It’s such a cliché story, I’m almost a little shocked,” agreed Riviere with a nod.

We were starting to feel silly for listening so seriously.

“Hey! I poured my heart and soul into this sketchbook so I could explain this to you!”

Yeah, not our problem.

“Either way, it *is* a very common situation. And I don’t think it’s a good thing to tear people apart,” I said, in a way that I hoped implied, *Don’t do anything people are going to hate you for later.*

Riviere nodded again. “Don’t you think they’ll naturally drift apart when Annie finds out what he’s really like?”

It was a sincere question. The two of us were the very picture of mature adults. But Cattleya only gave us an exasperated shrug—kids these days!

“I hate to say it, but I don’t think it’s that simple,” she said.

Riviere and I responded at almost the same time:

“Why not?”

“Explain, please.”

Cattleya replied, “I think there’s a very low likelihood that Annie will leave Bruno, even if she finds out what he’s like.”

“Why not?”

“Explain, please.”

All right, so we felt sort of silly repeating ourselves like that. We were the very picture of inconsistent adults.

Then Cattleya related to us a conversation she’d had with Annie not long ago:

“Say, Annie?”

“Yeah? What is it, Cattleya?”

“If the boy you liked pushed you to, like...do stuff, how far would you go?”

“Huh? I’m cool with pretty much anything.”

“Well...what if he wanted you to wear weird, revealing clothes?”

“Sure! Not a problem. Bring it on.”

(Here Cattleya mimicked the choked noise she had made.)

It was then, five years after they’d first met, that Cattleya discovered Annie was the open-minded type.

“And that’s why I want to break them up,” she said, leaning back on the sofa. “I’ll pay anything you ask. My dad has lots of money.” She tossed a sack on the table.

This was not the behavior of someone who wanted to rescue a helpless young woman.

“What a very interesting story you’ve brought us,” said a young woman who swooped in from the side to collect the bag. She had gray hair and eyes of lapis lazuli. Our assistant, an on-again, off-again presence at Riviere Antiques.

Now, who could that be?

“It’s me,” said Elaina, looking like this was her moment to shine. “I came running when I smelled money.”

Ah, Elaina, nothing if not unashamed of her desires.

“Oh? Then should we three take this request on together?” Riviere said, clapping her hands as if to suggest the discussion was over.

“By the way, what kind of request is it? I showed up in the middle, so I’ve got no idea,” Elaina said.

Long pause from me. Somehow having to explain this ourselves...it seemed like a lot of trouble. Instead I looked at Cattleya. “Think you could go over all that again?”

“Oh, what the shit!”

“Gosh. That mouth...”

Anyway, so it was that we took on the grave responsibility of saving an unsuspecting young damsel from her no-account paramour.



“Ha-ha-ha!” Bruno laughed.

“Tee-hee-hee!” Annie giggled beside him.

School was out for the day, and I was observing the two of them through a pair of binoculars. If anyone had seen me, I would definitely have looked like, you know, a criminal. But! Let me explain. I swear there was a good reason for this.

It was right after we had accepted Cattleya’s request for help. She’d given us some more details about young Bruno and Annie. In fact, she’d opened a map right there on the table. “Bruno’s house is here,” she’d said. “He leaves at eight o’clock sharp every morning to go to school. Annie’s house is right near his, so they always walk together. They reach school at eight thirty. They go to their classroom and chitchat with friends until classes start. And then...”

She looked like a naturalist presenting the result of years of research on her subjects. You couldn’t do better than a childhood friend for inside info. We could already picture Bruno’s daily life in intimate detail.

When she had finished talking, I gave Cattleya a smile.

“You know so much, you almost sound like a stalker.”

“Stop that, MacMillia.”

But hey. Thanks to her, we knew exactly where Bruno would be and what he would be doing at every moment.

Hence me with the binoculars.

Bruno and Annie looked so comfortable together. They were currently walking home from school. It was practically routine now for Bruno to take them by the crepe stand, that most quintessentially adolescent of snack stop-offs.

I brought a teacup to my lips and said, "They're in position, Miss Riviere!"

The teacup was one of the various sancta we had on hand at Riviere Antiques, a nifty little device that would carry your voice to whoever was holding the other teacup. I held mine up to my ear and heard Riviere whisper, "*Roger that.*"

A moment later, through the binoculars, I saw her slither up behind the young couple. Without a word, without so much as a suspicious tic, she fell into step behind them. It was so simple, so natural. Bruno and Annie never noticed her.

"Heh!" Riviere came back to me with a triumphant look on her face.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"A needle and thread."

I looked at her, not understanding. I tilted my head as if to say, *That doesn't answer my question.* But Riviere said, "Just watch," and looked in the couple's direction.

I peered back through my binoculars, and at just that moment, I saw that something had changed.

"Here! Say 'Ahhh'!" Annie said, lifting her crepe to Bruno's lips.

"Uh... Ahh," he said, a little embarrassed.

What an idyll! A loving exchange that any couple anywhere might have. I watched them, almost feeling protective.

Except then, for no reason I could discern, Annie's crepe shoved itself right into Bruno's face.

For a second, they were both stunned into silence. Then Annie exclaimed, "Oh my gosh, Bruno, I'm so sorry!" and took out her handkerchief.

"Ah... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Come on, don't worry. You're such a joker, Annie!" Bruno said, grinning in spite of the whipped cream all over his face.

"Urgh... I don't know what came over me..."

Struggling to understand what had happened, she reached out to wipe Bruno's face with her kerchief.

"Um... Annie?"

She started wiping.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Specifically, wiping his thigh.

“Yikes!” she exclaimed, turning beet-red. “I d-didn’t mean to... Er, I was just...” Even as she stuttered, her hand continued politely wiping Bruno’s leg. “Wh-what’s going on? This isn’t why I got out my handkerchief!”

“Ha-ha-ha...”

Bruno might make his servants do weird stuff behind the scenes, but outwardly he was an upstanding young man. Standing there, he looked just like a gallant lad laughing in spite of a measure of discomfort.

Suddenly, Annie was acting very strangely. What sancta had Riviere used? I looked at her.

She didn’t answer my question until after we got back to the shop. With today’s operation over, we were making our report to Cattleya.

“A needle and thread,” she said again, placing precisely those items on the table. She had stuck the needle to Bruno, and the thread to Annie. “You know how sometimes you’re trying to thread a needle, and you can see exactly where you want the thread to go, but you just can’t get it through? The sancta I used today works a lot like that.”

Nothing that the person with the thread on them tried to do to the person with the needle on them ever went quite right, and shenanigans ensued. For example, maybe the thread person tried to feed some crepe to the needle person, and it wound up on their face instead. Or maybe they tried to wipe the person’s face and ended up wiping their leg. The more touchy-feely they tried to get, the more it would backfire on them.

“I see,” Cattleya said. “And how did it go?”

Well? Did it go well?

What a question!

“Oh, gracious,” Riviere said, picking up her cup of dark tea and looking very pleased with herself. She took a sip, then said, “It failed completely.”

“Oh, what the shit!” Cattleya smacked the table with a bang. Yikes... “The way you built it up, I was sure it must have worked! How could it not? Seriously, the way you built it up, I was sure it must have worked!”

“You just said the same thing twice.”

“Shut up!”

“Complain all you like; it won’t change the fact that the plan didn’t succeed,” Riviere said, glancing away with a disinterested sound.

“Whatever! But don’t hurt Annie! What if she ends up with some weirdo trauma because of you?”

“Don’t worry. Nothing happened that would sully her reputation.”

“Does that include the part where she was wiping a guy’s leg with a handkerchief in public?!”

“I’m telling you, it’s fine. Everyone just thought they were a really close couple.”

“That’s exactly what I *don’t* want everyone to think! That’s why I hired you!” Geez! Cattleya was very upset. “Anyway, leave Annie out of this! She’s my best friend, remember!”

“But Bruno’s fair game?”

“Yeah, he’s okay. Did you know it says in the dictionary that there isn’t a decent man alive named Bruno?”

“I think there’s something funny about your dictionary...”

“Tell me how this strategy managed not to work out, though. If I wiped Bruno’s thigh, my hand would rot off, fingers first.”

“I think there’s something funny about your body...” Riviere was sounding more and more exasperated. Then she turned to me. “Care to explain, MacMillia?” Maybe she thought I could tell the story better, since I’d observed the whole thing through my binoculars.

I thought I would go with the very short version.

“They just laughed about it and seemed to enjoy the moment.”

“Oh, what the shit!”

Bam!

Cattleya puffed her cheeks out, furious. “I’ll thank you not to make things *worse!*” she said. That much, we could all agree on.

“H-hey, it’s all right! That plan just happened not to pan out. The next one will work for sure!” I said. We’d made sure to have some insurance against the possibility that Riviere’s idea didn’t work out.

“Looks like it’s my time to shine,” said Elaina, stepping up as the rest of us squabbled.

She was our insurance. If Riviere couldn’t make things work, she would take over. Which was all well and good—but why was she always showing up late?

“Just leave this to me,” Elaina said. “My way of breaking up those two is ten times smarter than Miss Riviere’s.”

Well, her face was certainly ten times more self-confident than Riviere’s. I wondered what made her so sure.

“Are you serious?” Cattleya looked like steam might come out her ears, but Elaina paid her no mind at all.

“Just you watch. I’ll show you how a *grown-up* handles these things.” She gave a flick of her hair.

“*I’m* a grown-up,” Riviere grumbled from beside her.

“Let’s reconvene tomorrow,” Elaina said, ignoring her completely.

And so, the next day...

“Ha-ha-ha!” laughed Bruno.

“Tee-hee-hee!” giggled Annie, next to him.

Their smiles were implacable; the previous day’s events seemed to have vanished from their minds. Naturally, they went straight for the crepe stand. As I watched them, I couldn’t help thinking that these kids could use some

variation in their diets.

Then I watched as Elaina walked up. She made it look natural, passing by them as if she were just, well, someone passing by.

If anything made her stand out from your average nondescript citizen, it would have been the glass of water in her hand. No sooner had I wondered what she was doing with it than I realized it was a sancta. “Yah!” she cried (sounding sort of silly) and splashed the water on Bruno.

“Arrrgh!” Bruno exclaimed, stunned. I was almost as surprised as he was. What did she think she was doing?

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry. Are you all right. Silly me. My hand must have slipped.” Elaina said. Was she...*trying* to be a terrible actor? There was no emotion in her voice at all. Apparently, this was what passed for “how a grown-up handles these things.”

I was still trying to figure out how that was.

I give Elaina a proper squint, but beside me, Riviere nodded with a knowing look. “I see... Yes, that’s not a bad move at all.”

“Do you know something I don’t?”

“That’s one of our shop’s sancta. The Water of Drawing Out True Personality.”

“Water of Drawing Out True Personality?”

Meaning...what, exactly?

“Just what the name implies. That water can bring out a person’s hidden true nature. If they drink it, it has the effect of a truth serum—but there’s another application if you pour it over someone’s head.”

“Another application?”

Meaning...what, exactly?

“Just wait. You’ll see.”

Riviere answered my question by pointing at the trio down the street. Annie was frantically trying to dry off her sopping friend, while Elaina was saying “I am very sorry” in the world’s most unconvincing apology.

And then there was Bruno, looking at Elaina with...was that excitement?

"Huff... Huff... Hey, you're cute. How old are you?"

"What is that about?" I snapped.

"When you pour the Water of Drawing Out True Personality over someone's head, everything they think immediately comes out of their mouth."

"Is that right?" I stole a glance at Riviere.

"You would look amazing in a good pair of tights. Like the ones my maids wear. Any chance you'd like to join the team?"

Bruno reached out toward Elaina, who slapped his hand away. "If you touch me, I'll kill you."

Annie stood beside Bruno, aghast. She was, to put it simply, positively horrified.

"It won't take long for her to dump him at this rate," Riviere said.

"I guess..." I gave a noncommittal nod and watched the three of them.

"Yaaarrghh! Put on some damn tiiiiights!" Bruno, transformed into a full-on pervert, flung himself at Elaina.

"Eeeek! No, stop! I'm scared!" Elaina said, dancing out of his reach and raising her voice just enough to make sure everyone nearby could hear her.

Annie continued to look on with a glassy stare.

"Hey, what's happening?"

"Gross! Isn't that guy from the school near here?"

"He's scaring me!"

Whispering and pointing started among the townsfolk. There was a charge in the air like when people run across the scene of a crime.

"This seems likely to ruin his school life. Are we okay with this?" I said.

"Not my problem."

Ah, Riviere, always ready to ignore an inconvenient truth. A filthy representative of grown-ups everywhere.

Elaina spent the next little while running around town.

“...And that’s pretty much how it went,” she concluded. We were back at the shop, where she was telling Cattleya all about it, no small hint of pride on her face. She smiled as if to say, *Thanks to my fine work, all your worries are over.*

“I can’t shake the feeling that you went a little overboard...but fine,” Cattleya said with a sigh. Then she asked, “So how did it turn out?” She seemed to feel that even if we had stepped over the line, as long as she got what she was after, then she didn’t care.

Elaina’s smile grew even bigger. “It failed completely.”

“Oh, what the shit!”

Bam!

Poor table, getting pounded in anger day after day.

“You went completely overboard and *still* messed up?! I didn’t ask you to just make him a laughingstock! I didn’t ask you to just make him a laughingstock!”

“You said the same thing twice.”

“Shut up! Shut up!”

At least it was easy to tell when Cattleya had snapped. She looked like she might just flip the whole table over. She glared at us and our multiday losing streak. “What happened?” Her voice took on the tone of a manager scolding some delinquent employees. “What went wrong today? I can’t even imagine how that situation could have ended well for them.”

For some reason, she was looking at me. Maybe because I’d been the one to do all the explaining yesterday under very similar circumstances.

Then, equally mysteriously, Elaina patted me on the shoulder. “I believe *she* can explain in more detail.”

So there were no-good grown-ups here, too!

“Uhh... Well, um, you see...”

Ugh! This was not the role I wanted to play, I thought, as I launched into another distilled but truthful explanation of what had happened: Elaina fleeing

through town, Bruno in hot pursuit.

Long story short, as the Water of Drawing Out True Personality dried, the effect faded. About fifteen minutes after Elaina had doused him, Bruno had returned to being a sane, self-controlled young man.

“Urgh... What...what have I done?!”

Incidentally, the effect might wear off, but the memories didn’t. Meaning he recalled every one of the fifteen minutes he had spent chasing Elaina through town howling “Tiiiiiiiiights!” They were burned into his brain—and probably Annie’s, too. She stood there, stone silent.

“A-Annie,” Bruno said, rushing up to her. He took her hand, almost clinging to her, and started talking. “Th-this isn’t what it looks like! It’s all a misunderstanding! I don’t have a thing for, you know...tights and maid uniforms and stuff! It’s not like I’d want just anyone to wear them for me!”

He sounded like a boyfriend who’d been caught cheating.

Annie, though, smiled at him. “Bruno, it’s fine,” she said. “Cattleya already mentioned that you’re into that kind of thing.”

Bruno caught his breath.

“I promise, it doesn’t bother me.”

Are we friends or what?

As she whispered those last words, her face looked like a saint promising forgiveness for all sins. She spread her arms, the embodiment of tolerance.

“Annie...” Bruno looked at her, wide-eyed.

In a trembling voice, she whispered, “I know that you ask each of your servants every day what color underwear they’re wearing, so they think you’re gross.”

“Annie...”

“I know that your whole persona at school is being this gallant, handsome guy, but that whenever you walk by a girl, you take an especially deep breath.”

“Annie...”

“Also, I know that when you look like you’re at your most serious in class, you’re really staring at the nape of the girl who sits diagonally in front of you.”

“Annie...”

Uh, was it just me, or was that a lot of sketchy behavior? I drew back a little myself. In another time—or maybe if he weren’t so darn handsome—Bruno would probably have been tossed in jail for all that stuff.

But anyway, that was the story.

“I guess Annie pretty much forgave him for all of it,” I said in summary.

“Oh, what the shit!”

Bam! Cattleya pounded the table again.

“I’m starting to think maybe those two really are made for each other,” muttered Elaina, who had seen them at point-blank range.

“They are *not* made for each other! They are *not* made for each other!”

“You’re repeating yourself again,” I volunteered.

“Shut up, shut up! This is no-holds-barred—I want you to obliterate those two!”

Grrr! Cattleya looked like a fuming child. I guess she was still in her teens; she was sort of acting her age.

“After all this, don’t you think it might be best to let them date and be happy together?” I asked. Annie seemed unusually accepting of Bruno, and Bruno seem to be enjoying himself, too.

“Absolutely not! I won’t allow it!” Cattleya greeted my suggestion with a fierce shake of her head. “Those two, go out? Never! Absolutely not!”

She sounded...sad. This didn’t seem like someone objecting to a childhood acquaintance and a best friend getting together. It felt like there was something else going on here.

“Cattleya?” I asked, curious.

“Erk! I-it’s nothing! I mean it!” She refused to look at me. “The point is! Next time, you’d better do it! You have your orders!”

The glimpse of whatever it was was gone, replaced by Cattleya's usual scowl.

Still privately puzzled, I stole a glance at her. Something felt off. Was she really trying to break up the relationship just to protect Annie?

"Hmm," I *hmm*ed, and a seed of doubt began to grow in my mind.

So anyway, the next day arrived.

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Bruno.

"Tee-hee-hee!" giggled Annie.

They were on their customary bench, sharing a pleasant moment.

"That's great! I love your smiles, both of you!" came a cheerful call from someone who approached them holding a camera. Namely, me.

Riviere's and Elaina's plans had ended in failure, so naturally I would be the next to make an attempt. Put simply, today was my day to try to split the pair up.

"Show those beautiful smiles to the camera! Look this way, if you please!"

I was just a passing photographer who coincidentally happened to spot the happy couple and convinced them to sit for a picture. It had only taken a bit of "Wow! What a beautiful couple! I'd love to take your photograph" and a little "Aw, can't I?" and a dash of "Pretty please!" before they agreed to let me turn my camera on them.

The camera, of course, was a sancta. One with a very special power.

"Ha-ha-ha... I'm feeling a little camera shy, Annie."

"Tee-hee-hee... Yeah, me too."

They looked at the camera with mingled embarrassment and happiness. From every angle, they were the spitting image of a young couple in love.

I put them square in the middle of my viewfinder and pressed the shutter.

Click! One photograph, coming up.

At first glance, there was nothing unusual about the photo at all—but it was

the best way of all to break this couple up.

“Great!” I said, and I headed back to Riviere Antiques with the photograph in hand, where I reported my results to Cattleya with a big smile on my face.

“It was no use at all!” I announced.

“Oh, what the shit!”

Bam!

That poor, poor table.

“This was the most nonsensical plan of all! The most nonsensical plan of all!”

“Wow! You said the same thing twice.”

“Shut up! Shut up!”

I can't believe this! Cattleya looked like a volcano about to erupt.

“Okay, calm down,” I said, offering her a teacup of water in hopes of dousing the flames.

“All you did was take a picture of them sharing a moment!”

“Yes, but it's a very good picture, don't you think?”

“That's not the issue!”

I can't believe this! Cattleya sounded more and more distressed. She must have been getting hoarse from yelling so much, because she slugged down the water, then glowered at me again. “How exactly did things go wrong *this* time? Tell me. I want to know.”

She added in a huff that she was done asking us to do this job for her. She was out of patience with us after we'd failed to bring her any good news for several days running.

I did feel like I had done wrong. “I'm real sorry,” I said, bowing my head. But I wasn't apologizing for not succeeding in our assigned task. “Before I tell you what happened with the camera, could you tell us a little bit about you?”

“What?” Cattleya stiffened, continuing to regard me with a mixture of suspicion and annoyance.

I didn't mind; I just said, "There's a few things you haven't been telling us, right?" Straightforward and to the point, that was the best way to go. There was no need for preamble, and there was no need to beat around the bush. I looked right at Cattleya, recalling what she had said to us when she first came in several days before. Specifically, how she had described her request.

"Bruno's a bit of a pervert, and you wanted to get Annie away from him because she means so much to you. Is that right?" I asked.

"Excuse me? You're asking about that now? Of *course* I—"

"Okay," I said, interrupting. "But is that the only reason?"

For the first time, Cattleya looked shaken.

I pressed the point. "There's something else going on, isn't there?"

As I asked, I thought about what had happened today. It was right after I had taken Annie and Bruno's photo.

"There! All set!" I'd said, handing it to them. The camera I had used was capable of producing a photograph right on the spot—that was its effect as a sancta. But that was all. The reason I had chosen this particular object for my mission today was simple: I'd wanted a chance to talk with them.

"Wow! That's awesome! This is a terrific picture!" Bruno said, inspecting it. He sounded so genuinely excited, you never would have guessed he forced his servants to indulge his peculiar whims.

"Yeah, it's great!" Annie grinned. Her smile was beautiful; she was every bit the sweet, outgoing girl that she looked.

From up close, I was more sure than ever: No matter how you cut it, they seemed like a caring couple. That was all they had seemed until I talked to them in person. But there was one thing I never would have noticed simply observing them from afar.

"Thank you so much! I'm thrilled you took this picture!" Bruno gave me the most gentle smile and a bow. Then he said, "I'll treasure this even after I leave this country."

Wasn't that sweet? Even after he left this—

“Huh?” I stood there, trying to process what he had just said. After he left this country? What did that mean? “Are you, uh, going away?” I asked. I sure hadn’t heard anything about that.

The answer came from Annie, who nodded. “Yes, he is.” She stood close to Bruno, still looking sweet but now, also, somehow sad. “He’ll be moving off our island very soon.”



Cururunelvia, the land of prayer, is a small island that has very little interaction with the outside world. There’s only one chance per year to leave this country: the scheduled ship that departs each spring. In other words, if you happened to stumble thoughtlessly into this land, you were stuck here for at least a year—and the reverse was true, too.

Now I discovered that young Bruno was going to board that ship and head out into the wider world.

“We found out about a year ago. My family learned that we were all going to have to move off the island for my dad’s job. I’ve only got a few months left here.” Bruno sounded perfectly calm as he explained; he seemed to have already accepted the reality.

It was winter now, which gave him about three months until the ship left in spring.

“I know it’s sad, but I’m sort of looking forward to it, too. There’s supposed to be all kinds of fun things outside this island,” he said. Food to eat, places to see, people to meet—there had to be so much more beyond our small island than within it. Bruno, his eyes filled with optimism and hope, told me he was sure that on the other side of the sadness would be joy.

“Um...” Standing there, I suddenly started to feel like a friend who had abruptly been told someone was leaving.

Bruno was moving away?

“So...does everybody know that?” I asked.

“Well, sure. We told the household servants, and I let all my friends know.”

“Would that happen to include the girl who was your childhood friend?”

“My childhood friend?” Bruno looked at me, surprised, but then he said, “Wait—are you Cattleya’s friend?”

“Oh! Yeah. Yeah, kinda.”

“Anyway, yeah, she knows. In fact, she was the first friend I told. It must’ve been at least six months ago now.”

“Oh yeah?” Well, it was news to me. Why hadn’t Cattleya said anything about this?

As I pondered, Bruno looked ever so slightly uncomfortable. “The thing is...I never saw Cattleya again after I told her I was moving.”

“Hmm?”

What was that? Never saw her? I pitched question after question at Bruno, like some kind of gossip columnist, but he never looked the least bit bothered. He just answered patiently.

“When I tried to tell her what was going on, she burst into tears and ran off.”

And that was it. No matter how hard Bruno tried to talk to her, she never really responded. Gradually, a gulf opened between the two of them.

I knew that had to be why Cattleya had hidden the facts from us.

Now, as she sat on the sofa across from me, I said, “I have a theory, Cattleya. Are you in love with Bruno?”

The request she had made of us was to save her dear friend Annie from dating that no-good loser, Bruno. And yet the main thing she seemed concerned about was the simple fact that the two of them might be dating. She didn’t appear motivated by hatred of Bruno personally so much as the fear that he and Annie might stay together forever.

If Bruno was leaving the country in a few months, then—well, forgive me for putting it this way, but if Cattleya just stood by and did nothing, Bruno and Annie would be wrenched apart anyway. There was no need for her to go out of her way to break them up. What’s more, Bruno had told Cattleya he was moving six months ago—right about the same time she was first becoming

friends with Annie.

If all that was true, then I could propose an alternative interpretation of events.

Bruno tells Cattleya that he's moving. The news comes completely out of the blue, and shocked by the sudden revelation, Cattleya is unable to accept the fact that their remaining time together is so short and leaves in a rage. This leads to the gulf between the two childhood friends.

Enter Annie, who gets close to Bruno, stepping into that gulf.

Of course, all that was merely my speculation.

"But is it possible that's what happened?" I said.

Everything else would have gone pretty much the way Cattleya had told us. Annie and Bruno had quickly grown close and now were practically dating.

To take a different view of the situation:

"Cattleya, you're jealous—because you feel like your last few days with Bruno are being taken from you by your best friend." Once again, I pulled no punches.

Cattleya was wide-eyed. "Wh— What? What are you talking about? Like, seriously, what are you talking about?"

"Wow! You said the same thing twice."

"Sh-shut up!"

"I mean it, though. What's the real story?" I shuffled close to her. *Time for answers, if you please!*

"Th— The real story? I don't know what you're talking about. A guy like *him*?" Cattleya glared at me, almost spitting the words. "Of *course* I'm in love with him!"

Well, there you had it!

Mm, mm.

"Of course you're in love," I agreed. Ah, to be young!

I was very happy to have gotten my answer—and just the one I expected, at

that.

Cattleya, on the other hand, was appalled. “Hey! What’s going on? Why did I just—?” She couldn’t believe what had come out of her own mouth.

I was sure she’d been planning on trying to hide her real feelings. “But there’s no lying here,” I said, pointing to the teacup I had offered her. Inside was plain, clear water. “That’s the Water of Drawing Out True Personality,” I informed her, setting down a teapot full of the stuff.

It was one of the sancta we’d used in our recent attempts to break up Bruno and Annie. Just as the name implied, it could draw out the true self that people were hiding within. When you poured it over someone’s head, like we had with Bruno, it caused whatever they were thinking to immediately pop out of their mouth—but if you could get someone to drink it...

“You’ll only be able to answer truthfully to anything I ask you now.”

...then it acted as a truth serum.

“Oooh! Y-you’ve done it now!” Cattleya growled.

“You never would have told us the truth otherwise, right?”

“W-well, what do you care?! How I feel about someone else is none of your business!”

“Fair enough. I guess it’s not,” I said. But the way I saw it, if Cattleya’s *real* desires lay elsewhere, then there was also no need to go to all this trouble to break up Annie and Bruno. “Let’s confirm: You’re in love with young Bruno, right?”

“Huh? Yeah, sure I am. Madly in love!”

“So why do you describe him as human trash and everything?”

“I’m the only person who can understand his true beauty!”

“Oh, uh...I see.”

“I can make all his dreams come true, so what’s he doing with *her*?!”

“Oh, I see...”

Then Cattleya gasped. “Shoot! I’ve said too much!” She clapped her hands

over her mouth.

“It’s like some whole new kind of passive aggression,” Elaina muttered from beside us. When she was right, she was right.

“If you love him that much, why don’t you just tell him?” I asked. There were only a few months left to do it. Did she really have time to be screwing around trying to tear Bruno and Annie apart?

Even after I explained my reasoning, Cattleya kept her hands over her mouth, afraid that she would say something else she’d wish she hadn’t.

She must have been frightened that the secrets she was holding in her heart would overflow. Instead, she had chosen to lie, dissemble, and avoid admitting her feelings for her childhood friend all this time.

I looked at Cattleya and said, “Do you really want Bruno to leave without you ever having told him how you feel?” I actually thought maybe I could bring her around. “Do you want to have to live the rest of your life keeping those feelings under wraps?”

Cattleya caught her breath. She gave me another dirty look, but she was biting her lip, pained. The hands drifted away from her mouth. A slow whisper worked its way from between her lips. “You think I don’t know that?” Now, I was sure, we were hearing her heart of hearts. “But it’s impossible! I could never tell him the truth!”

Why not?

I gave her a puzzled look.

Cattleya got more and more agitated as she talked. “I mean, I’m scared! If he turned me down, I...I don’t think I could survive it! Better to say nothing and be in a little pain than to tell him and have it all end!”

Again, this was her truth. I nodded. Yeah, I could understand that.

“But you do love him, don’t you?”

“I adore him!”

“What if you could go out with him?”

“I want to! I so want to!”

“All right...”

But if she never told him how she felt about him, then dating him was less than a dream.

Which meant one thing.

I picked up the teacup, the one full of the Water of Drawing Out True Personality, and said, “You can come out now.” Almost as if I were talking to the cup.

“What are you doing?” Cattleya asked, studying me.

That was when the bell above the shop door jingled.

In came a young man, tall and slim, with pale skin and hair. And he was holding a teacup just like mine. It was Cattleya’s childhood friend. The man she loved.

Bruno.

“Cattleya...,” he said.



Cattleya had been hiding her true feelings from us, yes, but we had also been hiding something from her.

“Say, Bruno. Could I ask you for a favor?” I’d asked after taking their picture and hearing some of the story.

“What is it?” he’d said, curious.

I handed him a teacup. “Hold this and wait by the store, would you?”

“Uh...” Naturally, he was somewhat confused by this sudden, strange request. He studied the teacup. “What’s this?”

“Just wait. You’ll see.” I chuckled and looked very clever.

“Why do I have to wait outside your shop?”

“You’ll understand that later, too.” I chuckled again.

“You don’t have any interest in explaining any of this, do you?” Bruno looked a bit nonplussed, but he humored me. He was really a decent guy, deep down.

“Cattleya... What you just said...” Now Bruno stood in the shop, his face as red as if he’d spent way too long in the sun after hearing what Cattleya truly thought. In his trembling hand, he clutched my teacup.

“See this? It’s a sancta that lets people far away hear what you’re saying!” I told them. Very useful.

Cattleya, meanwhile, was absolutely silent.

“Cattleya...I didn’t have the slightest idea you felt that way about me...”

She stayed silent; she couldn’t even answer Bruno. He didn’t seem to mind; maybe he didn’t even really notice. His eyes flitted this way and that as he said, “I, uh... I mean, about what you said, I—”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!”

He was interrupted by a scream—a scream from Cattleya, cutting him off before he could say what was really in his heart. Maybe, after hiding her secret so deep for so long, she couldn’t bear the reality she was now confronted with.

She clapped her hands to her cheeks, which were bright red. “Oh my gosh... My Bruno is too hot to handle!”

“I’ve heard of doing a one-eighty, but this is ridiculous,” remarked Elaina, watching them with no special interest.

“Kids these days,” agreed Riviere, equally detached.

“Oh no... Just being in the same room together is making my heart race!”

Elaina: “Not that I care, but isn’t she having a little too much fun with this?”

Riviere: “Kids these days...”

“Nooo! If I stay here, Bruno’s pheromones are going to drive me mad...!”

“She couldn’t keep it secret enough before, and now she lets it all hang out?”

“Kids these days...”

“It’s no use! I can’t stand it! I must flee!”

“Wow,” Elaina said, her mouth hanging open slightly as she watched.

Cattleya jumped up with all her strength and speed. She was trying to hide her face with her hands now. Her body language was unmistakable; she was charging dead ahead.

Except that dead ahead of her was Bruno’s chest.

“Wha...? Wh-what’s going on? Why am I...flinging myself at Bruno?!”

She was positively frazzled. Tucked into Bruno’s arms, she seemed caught between being embarrassed and being overjoyed.

She’d meant to run away but had run straight into his embrace instead. Very strange, no? Grinning, I told her the secret. “It’s a needle and thread.”

Did she know about them? They were sancta that we had here at Riviere Antiques—they made everything you tried to do go exactly the opposite of the way you intended.

“O-ooh, you’ve done it now!”

“Another dissatisfied customer?”

“The most satisfied of all!” she exclaimed through gritted teeth. For some reason, she was also sniffing Bruno’s neck intently. Her words and her actions were completely at odds with each other.

“C-Cattleya! Come on, we’re right out in public!” Bruno protested.

“What? Don’t you like me?” she asked.

“No, I don’t not like you... I mean, I *do* like you, a lot...”

“I’m sorry? What did you just say? I couldn’t hear you at all,” she said, pressing ever closer to him.

“She’s very proactive. I like it,” said Elaina, nodding seriously.

Riviere looked just as earnest as she offered her interpretation: “She’s gotten carried away by the effect of the sancta and is being a little *too* honest, I think.”

Bruno and Cattleya were growing more and more oblivious to what anyone around them was saying.

“I know I already said this, but...I really didn’t have any idea you felt that way about me,” said Bruno.

“Obviously. You’re such a dunce.”

“W-well, how was I supposed to know? You always snap at me.”

“That’s the flip side of love! How could you not know that?” Still clasped in Bruno’s arms, Cattleya nuzzled into his chest; she looked up at him and sighed wistfully. “You really do have gross tastes, and you let your appetites control you, and you’re completely hopeless. You’re the worst man I know.”

“C-Cattleya...”

“But I love you for that.”

“C-Cattleya...!”

“As long as I understand you, who else do you need?” Then she said, “I want you to look at me, and no one else.” Hiding nothing, she told Bruno everything, everything about how she felt about him. “Be mine, and mine alone.”

It was an unadulterated confession of true love. The sancta had prevented her from hiding it, then stopped her from running away; the harder she tried to run, the closer she wound up to him—but that was exactly why she could tell him these things now.

Bruno took a deep breath, as if absorbing all the feelings Cattleya had laid bare before him. He looked at her, and their eyes met. Her gaze was equal parts anticipation and anxiety. Their breath came soft.

Finally, Bruno took her hands in his. He gave them a squeeze—then gently drew away from her.

“Oh no...”

It looked like he was rejecting the young woman who had finally found the courage to tell him how she felt. Bruno turned around and then walked away.

As we all watched this unfold, he moved toward the back of the shop. He stopped in front of the table that Cattleya was always pounding.

Pointing at the teapot sitting there, he turned to me. “You called this the

Water of Drawing Out True Personality, didn't you?"

"Huh? Er, yeah, I did..."

What about it?

I was about to ask—when Bruno bowed to me and said, "Thank you very much." He picked up the pot.

And then he took a big swig right from it.

He gulped down the Water of Drawing Out True Personality.

"Whoa, just a—!"

What was this all about? I was about to ask—but Bruno wasn't even looking at me anymore. He just kept chugging the water. It started to spill from his mouth and soak his shirt, but he didn't seem to care.

When the pot was finally empty, he slammed it down on the table.

"If you can tell the whole truth, then so can I!"

The Water of Drawing Out True Personality prevented the drinker from hiding what they were feeling—and Bruno had just drunk every last drop. He looked square at Cattleya. "I love you, too. I've always loved you."

Outwardly, Bruno looked like a hardworking young student—but behind that facade, he was an adolescent boy with moderately questionable proclivities.

"I love how you look when you're confused. I love how you look when you're angry. You've always occupied the most important place in my head. I love how you're so prickly, but then every once in a while you show me a little smile. I love all that stuff about you."

"Bruno..." Cattleya put her hands to her mouth, deeply moved.

Gosh! They fit each other so well it hurt.

Bruno kept talking. "I can't change the fact that I have to move. In a few months, I won't live on this island anymore. But until that day comes...I mean, if it's okay with you...will you go out with me?"

Their time as students together was going to be very brief. But then, in the grand scheme of a lifetime, the time you spent as a student was so short

anyway. Just a few sweet years before you wound up as an adult.

So Bruno said, “Do this for me: When you grow up, get on that boat. Come live with me beyond this land.”

He understood the stretch of time that would be involved in making that promise, and he made it anyway. His declaration of love was so passionate, it was just one step away from a marriage proposal!

Cattleya giggled. “Just don’t cheat on me while you can’t see me.”

“I would never.”

“And no flirting with other girls.”

“Of course not.”

“And no adult shops or anything!”

This time Bruno didn’t answer.

“Excuse me? I can’t hear you!”

“Cattleya,” he whispered and hugged her. He’d quickly figured out the one fatal loophole in the Water of Drawing Out True Personality: If you kept your mouth shut, the sancta couldn’t do anything about it. “Cattleya. I hear about all the wonderful things there are outside our island. Things to eat, places to go, people to meet...”

“And adult stores to go to, I suppose?”

“The outside world must be simply bursting with diverse delights that we can’t even imagine within the confines of this island!”

“You’re totally planning to go to some filthy little smut shop.”

“If we can survive the loneliness of being apart, I’m sure joy is waiting for us. When you think of it that way, even being separated seems like a pleasure in its own way, doesn’t it?”

“You can’t *wait* to go to one of those disgusting places while we’re apart, can you?” Cattleya glared at Bruno and gave him her biggest, most powerful hug—she was probably trying to run away again, but the needle and thread reversed what she did. She looked like she might start bawling him out at any moment,

but instead, still glowering, she said, “I want you to know—if you try *anything* with another girl, you’re dead.”

“I promise, that’s one thing I would never do. I’ve never been truly excited by any girl except you.”

“God, that’s gross.”

They were so close, their shoulders were touching. They gazed into each other’s eyes, aware only of one another. Enraptured by an attractiveness no one else could see, they stood there in an embrace that seemed like it would never end.

Then they filled that brief time before they became adults with beautiful, shining days.

Some people might have called it *youth*.



“That was quite a fine job you did the other day, MacMillia,” Riviere said, a few days after Cattleya and Bruno had (almost in spite of themselves) gotten together.

It was another day at Riviere Antiques, and once again, we had nothing but time to kill. Riviere spoke of the events of a few days prior with genuine emotion, as if she were recalling a pleasant memory.

“Without you, I don’t think we ever would have cracked that case. Elaina and I failed to see how Cattleya really felt. Didn’t we, Elaina?” She clapped the young woman on the shoulder.

Elaina took the baton and ran with it. “Oh, absolutely. The way you made use of those sancta, I don’t think it would be going too far to say that you might surpass this shop’s very owner, Miss Riviere, one day.”

“Truly, you did a wonderful job.”

“The best. You’re a spectacular employee.”

They showed no reticence in their praise, lavishing acclaim upon my success.

“Aw, gee, you don’t say,” I replied, reveling in the all too uncommon words of

congratulations from the two of them. I scratched the back of my head. I was gonna blush. Well, they weren't wrong—I knew I had done a great job!

“So, spectacular employee,” Elaina said, clapping me on the shoulder.

“Eh-heh-heh,” I laughed, still savoring the praise.

“With all that said...” Riviere clapped her hand on my other shoulder. “We’re going to let *you* handle this next customer.” They were both grinning broadly.

Me? I fell quiet. Had all this been just to push some work on me? If I could have gotten the two of them to drink the Water of Drawing Out True Personality right at that moment, I was sure I would have heard some very unpleasant admissions.

As it turned out, though, they were right—this was a job better left to me than to the two of them.

“*Sigh*. Guess I’d better do it...,” I said.

Because the person in front of us had come to Riviere Antiques on account of the last job I had done.

Sitting on the other sofa was a young woman—probably a student, I would have said. About the same age as young Bruno and Cattleya, in fact.

“Uh...” I tried not to sigh when I saw her.

She had red hair and brown skin. Looked like the athletic type. The sort who would be equally popular with boys and girls.

“Sorry,” I said. “Could we go over that again from the top?”

It was Annie, sitting there in front of us.

“The boy I love started going out with another girl,” Annie said mournfully, looking at the ground.

There was, she told us, this guy she’d had her eye on for the better part of six months now. They’d been getting closer and closer, until she was sure that with one more little push, they could start going out. At least, that was what she’d thought. But wouldn’t you know it, he suddenly started dating her best friend!

The story was all very familiar—almost as if I’d seen it happen myself.

“Uh-huh,” I said when she was finished. “And?”

“And...and...I just... You know, every time I see his face when he’s with her, with this other girl, it’s like my heart is in a vise...”

“For sure. I hear you.”

It had to be a shock for poor Annie—the young man she’d worked long and hard to be with was suddenly plucked away from her by someone who swooped in from the side.

“When I see him smiling with my best friend, I just...I don’t know what to think!”

“For sure. I hear you.” I could definitely understand that feeling. I nodded and tried to sound comforting.

“I see them secretly making out in an empty classroom, and my heart, it gets... hot!”

“For sure. I hear you.” Gosh, they got up to stuff like that at school?

“Somehow I just feel this surge in my spirit...”

“For sure. I...hear you?”

What was that?

“I get so excited!”

“I didn’t mean you needed to spell it out.”

It didn’t matter how many times she rephrased it anyway; I still didn’t follow. Excited?

“When I see the guy I lost making out with the girl who stole him from me, I get really excited...!”

Bam! Annie pounded the table in an excess of emotion. Her eyes were glittering.

“I feel like I’m going to go crazy if I don’t do something! Don’t you have some kind of sancta that can help me contain these emotions? Please!” She practically grabbed me by the lapels.

Cattleya and Bruno had been such over-the-top freaks that I'd forgotten, but Annie was a pretty twisted girl herself.

"Sigh... I'm afraid I'm going to lose it at this rate," she said.

"Are you sure you haven't already?" I asked.

Annie had seemed to be game for just about anything—and apparently "just about anything" included having Bruno stolen from her. Talk about range.

"Wow..."

"Kids these days..."

Elaina and Riviere tried to look detached as they watched Annie work herself into a lather.

A little obsession that no one else could understand? A proclivity all your own? A beautiful moment when something you had been hiding in your heart suddenly burst into bloom?

Maybe that's just something else people would call *youth*.



A Silence Obtained

They say “the nail that sticks up will be pounded down.” Layla had learned that lesson better than anyone these past several years—and learned it the hard way.

She’d been among the top performers since she had joined her most recent job. Her boss trusted her, and her work was held up at meetings as a model to imitate.

Layla always worked with an eye toward efficiency; she never did anything unnecessary. That was her whole philosophy at the office, and it was what made her performances so dazzling.

There was nothing that would so much as raise an eyebrow about any of it—or at least, that was what Layla thought.

One day, she was doing her work, just like she always did, when she heard people talking.

“Huh! Another meeting, another...well, *you* know.”

“They can’t stop talking about how great Layla is. Layla the pet!”

“Maybe it’s ’cause she lets the boss touch her butt! You think?”

“Ha-ha! She totally would! You know her outfits barely cover her!”

“Is she here to work or to seduce people?”

Layla heard the women slandering her.

The nail that sticks up will be pounded down.

Her peers and even her senior colleagues had begun to distance themselves from her ever since she'd started to achieve serious results in the company. She didn't mind it as such—she could just tell herself that it was the fate of talent to be resented.

But...

"Sigh! It does grate on my ears," she grumbled as she walked home.

She didn't have any particular feelings about being disliked, but being forced to listen to such lowbrow conversation when she was trying to do serious work was painful for Layla. She wished they would let her do her work in peace.

So she murmured, as if in prayer: "If only there were something that could keep me from hearing their insults."

Her wish was as simple as that.

"Oh, there is."

She didn't know if her prayer had reached heaven, but a voice answered her, though she had been speaking to herself.

She turned toward it to see a woman emerge soundlessly from a dark side alley.

"There's a sancta that will prevent you from hearing those barbs," the woman said. She wore a black dress, almost as if she were in mourning. The moonlight framed dark hair and skin as pale as the dead. Dark eyes that looked devoid of life took Layla in.

The woman introduced herself as Antiques Carredura.



Layla's coworkers knew that no matter how cool she tried to act, hearing people bad-mouth her had to bother her.

"See how she throws herself into her work every day? Hey...you think she's in

debt?”

“Ha-ha! I think she’s giving it to a guy!”

“She *would*!”

They couldn’t do better work than Layla, so instead they launched words like darts at her. If they could get the slightest hint of a rise out of her, that was enough for them. So today, like every day, Layla’s coworkers held one of their snickering conferences, well within earshot.

But this time...something was different. Most days, Layla would quietly but steadily lose her composure as her coworkers chatted—but today, she seemed completely at ease.

“Huh? I know she can hear us!”

“BS!”

“She’s trying to say we’re beneath her notice!”

Her coworkers rained their usual abuse, keeping none too quiet, but Layla didn’t show the slightest reaction. She completely ignored everything they said, as if she had stoppers in her ears.

“Did something about Layla seem funny today?”

It was lunch break, and Layla’s coworkers were in the bathroom, touching up their makeup. They couldn’t seem to get through to her no matter what they said, and it was throwing them off.

“Normally, she looks so upset, but today something’s different,” one of them said.

“Maybe she thinks she’s saying we’re not even worth noticing,” another one spat. “God, that woman makes me so angry!”

As ever, the three of them were discussing their shared hatred of Layla. They were just checking their faces in the mirror when the door of one of the stalls swung open, and they all went silent.

Layla emerged from the stall—the very person they had been in the act of insulting. Yet she went over to the sink as calmly as if she hadn’t heard anything

and stood right beside the three of them as she washed her hands.

“Wh-what’s with you?!” one of the women asked. She felt a disgust she couldn’t put her finger on.

“Yeah! If you’ve got a problem with us, why don’t you just say so?” demanded the woman standing next to Layla.

Layla, however, didn’t say anything. She didn’t even react to how loudly they were shouting. She simply dried her hands and left the bathroom as if the three of them weren’t even there.

They noticed something as she left—she was wearing a pair of silver earrings they hadn’t seen before.

“These are called the Earrings of Silence,” Carredura had informed her the night before. She handed them to Layla and said, “Per their name, they enable the wearer to pass their days in silence.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” Layla had asked, puzzled by the seemingly vague description.

Carredura calmly explained, “When you wear these earrings, you’ll cease to hear the voices of those who are harmful to you. Nor will you hear overly loud voices. Hence the name, Earrings of Silence.”

“Hmm...”

Layla contemplated the earrings—but then she squinted. Yes, they certainly looked like a sancta with a powerful ability. But it was also said that when a story was too good to be true, it usually was. “Is there a catch?” she asked.

“Certainly.”

Of course. Layla was disappointed—the silencing did sound appealing.

Carredura said, “The downside is that taking these earrings off is difficult—only I can do it. That’s their one drawback.”

“Hmm...” Layla nodded as she thought about this. “So if I put them on, I would have to leave them on?”

“That’s right. If you find you want to take them off, call me—simply hold this business card and wish to meet me. I will be at your humble service anytime, anywhere.”

The woman handed Layla a black business card emblazoned only with the name Antiques Carredura. Layla wondered how it was supposed to work but decided that the business card must be another sancta.

She looked at Carredura. She didn’t want to hear her coworkers’ voices, not in any circumstances. So she couldn’t take the earrings off once she put them on? Who cared? That was hardly a disadvantage for her.

“I’ll take them,” she said.

“A pleasure doing business,” Carredura replied with a pleasant smile.

The earrings appeared on Layla’s ears starting the next morning.

“_____”

They turned out to work just as advertised. None of the voices of the women who routinely belittled Layla reached her ears.

Their mouths were open. She could see them looking at her and smirking.

“_____”

“_____”

“_____”

But she didn’t hear a word they said. It was as if their voices, and theirs alone, had been blacked out, erased from Layla’s world.

Now this, I like.

From that day forward, Layla worked even more efficiently than before. With those grating comments swept away, she finally had the peace she craved.

“Excellent work as always, Layla.”

She must have been in a really good mood, because she was even more efficient than usual—work that she had planned to spend all day on, she finished in the course of the morning. Her boss was astonished by her speed and was lavish in his praise.

“Oh, no, sir. Just business as usual.” At least if one didn’t do anything unnecessary—such as have to listen to inane chatter.

“The rest of our staff could stand to learn a thing or two from you,” Layla’s boss said with a sigh, casting a glance over Layla’s shoulder.

“_____”

“_____”

“_____”

Her coworkers were exchanging pointless banter, as usual. Layla didn’t know what they were saying—something not remotely productive, no doubt.

There were so many lazy people at her company.

“Say, ladies, you free tonight?” asked one of Layla’s senior colleagues, trotting up to the three chatting women. He was a pushy guy who was forever inviting them out to drinks—and in Layla’s view, that was all he was good for.

Her three colleagues, though, seemed to be very taken with him. They looked at him, transparently thrilled and openly flirtatious.

“_____”

“_____”

“_____”

They said something to him, although of course Layla didn’t know what.

“Ha-ha-ha! Really? Okay. Sounds good. Let’s all go get drinks tonight.”

“_____”

“_____”

“_____”

“Good idea. I’ll invite a few of our coworkers.”

They were so busy planning their playdate that they couldn't be bothered to do their jobs. Layla could hardly stand to look at them.

“_____”

And so she stopped hearing her senior colleague's voice as well.

One thing was for sure: Once she put on the sancta, her life got a lot less stressful.

Like when she was grabbing a drink at the bar after work.

“Hey! What's wrong with this stinking bar? There's a hair in my food!” shouted a drunk in one of the far seats. His voice was grating.

Layla turned to look at him. A member of the staff was rushing up, bowing and saying, “I'm so sorry, sir!”

“You better make me a new meal, or ——”

The man's voice was excised from Layla's world.

Layla smacked her lips over the delicious food, the bar just a little bit more peaceful than before.

Then there were the times when she would be walking through town once some playboy type tried to pick her up. “Hey, girl. You free right now?” he would ask. And once again the sancta came in handy.

“Aw, don't ignore me. All I want is a little ——”

The moment she thought about how grating such a man's voice was, she would cease to hear it.

The more silence embraced her, the more Layla realized how her world until now had heaved with things she hadn't needed and hadn't wanted to hear.

On her way home one day, Carredura accosted her. “Well, well. You're looking better since I saw you a few days ago.”

Layla smiled at her. “Thank you. With your help, I'm very happy indeed now.”

“That's wonderful. Nothing brings me more pleasure than my customers'

satisfaction.” She let her eyes drift toward Layla’s ears. “Would you like to take the earrings off?”

They were difficult to remove, Carredura had told her when she bought them; only Carredura could do it. That was their supposed demerit.

Layla shook her head. “No way. I could practically live the rest of my life with these things on.”

“Oh, I see.”

Well, Carredura advised her, if she changed her mind, she should simply pray to the business card. Then, smiling, the antiques dealer vanished into the darkness of an alleyway.



It happened a few days later.

“Layla? How’s that job coming? They said they left it to you.”

“Wha?” She gave her boss a funny look. She’d done all the work she’d personally been asked to do. Every bit of it. She knew she always did a thorough, complete job—so now she searched her memory, but she couldn’t recall being asked for anything.

Her boss gave her just as funny a look and pointed to her male coworker. “I thought he asked you to get together the presentation materials for that client. You don’t remember?”

Him. A senior colleague who was forever talking about going out to drink, and never actually doing his work.

Then Layla remembered. A few days before, he’d started chatting with her in a tone she considered much too familiar. She’d assumed he was just asking her out for drinks again and ignored him. But...

“_____”

Now that she thought about it, she realized she hadn’t actually heard him. Apparently, he had been asking her to do a job.

“I’m so sorry, sir. I’ll do it right away,” she said.

“Sure thing, thanks.”

Layla gave a contrite bow and went back to work.

“_____”

“_____”

“_____”

From a distance, she could see her coworkers laughing. Taking the chance to get their shots in at her, no doubt.

Not that she cared what they said about her. She couldn’t hear them anyway. She gave them her usual disinterested look and got to work. She had dropped the ball, but that could be rectified by doing the job, and doing it right.

At length Layla handed the materials to her boss—a bit late, perhaps, but perfect as always.

“Hmm,” he said, looking at them. “I guess this will do this time.” He looked strangely...unimpressed.

He set the papers down on his desk, but then he looked up at Layla and sighed. There seemed to be more he wanted to get off his chest. “Layla, what’s happening with you? You used to be a much harder worker, but now _____”

Suddenly, she didn’t hear his voice. She hadn’t wished for it, not really—but she had reflexively thought of her boss’s voice as so much noise, just like the voices of her coworkers.

“_____,” he said, but she didn’t hear him.

She looked around and realized she couldn’t hear anything at all.

She’d gotten the earrings in order to enable her to do her work smoothly, but now...

The looks everyone was giving Layla as she stood there ensconced in her silence were just like the ones she had given all these incompetent fools before.

What should she do? She had to do something. At this rate, she would be

completely incapacitated.

Layla had left work early, and now she was wandering around the twilit city.

The earrings were supposed to make everything better. Her work had been the one thing she was good at! She didn't want to think that it was the sancta that had turned everything upside down. She didn't want to admit it. She had to do something about this. Panic drove her on in a rush.

"Welcome, welcome! My shop has the finest _____"

The voice of one of the street stall owners, which normally never bothered her, seemed impossibly loud—and so it cut off.

"Hey, did you hear? You never going to believe this! _____"

"Ha-ha-ha! That's so gr_____"

She went by a couple of chatting girls, but it was so obnoxious the way they were talking—and they were cut off.

"Hey, miss, are you all right? You don't look so g_____"

Shut up.

"Oop! Careful, now. Gotta watch where you're going, or _____"

Shut up!

Why wouldn't everyone just shut up?!

The thought went through her mind before she knew what she was thinking—just once, and no more. It was instinctive; she was lashing out.

But she had thought it, and the earrings were faithful. They removed from Layla's hearing everything that antagonized her.

"_____"

Voices disappeared from the city.

Sound disappeared.

The hubbub of town, the footsteps on the pavement—Layla ceased to hear any of it.

"_____"

She couldn't even hear her own voice.

As she had hoped, as she had wished, Layla was left with only silence.



If you change your mind, just pray to the business card.

She was in a true crisis now.

In the middle of the night, the town quiet and still, Layla remembered what Carredura had said. She scrambled to grab the business card out of her bag, then collapsed on the roadside and prayed.

All alone on the night-darkened streets, she prayed.

Yes, she had wanted quietude. But now, unable to hear even the slightest sound, how was she supposed to carry on her daily life? She had to take these earrings off; it was the only way.

Please come quick! she prayed with all her might.

Layla didn't really understand what kind of effect the sancta that was this business card possessed. Whatever it was, though, Carredura answered her prayer.

"_____"

Suddenly, she was there, amid the silence, smiling pleasantly.

"Is something the matter?" Carredura asked the pale woman she found on the nighttime streets. "You don't look so good." She knew the woman; she'd sold her the Earrings of Silence a week or so earlier. "You summoned me. That means you must want something with me."

What might it be?

Carredura liked to think of herself as ready and eager to grant any wish her customers might have. She stood and smiled down at the woman in a way she hoped would reassure her.

Layla's mouth worked open and closed; desperately, she formed words. "III..."

ahh...I wahnt to...tayyke ohv th'...airings!"

"Excuse me?" Carredura gave her a puzzled look. She liked to think of herself as ready and eager to grant any wish her customers might have—but they had to be able to tell her clearly what that wish was. Whereas Carredura was quite unable to understand what Layla was saying as she crouched there before her.

Was she saying she wanted to do something with the earrings?

"Could you say that again, please? More clearly? I couldn't quite catch that." She tried to look especially perplexed.

As she waited, however, she only grew more baffled. Could Layla not understand what she was saying? The other woman gave her an equally bewildered look and made no attempt to answer Carredura's question.

And here Carredura was so eager to grant her wish, if only Layla would tell her what it was! But there were minimum conditions to be met when making an exchange—and if she didn't know what someone wanted, she couldn't give it to them.

Instead, she plucked the business card from Layla's hands, and with that same pleasant smile on her face, she said, "I'm terribly sorry. I simply don't know what you're trying to say."





On the Founding of the Land

Sometimes I think of my parents, who gave me the name Riviere.

They were very kind people who cherished their only daughter. I remember them smiling at me from my earliest days, telling me that as long as they had me, they didn't need anything else.

So when it was discovered that I had contracted a very rare disease, they were even more shaken than I was. I remember how they wept and cried. They observed my symptoms time and again, asking if there wasn't some mistake. But the longer they watched, the more obvious it became that there was something strange going on with my body.

Maybe, my parents thought, some terrible thing had possessed me—and so they promptly took me to the town doctor to treat my newly abnormal body.

"I can't believe this," the doctor said, astonished from the moment he saw me.

He was observing the pale, vigorous finger of a young woman just turned fourteen. A finger that had just closed a knife wound almost as soon as it was made.

"As you can see, Doctor...our daughter's body heals itself unnaturally quickly," my father said. What illness was this? How could it be cured? For that matter, *was* it an illness? My parents didn't know.

“I hate to say this, but I’m at a loss as to what these symptoms might mean,” said the doctor, who was every bit as flummoxed as my parents were. The best he could offer was, “If it doesn’t seem to be doing her any particular harm, maybe we can just leave it be.” I think he might even have said something about being a little envious of my swift recovery. Maybe he was speaking from the heart, as someone who spent every day battling illnesses and injuries, or maybe he was just doing whatever he could to make my parents feel a little better. Either way, hearing the doctor say that there didn’t seem to be a serious problem helped them regain some of their composure. They stopped weeping and crying and started to smile once more.

Eventually, however, it became clear that the doctor’s judgment had been mistaken.

Because though years passed after that, my body remained exactly as it had been when I was fourteen.

The country where we were living at the time was a small place, and rumors about me swiftly spread all through town. *Riviere has a disease that keeps her from growing up. Even though she didn’t do anything wrong. Poor girl.*

People felt bad for my grieving parents and banded together to find some way to fix me. A doctor tried every manner of medicine on me in hopes of encouraging my growth—all in vain. A scholar studied me from head to toe but couldn’t find anything unusual about my body. A mage gave me magical medicine that he hoped would cure me. But nothing had any effect.

People started visiting me, local citizens and folks from beyond our borders alike. But no matter what anyone tried, I never aged a day over fourteen years.

Nothing helped; nothing changed at all. It was like plunging a sword into a raging sea. We tried everything, then tried it all again, but my symptoms never went away, and all our efforts yielded nothing more substantial than the froth on the waves.

As time went on, fewer and fewer people came to our house. One after another gave up. When my parents finally gave up, too, I was in my

midtwenties. The years piled up for the world I lived in, but not for me.

“In the end, we were never able to help you grow into an adult,” my father said with a sigh.

“I’m sorry, Riviere,” my mother wept. “I’m so sorry.”

My parents, who for as long as I could remember had never done anything but smile at me, suddenly always seemed to look careworn and grim. The passing years threw the wrongness of my existence into sharp relief. People stopped looking at me with pity and started looking at me with envy.

“You’re little Riviere? You really are still just a girl! Oh, that I could be like you!”

The older a woman was, the more jealous they appeared of my youth.

“Lucky you, Riviere. I wish I could be a kid forever,” said a friend who had just gotten married and had a child. She was telling me, almost proudly, how hard it was to be an adult.

Even the people who had given everything they had to trying to help me were envious: “Tell me the truth. You don’t really *want* this to be fixed, do you?”

Maybe I had acquired a heart that healed as quickly as my body, because no matter what anyone said to me, I never seemed to feel saddened or pained by it.

“We’re sorry, Riviere. We’re so sorry...”

That was the one thing that caused me real pain—having to see my parents continually grieve. It was obvious to me that not being able to watch their daughter grow up was agony for them.

I saw that to stay with them would only mean to hurt and upset them further. So I decided to go my own way. “I’m leaving this country,” I told them. When I saw how shocked they were, I added, “I’d like to find some way to help myself this time.”

Even then, they were reluctant. *Don’t go*, they said, *it’s dangerous. Stay at home*. They said all kinds of things to me as I packed my bags, but I didn’t so much as nod.

“Have you forgotten?” I asked. “I’m twenty-nine now.”

I added that someone that age should be perfectly able to travel on her own.

I smiled at my parents, who were still worried. They at least agreed to see me off. Deep down, I think they knew—knew that they and I were not living in the same time.

I spent a while traveling around the nearby countries.

“I said I was going to try to find a treatment, so I suppose I should.”

It wouldn’t exactly be convenient looking like I was fourteen years old all my life anyway. I couldn’t go on forever separated from the world around me.

For starters, then, I decided to go to all the hospitals and visit all the mages in the nearby lands. None of those in my own country had been able to help me, but maybe somewhere beyond the borders of my homeland there was someone who knew something about my illness.

“Huh! No, I don’t think we have the capacity to treat this condition,” said the doctor at one hospital, shaking his head. I sighed: Another attempt had ended in ignominious failure.

A mage in another country was very excited by me: She grabbed me by the shoulders and exclaimed, “This is incredible! What is going *on* with your body?! Let me study you!”

I got scared and ran away.

In another country, a shady group tried to get me to buy a jar. “This jar, you see—you buy this jar, and any illness you have will be healed on the spot!”

I took fright and ran away again.

After that I went to all sorts of countries, asking not just mages and doctors but all kinds of people about what might be done.

As I went hither and yon, time passed, until it had been nearly a year. Finally, I found myself in a town square in one country in particular. I was sitting on a bench when I let out a sigh. “Looks like I’m out of funds.”

The inside of my wallet was looking awfully lonely. That's what happens when you spend a year trying to get medical treatment instead of working...

"I've got to do something different, or I'm going to be in trouble."

I needed money if I was going to travel and visit people. But my wallet yawned open in front of me, hungry for cash. I put my head in my hands, the very picture of a distraught young woman.

"I guess I'd better put my search for a cure on hold and get a job instead."

Luckily, I happened to be staying in a relatively large country just then. The more people there are, the more workers places need. I grabbed every HELP WANTED poster I could find in the square and started hitting up potential workplaces. It was a big country. It wouldn't take me long to find a job.

"I'm sorry? Thirty years old? Take your jokes someplace else, kid."

Uh...

It wouldn't take me long at a—

"Look at you! You're just a baby! I'd go to jail if I let you work here."

Ooookay.

This wouldn't take lo—

"Is this your idea of a prank? Get outta here!"

Gah!

It had been several days already.

"This is not good," I mumbled to myself.

No, not good at all. Before I knew it, I was scraping the bottom of my wallet. Although I tended to forget it these days, my body was still fourteen. I could act as mature as I wanted, but I would inevitably look like a child. So what if I told them truthfully that I was thirty years old? Nobody would take my word on it and give me a job.

But as it turned out, nobody would give me a job if I lied, either.

"I'm fourteen, sir."

“Scram!”

When I tried claiming to be my apparent age in interviews, of course I was promptly chased out. An office was no place for children.

“I’ve got to do something different, or I’m going to be in trouble,” I said to myself, repeating those same words from a few days before—and sitting in the same place. But now, things were even more serious than they had been the first time. At this rate, I really was going to end up having to camp out.

I never thought of going back home. “I’ll just try a little bit longer to find some work...”

I wasn’t a kid, after all. I had brought this problem on myself, and I wanted to deal with it myself. I got back to my feet with a mixture of panic and resolution.

Which was when somebody patted me on the shoulder. “Hullo there.”

I turned to see a man I didn’t recognize standing there. Now, who could this be?

“Who are you?” I asked guardedly.

The man smiled, radiating kindness. “You’re the young lady who’s been looking for work recently, aren’t you? You’ve got a lot of people talking.”

I gave him a hard look and didn’t say anything.

The man shrugged. “You can skip the intimidating glare. I’m just here to offer you work.”

“O-offer me work?” I asked, all my vigilance evaporating. I was saved! “You... you really mean that?” I tried to continue to look suspicious of him, but I was walking on air.

I fired questions at him one after another: Where was this job? What did it entail? Why had he approached me?

The man’s brow furrowed. “First, I have a question for you. You’re young Riviere—is that right?”

“Yes,” I said.

What about it?

In the face of my renewed dubiousness, the man said, “A matter of prudence. I try to exercise the utmost caution, especially when dealing with youngsters like you.”

“Why?”

“Well, it would never do to kidnap the wrong child.”

“Huh?”

What was he talking about?

I felt the shock, the confusion. When the smile vanished from the man’s face, I knew I had been caught in a trap—but by then, it was already too late.

Everything went dark.

“Eeeeeek!” I cried.

Someone had put a cloth bag over me from behind, all the way from my head to my toes, and just like that, I was stuck. I struggled and fought in the darkness. I shouted. But there was no sign that my voice made it outside the bag.

“You’ve got *a lot* of people talking,” I heard the man say. “There’s a noble from another land who’s especially interested in your *body*. He hired me to bring you to him.”

Lucky you, finding work just when you needed it.

From somewhere beyond the darkness around me, I sensed the man laughing.



They must have put me on an open wagon, because when I was let out of the sack, the sight that met my eyes was a great blue sky spreading overhead, and the country I had been in growing steadily smaller behind us.

“Hey, you think she’s really thirty years old?” asked a well-built man with a knife at his hip and a hard look in his eyes. He directed his question at the driver while he expertly bound my hands with rope. I assumed he was the one who had shoved me in the sack.

Then he turned to me. “Let’s get one thing straight. You get any funny ideas, I’ll kill you without a second thought.” A nice, easy-to-understand threat. Then the well-built man got up and went back to sit by the driver.

“What’re you so worried about? She can’t get away,” said the driver, looking back over his shoulder at me. It was the kind-looking man who had first approached me. He smiled, just like he had when we’d met, and said, “It’ll be a bit before we get to our noble friend’s country. You can just take it easy back there.” He sounded like he was talking to a child. Then he said that if I got hungry, I could feel free to eat some of the fruit, and he pointed to the cargo. There were a few boxes there, with provisions this noble had apparently provided so that I could eat. And I *could* eat, notwithstanding my bound hands.

“I don’t want any fruit,” I spat and sat down in a corner of the cargo area. I didn’t want to eat anything whose provenance I didn’t know.

Instead of eating, I started asking questions.

“What do you mean to do with me?”

“Us? We’re not going to do anything with you.”

“Then let me go.”

“Ha-ha-ha! When we’ve finally got you?” The “kind” man laughed: That had to be a joke! “We bring you to this guy, he pays us enough that even bandits like us won’t go hungry for the rest of our lives.”

“I’m not worth that much,” I said slowly.

“Hey, no arguments here. But there’s certain...types out there who’d do anything for a kid like you.” He shrugged and claimed he couldn’t understand it. But he went on: “I hate to break it to you, but you’re not getting out of here, no matter what you say.”

I pondered how to escape my plight.

“Please,” I said, trying to think while I begged. “I’ll do anything you ask. Just let me—”

“Don’t you ever shut up?” The not-so-kind-after-all man looked like he couldn’t believe he had to deal with this. He turned a cold gaze on me. “You’re

supposed to be thirty years old, right? Use that grown-up head of yours and think about exactly where you are.”

My breath caught.

“Or maybe we gotta beat the lesson into you before we sell you off?”

This was one unexpected, and unwelcome, effect of my going to so many countries and asking so many people for help: These men knew very well about the illness that consumed my body.

“They say you instantly heal from any injury.” The well-built man took his knife in hand and looked at me. “Maybe we should see if that’s true. Here and now.”

“Please...don’t.”

“Then sit down and shut up.”

I lowered my gaze and fell silent.

“You’re lucky. We’re the nice kind of brigands,” the first man said mockingly. “Otherwise, we’d have a little fun with you before—”

Thump.

He was interrupted by a bump that made the entire cargo platform seem to jump. One of the boxes broke open and poured out some apples.

“That was some bump. Think we hit something?” the man with the knife grunted.

A second later, the wagon screeched to a halt, the man holding the reins executing an emergency stop.

“Hey! Why’d you stop us?” the other man growled.

“I heard something. I’m gonna go see what’s happening back there.”

“Why bother?”

“Matter of prudence.”

The man hopped down from the bench, giving me an ever so slightly better view of where we were going. A broad, grassy plain spread out as far as I could

see. If I were still a free woman, it was a scene I could have come to see any time I wanted. Knowing this might be the last time I would see it made everything seem especially vivid and precious.

The driver was back a moment later. “Nothing there,” he said with a shrug and a grunt.

“I told you.” His well-built counterpart grunted back at him, and then the driver got the wagon going again. The apples went tumbling around the cargo area—until they stopped at a woman’s feet.

“An apple! It’s my lucky day,” she said. She bent down and picked it up, polished it with her sleeve, and took a bite. “Ugh! This is terrible.” She scowled and spat it back out.

Wait...who was she?

I was frowning even harder than the woman who had appeared out of nowhere.

She looked to me like she was in her midtwenties. She had wavy white hair, and her trademark color appeared to be sky blue. She wore a white robe and a pointy hat decorated with blue ribbon—she was a mage. I could tell she was sexy even under her outfit, and as she stood up again, she puffed her chest out self-importantly.

Her expression, I might add, was supremely confident.

“Ahem!” she coughed, and those blue eyes fell upon my two kidnappers. She was clearly waiting for them to notice her.

And notice her they did.

“Huh?! Wh-who the hell are you?!”

“And how the hell did you get on this wagon?!”

The well-built man and the driver both turned toward her, the former getting ready to fight.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha, oops! Spotted me, did you? I guess for your sake I’ll stop sneaking around!”

They hadn't spotted her; she'd given herself away!

I might have been exasperated, but the woman didn't care. She let her hair billow and flung her robe back dramatically, then shouted at the top of her lungs, "You're kidnappers, aren't you? Capturing a girl who doesn't age in order to sell her is low, even for the likes of you! You scoundrels!"

Apparently, this mage had also heard the rumors about me. She gave me a quick glance—and then produced her wand.

"Believe me, I would love to put an end to you right this minute—but I believe that even the worst villain deserves a chance to do better. So here's *your* chance."

The men looked at each other, and then, without a word, they raised their weapons.

The woman hardly seemed to notice, let alone care. She continued to talk at them. "If you've learned your lesson, then get off this wagon. If you go now, I won't come after you."

"We've come too far to back out now!" the well-built man exclaimed as he rushed her.

"Yeah, you little fool!" The driver belatedly grabbed a weapon.

As they'd told me when we were having our little conversation, if they kidnapped me, they were on track to get enough money to live the rest of their lives in luxury—so they weren't about to run away.

The mage greeted them with a smile. "I think you're going to find you're the fools."

Then she raised her wand.

"We're real sorry..."

Almost before I knew what had happened, the two men were sitting on the ground, no longer on the wagon. I guess a couple of outlaws didn't stand a chance against a mage.

“Learned your lesson?” the woman asked, grinning. She wasn’t holding her wand anymore, but fear of her had imprinted itself on those men in an instant, and they both groaned “Y-yes! We have!” and nodded emphatically.

“I can’t hear you!”

“Yes, ma’am! We’ve learned our lesson, ma’am!”

“Good!”

She waved a hand at them and told them they were free to go, then. The men scrambled up, got onto the horses, and were gone in a flash. Never mind me—or the money.

I stood there on the grassy plain that I had thought I would never see again and heaved a sigh. I was still alive.

“Are you hurt?” the mage asked from beside me. She was so tall. I had to look up at her to shake my head and say, “I’m fine, ma’am.”

She snorted as if this was funny. “You don’t have to ‘ma’am’ me. I’m younger than you are!”

True enough—I had thought when I first saw her that she looked twentysomething.

“You know about me?” I asked.

“The immortal fourteen-year-old? Yeah, I know.”

“I don’t think anyone’s ever said I was immortal.”

“Come on. You always look young and never age. Any injuries immediately heal. We have a word for that—*immortal*.”

I didn’t say anything.

“That’s why so many people are looking for you. People with moderately questionable sexual proclivities, for example, or bandits looking to make a quick buck.”

“And you? Who are you?”

“A witch drawn by an intense curiosity about that body of yours.”

A witch.

When she said that word, it finally clicked. At her neck she wore a brooch shaped like a star—a symbol said to be given only to the most accomplished and powerful of mages.

“I’ve always been a researcher, you see. I’m just fascinated by special and unique people. Including you and your immortality.”

I still returned only silence, so she went on. “Maybe you’d let me do some research on you?” She added that a bit of study might be all it took to unlock the secret of my immortality—but she said it like it was a joke.

That, she told me, was her proposal.

“Are you saying you might be able to crack the secret of what makes me immortal?”

“I’m saying it’s possible.”

I wasn’t sure whether to believe her. Considering I had just been kidnapped, I was feeling a bit muddled. But I did owe her my life.

“What do you say? Want to come with me?” the witch asked—adding that she thought I’d find it at least a little better than being some nobleman’s plaything. She extended a pale hand to me.

She didn’t *look* like someone who was lying and trying to trick me. And anyway, it wasn’t like I had anywhere else to go. I wasn’t even sure how I was going to pay for my meals tomorrow.

I wasn’t sure refusing her was an option for me.

So after a long moment of silence, I took her hand. It was soft and warm. And its owner was smiling happily.

That was when I realized I hadn’t thanked her.

“Thank you for rescuing me, uh—”

Who?

I tilted my head and asked her name.

“Oh! Right! Sorry.” She cleared her throat and then said: “My name is

Cururunelvia.”

The witch of prayer.



She said she was a witch traveling the world. Meeting people, encountering things, and doing her research. That, she told me, was her greatest joy.

“Maybe you’d join me on my journey, Riviere?”

Cururunelvia was eager to keep traveling and meeting new things and people—but she also wanted to study me. Such a busy young lady needed a companion, and her idea was that we should travel the world together.

“I’d love to,” I said. I had no qualms and no doubts. In fact, not only would she get me from country to country for no charge, but she would cover my traveling expenses as well. I could hardly have hoped for a better offer.

So we visited all kinds of different places. It didn’t take that long together to notice that Cururunelvia did sometimes treat me like a child.

“C’mon, Riviere. Say ‘Ahhh,’” she said, trying to put some food in my mouth while we were eating.

I pushed her hand away. “Don’t act like I’m a little kid.”

“Oops! I guess I just tend to treat people the way they look.”

“Which would explain your flippant attitude toward me.”

“Ha-ha-ha! No, that’s just ‘cause I’m not very polite!”

“Never heard someone say that about themselves before...”

Something else I realized after some time together—which, really, had been true since the day we met—was that Cururunelvia was a rather strange person.

For example, in one country...

“Y-you! You there! Are you an elf? Amazing! I’ve never seen one before! Can I touch your ears? They’re so pointy! Let me stroke them! And your hair is beautiful. Can I touch it, too? Please let me touch it!”

We’d just been walking down the street when she suddenly raced off in an

excited fit. She made a beeline for a beautiful woman with golden hair and started touching her head. The vibe she gave off wasn't so much "researcher" as plain old-fashioned "freak."

"E—eeeeeeeeek!" the elf screamed, naturally enough. It didn't take the police long to show up.

"You sicko!"

"Get her!"

And then it didn't take long for them to arrest her.

"But whyyyy?" Cururunelvia wailed as they led her away.

Every time we went somewhere new, she would do some strange thing. Once, for example, we were in the mountains. Cururunelvia had befriended some of the locals and joined them to forage on the mountainside. On the way, she happened to pick a poisonous mushroom. When the locals told her it was dangerous and to throw it away, she replied, "Wow, really? Since I've got one, I should try a bite!"

And then she ate it.

"Grrrfgh!"

After which she collapsed.

Then she spent three days and nights on death's doorstep.

In another country, we met a fox-like beastkin.

"You're adorable. Can I taste your ears?"

"Uh... Why?"



“Nom nom nom!”

“Eeeeeeeek!”

After which she was arrested. Naturally enough.

“But whyyyy?” Cururunelvia wailed as she was led away.

“Why do you always make such a nuisance of yourself?” I asked one day as we were traveling.

Cururunelvia was beside me, grinning as usual. “A nuisance? Am I?” she asked, looking mystified. I guess she wasn’t very aware of it herself.

“You’re going to die one of these days,” I said.

“Hoo-hoo-hoo! Not easily, I’m not. Because I’m studying the immortal girl!”

“Yes? And what are your conclusions?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you don’t seem to have many conclusions.”

“Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo...,” Cururunelvia laughed, a very unsettling sound. She proceeded to choke down some cursed water that was supposed to kill you if you drank even a drop.

“Gggrghhh!”

She ended up sound asleep for three days and three nights.

That was how it usually went for us. The one thing I couldn’t call my life was boring.

In between doing bizarre things, Cururunelvia found time to study me, just like she’d said she wanted to. She examined me from head to toe and gave me a panoply of medicines to try.

“It’s not just injuries, Riviere. It looks like you don’t get sick at all. I sort of thought that might be the case...”

“You did?”

“Yeah. Like, the medicine I just gave you is supposed to turn your entire body green.”

“Is that so?” My hand moved of its own accord.

“O-ow! Please don’t hit me!”

Since we never stayed in one place for long, these examinations always took place at an inn or hotel. Nonetheless, Cururunelvia kept copious records and questioned me intensively about my situation.

“Could you tell me about your background? I mean, if it makes you uncomfortable, don’t worry about it.”

“No, it’s fine. But I don’t come from anywhere special.”

I gave her the quick version of the story of my life before I had joined her on her journey.

“Oh, I see.” She diligently took down everything I told her in a notebook. ““There was a girl named Riviere, a poor child isolated and alone because those around her were creeped out by her...””

“That’s a lot of nonsense,” I said. No one was *creeped out* by me!

“Maybe, but evoking sympathy is a great way to get research grants when you’re doing this kind of work,” Cururunelvia said.

“You’re a stubborn one,” I said with a sigh.

Cururunelvia kept writing. ““Whatever illness befell this young lady, whatever injury she sustained, she always survived. In fact, her preternaturally quick healing abilities allowed her to appear to resurrect herself from the very edge of death...””

“I’ve never been on the edge of death.”

“People expect a certain amount of hyperbole in research.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yep! Trust me.”

She went back to writing. ““When I met her, this young woman was just turning forty. But she had the appearance of someone in her midtwenties...””

“Is that how I look? Like I’m in my midtwenties?”

“You can do a certain amount of massaging the truth and even a bit of outright lying in research.”

She seemed to be doing this research by the seat of her pants. Yet somehow, strangely, being with her gave me the sense that one day we really would solve the mystery of my body. Even I wasn’t sure why I felt that way. Maybe her devil-may-care approach to life was rubbing off on me.

“All right, Riviere. Just take a sip of this medicine.”

“What does this one do?”

“Drink first.”

There was a long pause, but finally she made me drink it. Then she said, “It’ll make your whole body glow like a lamp!”

At that moment, Cururunelvia’s body, in fact, lit up.

“Gosh, that’s bright,” I said, squinting. I wasn’t thrilled. But I also wasn’t sure if the way my eyes were narrowing was because of the brightness—or if I was smiling because I was having so much fun.

One day we were at a hotel when Cururunelvia asked me, “Say, Riviere, can you use magic?”

“Uh, no.”

“What, really? Come on, try it. I’ll even lend you my wand.” She tossed her wand to me. It was old but lovely. The wand that had saved me.

After a moment’s hesitation, I went “Yah!” and waved it.

She didn’t say anything.

I didn’t say anything.

Nothing happened—were we surprised?—and silence came over the hotel again as my shout faded away.

“No good, huh? I see...” Usually, Cururunelvia just kept grinning even when

things didn't go the way she hoped, but this time, and this time only, she looked disappointed. At the time, I didn't know why. I just assumed she wanted me to be able to use magic.

It had been just about a year since we'd met.

"I've learned a lot about you and your body, Riviere," Cururunelvia said. We were in a certain country, chatting in the hotel as we so often did while she examined me. But this statement came out of nowhere. "Strictly speaking, I don't think you *are* immortal."

Wait...I wasn't?

I gave her a dubious look, not really following. "What do you mean?"

Cururunelvia flipped through the papers from all her examinations of me and said very simply, "You *are* aging, a minuscule bit at a time. It's just extremely slow, owing to your body's particular qualities."

"Particular qualities?"

"Uh-huh."

She told me that she thought my extraordinarily quick healing, my resistance to illness, and the fact that I had stopped growing at fourteen were all because of the nature of my body. Me, I could hardly tell what she meant.

Finally, Cururunelvia pointed at me and said, "Your body consumes magic."

That was the truth of what had transformed me into a nearly immortal being.



Magic-Consuming Physiology: That was what Cururunelvia dubbed this heretofore unknown condition. The defining trait of this physiology? Well, it was right in the name.

"First, a premise: Mages use magic by consuming the magical power in their bodies. The natural world is rich with magical power; trees in particular produce a lot of it. That's why you can use slightly more powerful spells in a dense forest—there's so much magical energy around."

Suddenly, I found myself getting a lecture on magic. I wasn't so sure about

this, but I decided to listen quietly; Cururunelvia didn't seem to notice and just kept talking.

"The purposes to which mages put magic are myriad. Attack and defense, medicine, and more. It would be fair to say there's almost nothing that magic can't do."

"Can it heal injuries quickly?" I asked.

"It's not impossible!" She nodded eagerly. "And I think that's what your body is doing, Riviere—all on its own!"

That, she said, was why she called it Magic-Consuming Physiology. According to Cururunelvia, my body was autonomously absorbing magical energy and using it to heal my injuries, cure my illnesses, and even prevent me from growing and maturing. That was why I *appeared* to be immortal.

"I thought that maybe if you could use magic—if you could actively consume it of your own volition—that you might be able to speed up your body's growth as well," she said. But unfortunately, using magic turned out to be something I couldn't do, which meant I wouldn't be able to suppress my body's automatic use of magic to heal me.

"So you're saying there's really no way to undo my immortality?"

She was silent for a long moment.

"Cururunelvia?"

Was there no means by which I might age like, and with, those around me? How long would my life go on? Would it ever end? My questions were tinged with a desperation born of anxious rumination.

Finally, Cururunelvia looked at me. And she said...

"Could I tell you about a dream I have?"

"A dream?"

Wait, what? I was brought up short by the sudden change of topic.

"You see, I want to found a country." Cururunelvia always looked so frivolous, like everything she said was a joke—but at that moment, she was quieter and

calmer than I had ever seen her. “I want to found a country where people can live in peace. People who have made bad choices, people who have been persecuted. Even people who move along an entirely different ‘timeline’ from those around them. A country where people of every status and tribe can greet each other with a smile.”

She went on, “I don’t think magic would be necessary in the country I want to establish, so for a long time now I’ve been working on this device. It forcibly absorbs magic and uses it for people’s benefit. It’s still a work in progress, though.”

I caught my breath and looked up at her. If that was true...

“I still don’t understand it, but your body already seems to have a device like that. I could almost say you yourself *are* the country I envisioned. That’s why I want to investigate you. To study you in every detail.”

And if...if Cururunelvia’s research were to bear fruit...

“I think I might be able to bring your lifespan close to that of a normal human, Riviere.”

Then she asked me a question.

“So...won’t you come with me?”

Our eyes met, and I nodded. “Of course I will.”

I doubted whether refusing was really a choice.

Cururunelvia appeared to have been laying plans to found this country of hers since long before she had met me. Not long after that conversation, she visited a small island with me in tow.

This was a place where cherry blossoms bloomed in the spring, verdant greenery was rife in summer, vivid maple leaves populated the trees in fall, and snow fell in winter. Something different to enjoy in every season. That, Cururunelvia said, was because she’d acquired various beautiful things in her travels and had brought them all here.

We were welcomed by an apprentice of hers at the port. “We’ve been waiting for you, Mistress,” she said. *We* seemed to include quite a crowd, all standing there with the apprentice. Beastkin, elves, mages, and mundane folk. There was no one thing they had in common, not their social station or their tribe. While Cururunelvia was busy visiting every country she could find, doing her research, they had been busy developing the island. There were already houses and farm fields, everything people would need to live there.

“If you were curious, this country is called Cururunelvia, the land of prayer,” she said, pointing at her country-in-progress and grinning.

“You named it after yourself?”

“That’s what all the cool kids do,” she replied.

She definitely did things by the seat of her pants.



It took another five years before the mechanism that made the country work was complete. Once we got to the island, Cururunelvia started studying my Magic-Consuming Physiology in earnest, and she told me it helped speed up the completion of her device.

“When I embedded a device just like your body into the island, everything went great—just like I expected! And now, well, here we are!”

We were in the cathedral at the center of the island. Cururunelvia stood there looking very proud. In the exact same pose, in fact, as the Cururunelvia statue behind her.

“As long as this is here, no one will be able to use magic in this land,” she said.

Magical power would normally move into people’s bodies, but this device absorbed it instead, before allowing it to be used for other purposes. The Cururunelvia statue was the basis of the entire thing.

It was great that it was finished and all, but...

“You made it a statue of yourself?” I said.

“Cause it looks really cool! Doesn’t it?”

“Seat-of-the-pants, as usual...” I gave a shrug.

I still looked fourteen, just like I always had, but if Cururunelvia’s theory was right, then starting today, I would be able to age normally. Notwithstanding my look of slight irritation with her, I gave a sigh of relief.

“By the way, there’s been a lot of debate about how we should use the magic that the statue absorbs. My student is still really opposed to this, but...well, would you take a look, Riviere?”

As she spoke, Cururunelvia took the pointy hat off her head. It was the one she always wore.

“What about it?” I asked.

“This is how we’re going to use the magic.”

I looked at it, puzzled. What did this have to do with using the magic the statue absorbed? It looked like an ordinary hat to me.

“Hoo-hoo-hoo... Will you still think that when I show you *this*?” Looking extremely pleased with herself, Cururunelvia took the hat and put it on her head.

And then she vanished.

“Huh?”

I looked around, but I didn’t see her anywhere. In the whole towering cathedral, it was just me and the statue. Where had she gone?

“Hoo-hoo-hoo! Is that awesome or what?”

I still didn’t know where she was, but I could practically sense her puffing out her chest.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“Right here.” The voice came from behind me. When had she moved? I turned around to find her grinning at me. The hat was in her hand again.

“These objects have a power similar to magic, but not the same. I call them sancta,” she informed me, obviously trying to look extra cool while she said it.

Sancta. The word referred to items that possessed a power akin to magic.

They were created sometimes, just every once in a while, when someone prayed at the great cathedral that stood at the center of Cururunelvia, the land of prayer.

The hat, Cururunelvia informed me, had been made when she had offered a prayer herself, wishing that she could turn invisible.

“This way, anybody can use a magic-like power. Anyone has the potential to find a solution to some difficult situation.”

What did I think of that? she asked me.

Sancta, in other words, were the perfect way of bridging the differences in physical capacity between different groups of people. A fitting solution for her ideally equitable country.

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” I said, looking back at her and nodding. I knew she was telling the truth with what she said. If I had any doubts, it was that useful tools always came with a cost.

“I think it would be even better if there was some way to undo the prayers,” I said.

“You think so, too, huh?”

“Great power always comes at a price. Someone might even try to destroy this country by turning some awful wish into a sancta.”

“My student said the same thing. She thinks only mages should be able to use the power of magic.”

“I’m just worried about people being led astray by the temptations of power.”

“I think you’re both pessimists. I don’t believe people are really that foolish.”

“And I believe you’re being naive.”

“Heard that one already, too.”

“And what did you say to it?”

“I didn’t know what to say! That’s why I came to you.”

“Well, now I’ve heard your story, but my opinion hasn’t changed.”

“You still think we need some way to make it like the prayers never happened?”

“Is that technologically possible?”

“The sancta are engineered so that the magical energy bestowed upon them can’t be stripped back out. If the Cururunelvia statue reabsorbed the magic from a sancta as soon as it was created, what would be the point?”

“I’m looking for an actual answer.”

“Practically, it is not possible.”

“I see...”

Meaning that if a sancta were created for a foul purpose, the only way to deal with it would be to physically destroy it.

I took the pointy hat from Cururunelvia and sighed. “Even this thing isn’t really safe. There are so many ways a person could misuse it. Maybe you should have the statue check certain prohibitions when people pray to it.”

I put the hat on my head, thinking I would teach Cururunelvia a lesson by turning invisible and maybe taking her wallet or something. Then she might understand the potential danger of these objects.

My plan turned out to be for naught.

“Huh?” Cururunelvia looked at me, puzzled.

This was the same hat she had used just moments before, so when I put it on my head, I should have winked out of sight. Yet for some reason, she was still looking straight at me.

“What’s happening?” she asked, confused. She reached out—and touched the pointy hat on my head. She could see me.

“It looks like the sancta’s effect is gone.”

Why, though?

Cururunelvia peered at me, mystified.

“Your body is awfully greedy, Riviere.”

Only later did we understand what was going on. The device behind the statue of “Cururunelvia of Prayer” was modeled after the illness that was consuming my body. In other words, the statue and I were two of a kind. We both absorbed magic as a matter of course.

“I designed this country’s magic-absorption device to be even more powerful than your physiology, Riviere, but it looks like if you come into corporeal contact with a sancta, you can temporarily overwhelm that power.” Cururunelvia shrugged as if to say she gave up. In simple terms, if I physically touched a sancta, I would absorb the magical power within it.

Or, put another way...

“I could get rid of any sancta created by wrongheaded wishes!”

This just happened to be the solution to the problem we had been facing with the sancta. As long as I was around, the system could work smoothly.

“I’m glad I could start by granting your wish, Cururunelvia,” I said. I owed her so much; nothing made me happier than being able to be of help to her.

I felt a wave of relief—but Cururunelvia’s expression remained dark. “I think I would prefer if you *didn’t* touch the sancta, if possible,” she said.

“I guess I can see why you wouldn’t like me to vitiate the fruits of people’s prayers.”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is?”

“When you touch a sancta, you *absorb* that magical power, Riviere.”

I was quiet for a long moment. We had finally succeeded in halting my body’s automatic absorption of magical energy. She was saying that if I touched a sancta, it would restart. Here on this island, where that consumption of magical energy had been forcibly stopped, there was no telling what might ensue if I were to absorb a sancta’s magic.

“As long as you go around erasing people’s prayers, you might find you’re never able to die. Ever.”

So, she pleaded, she wished I wouldn't do it.

"I guess I'll have to reconsider," I said.

Maybe Cururunelvia was right, and nobody would make a wayward wish. Then I would be able to age normally and live out a basically normal lifespan. All I could do was pray—pray that this might indeed be, and continue as, a country where people could smile together, regardless of status or race.

"I'll keep looking," Cururunelvia said. "Just to see if maybe there's something else I can do. So you don't have to keep struggling."

If things remained peaceful, well, that would be ideal—but the more ways you had to maintain peace, the better, she said.

"You sure need a lot of looking after, don't you, Riviere?" Cururunelvia said, and then she smiled at me—she was still smiling at me after all these years.

And all those years, she'd had the same habit of hiding the important things.

After the country's founding, I was always at Cururunelvia's side. She acted as a leader holding the reins of the nation, and I supported her as her aide.

I first noticed the abnormality after about a year, when people had really started to make serious use of the statue in the great cathedral.

One day, her student came into my office and asked, "Where is my mistress?" The young woman looked at me with brow furrowed. She must have thought it strange that I was sitting there working instead of Cururunelvia.

"You mean Cururunelvia? She's off today," I replied.

"Oh." The student nodded, disappointed, and left the room.

After that, Cururunelvia started taking off work with some regularity. At first I thought she just had a cold. "Feeling better?" I asked when she returned, and she just smiled and said, "Yeah, doing fine!"

It was months before I realized that this was no ordinary illness.

I knocked on the door to her office, wanting to ask about some work. "Cururunelvia, do you have a moment?"

Normally, I would have expected her to call back, "Sure, c'mon in!" But that

day there was no response.

I suddenly felt very strange. My heart started racing. I flung the door open and was shocked by what I saw.

“Cururunelvia!” I cried. She had collapsed face down on her desk in a pile of papers.

This wasn’t just some illness. Blood dribbled from the corner of her mouth, spreading across the desk.

This wasn’t a new problem, something that had just started—whatever it was, it had been eating away at her body for a long time now.

We took Cururunelvia to the hospital, and when she finally came around, she told me herself: “They say that at this rate, I’ve got about a year left.”

She apologized for not saying anything, but she said it with that same lighthearted smile.

Finally, she told me that she had one more wish she had never spoken of, one other reason for traveling the world alone and for bringing me into her fold and studying my physiology. Another reason besides the desire to create a country of peace.

She continued facing the illness that was devastating her even as she was always smiling at us.

“I told you, right? Sometimes you tell a little white lie when you’re researching.”



After that first collapse, Cururunelvia rapidly got weaker. She spent more and more of her days in bed. And me, I kept trying to think of ways to save her.

I suggested that maybe my body, nigh immortal and able to cure any injury or illness, might hold some way to treat her, but she shook her head. “I don’t think it works that way,” she said.

Realistically, any panicked solutions we might have offered after we learned about the situation, someone as wise as Cururunelvia would certainly have

already thought of. She told me that when we had been traveling, the disease had already been at work in her body, and that by the time she'd met me, she'd been practically assured that she would be dead within a few years.

I, Cururunelvia's student, and all the people of the country wished fervently for her not to go, trying to come up with ways to extend her life—but she only smiled calmly.

Some people suggested that she should leave this land and go somewhere she could heal herself with magic, but she rejected that idea, too. I could see in her eyes that she knew it was much too late. She looked like a person resigned—and ready—to face the end.

The days went inordinately quickly after that.

"Mistress...please don't leave us!" Her student wept by her bedside.

"Ha-ha-ha! Don't you worry, I'm not going anywhere yet!" Cururunelvia laughed and patted the young woman's head—but her arms were thinner than they used to be.

Some made it their business to pretend that everything was as it had always been. They would bring work to the bed and say, "Mistress Cururunelvia, could I get your opinion on these papers?"

"Yep, all looks pretty good, I think," she would say with a nod. She often looked just a little more energized at work than at other times.

Even my relationship with her was more or less unchanged. "Hey, Riviere? Fill out these papers for me," she said. She still had an office; it was just that now, it was her sickroom. Otherwise, I continued to work by her side just as I always had.

"At least do your own paperwork," I joked, even as I took the papers from her. While I worked quietly on them, she busied herself with something else.

So the days went by. Spring came and went.

"Come to think of it, have you decided who your successor will be?" I asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Let me guess. Your student?"

“Good guess.”

“You think she can do the work?”

“She’ll be fine. She’s not the most approachable person in the world, but she’s a good kid.”

The leaves bobbing outside had turned green. Cururunelvia had told me how sorry she was that the cherry blossoms had to fall—so I left her a branch. A sancta I had named the Eternal Cherry Blossom. The flowers remained in bloom all through spring and even in summer.

“That’s beautiful,” Cururunelvia said.

“Isn’t it? I prayed that, unlike us, this branch at least might remain in spring, time never passing.”

“Speaking of which...Riviere, have you gotten a little taller?”

“Hoo-hoo-hoo, you noticed? Seems I’m going through a growth spurt.”

“I’m glad you’ve got a future ahead of you.”

“That’s not funny.”

“But I know you, Riviere, can at least give me a wry smile for it.”

Summer gave way to autumn, and although a clinging heat remained, you could feel a chill in the air. I would open the window, then shut it later, just like I did every day. We were always together.

“Could I tell you about my dream?” Cururunelvia asked.

“You already did, once.”

“I mean the rest.”

“Sure. What is it?”

Cururunelvia was quiet for a moment.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m trying to remember how it went... I think I forgot.”

We could see snow piling up outside the window, which was shut tight. Cururunelvia gazed out at the white scenery, but she didn’t seem interested in

it. I took her hand, and she knitted her brow and said, "Why, that's a full-grown adult's hand now." She laughed.

In truth, it was simply that she had wasted away enough for it to seem large to her. But I smiled back and said, "I'm having a growth spurt."

"It's a bit chilly, isn't it?" I said.

"Yeah."

"Maybe I should go get you another blanket."

"No, don't."

"But aren't you cold?"

"Stay here. Please."

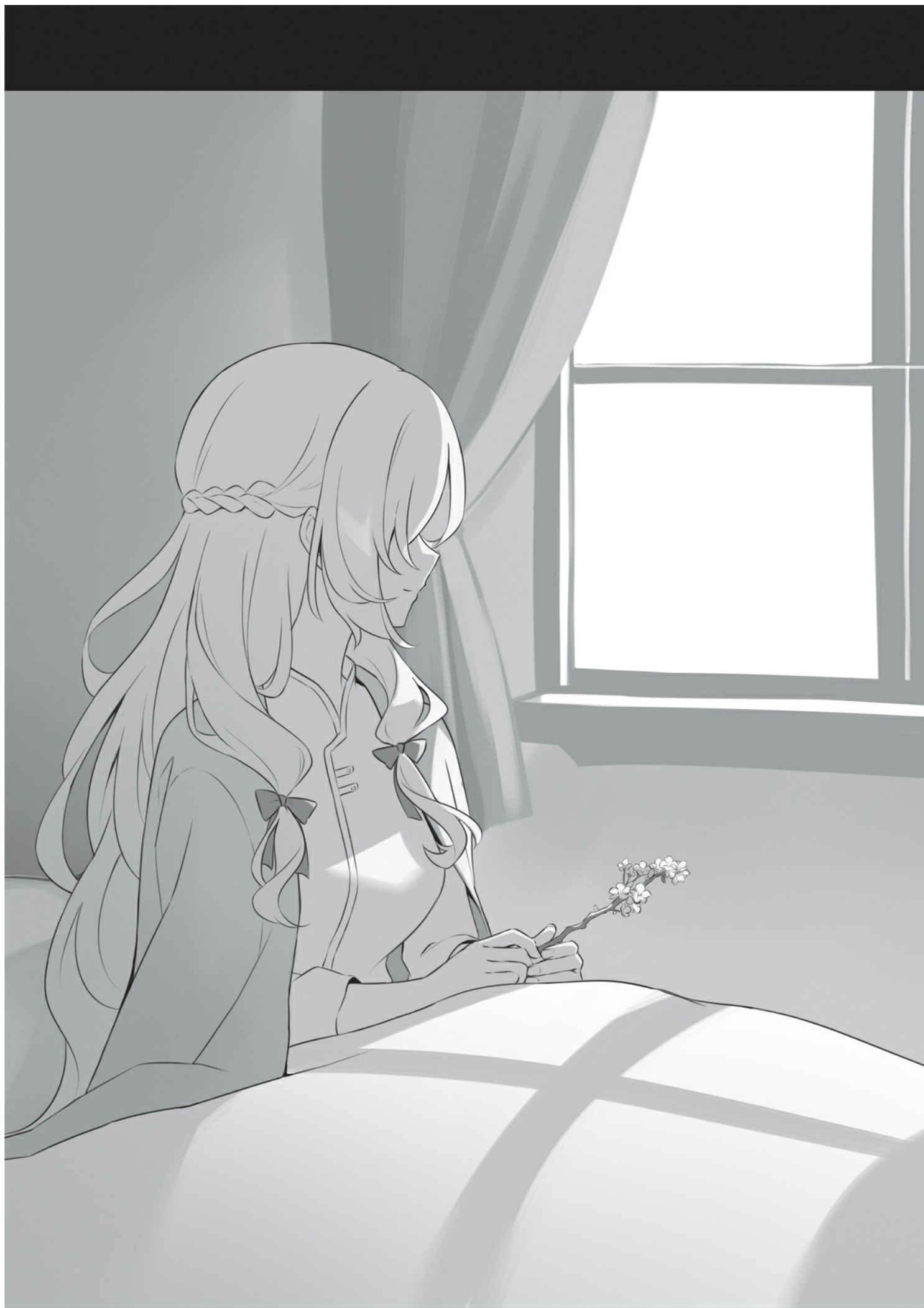
"Yes... All right."

The snow-whitened town gradually regained its colors, and people's interrupted work could begin again. I could open the window to let the rich sunlight and the aroma of flowers into Cururunelvia's sickroom. We heard birds twittering, celebrating the arrival of a new season.

Spring had come.

"Look, Cururunelvia. The cherry blossoms have bloomed again."

She didn't say anything.



“Cururunelvia?”

A couple of small pink petals danced through the open window.

Cururunelvia didn't wake up again.



We took Cururunelvia's coffin to the island's graveyard. A huge crowd had gathered to say their final farewells, and there were many tears. Sniffing and weeping could be heard from every quarter. A few people, unable to contain themselves, fell to their knees.

Only two people there weren't crying: me, and Cururunelvia's student.

“Riviere,” the student said as she stood and stared at the coffin. “Did the mistress have any last words for me?”

Once Cururunelvia was bedridden, her student had taken on the bulk of her actual work and had had very little time to spend with her teacher.

I nodded. “There was one thing she wanted me to tell you.”

“What?”

“That it's in your hands now.”

After a pause, the young woman said, “I see.”

We didn't cry, nor would we. Not because we weren't sad. Not because it didn't hurt. But because *she* had entrusted us with what came after.

“And did she say anything to you?” the other woman asked me.

“She did.”

“What was it?”

Instead of answering, I silently closed my eyes. I felt as if, by doing that, I could meet her anytime I wanted. The days I spent with Cururunelvia lived again in my imagination.

“I remembered,” the Cururunelvia in my memory said softly. It had been one day when she was watching the seasons go by from the window of her sickroom; summer had passed, and the colors outside were fading.

I cocked my head. “Remembered what?”

“The rest of my dream.”

“Tell me about it.” I leaned forward ever so slightly.

Her expression grew softer as she spoke. “You see, I’ve always had this wish. I wanted to found a country where people could live in peace. People who have made bad choices, people who have been persecuted. Even people who move along an entirely different ‘timeline’ from those around them. A country where people of every status and tribe could greet each other with a smile.”

“Yes, you told me.”

And she had achieved it. Cururunelvia, the land of prayer, where we now stood, was the realization of her dream.

“But one thing I never pictured there was myself. I can’t oversee this country’s development or support its people.” She had been suffering with her illness for far too long.

“That’s why you created the sancta, right?”

“That’s right.”

The ability to make wishes and have them granted was proof that Cururunelvia had lived; it was precisely what made this country unique. You could even argue that these objects would oversee the country’s development and support its people on her behalf. It might not be an exaggeration to say that the sancta were Cururunelvia herself.

“Riviere...,” she said.

“What is it?” I asked.

“When I’m gone, would you watch over the sancta for me?”

“What does that even mean, ‘watch over’?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.” She turned and gazed at the scenery outside the

window. “Keep watch over them so that people can maintain an appropriate distance from the sancta.”

“I still don’t follow.”

“As time passes, there may be people who forget the proper way to use sancta. There may be people who suffer alone, without turning to what could help them. There might even be people who use sancta for nefarious ends. I want you to show people the right way to use sancta, so that the world doesn’t become like that.”

She told me that the “appropriate distance” from sancta was not purely to use them for their advantages, but to let them bring people closer to their own lives.

“Maybe I should open a shop that deals in sancta, then.”

“That’s a great idea!” Cururunelvia nodded eagerly.

A shop that specialized in sancta could even help increase the chances that someone might find something to grant their wish without praying themselves. The more ways there were to take the edge off inequality, the more people might be saved.

Plus, if I went into the business of recovering sancta, I could also help apprehend those who sought to work evil with them.

“Maybe I could wish...to entrust you with this country’s future,” Cururunelvia said.

I paused for a long moment, but really, there was only one thing I could say. I could never deny Cururunelvia’s wish.

“Of course,” I said, and I took her hand. Her soft, warm hand.

Its owner gave me a joyful grin.

“It seems she gave both of us burdensome tasks,” Cururunelvia’s student said with a wry but concerned smile.

To her, Cururunelvia had entrusted the running of the country. And to me,

she had given the duty to watch over its future. To each of us our respective roles. It was an honor—and at the same time, a terrible weight that I could feel pressing down on me at every moment.

This duty hardly left me a moment to weep.

“Are you all right?” I asked. Even more than myself, I was worried about her, the one tasked with the business of running the country. That’s what led me to suggest, “I would be happy to be your assistant if you’d like. I was helping Cururunelvia, too, and I’m sure I could be useful.”

She, however, shook her head. “Thank you, but no. I can handle it on my own.” She looked straight at me. “You just make sure to fulfill your role to the best of your ability, Riviere. I’m sure that’s what my mistress would have wanted.”

I was quiet. In her words I felt not concern for my well-being but an attempt to distance herself. To me, her dark eyes seemed to convey that she sought no one to help her, wanted nobody at her side.

If she said she was all right on her own, then I wasn’t going to push the matter.

“If you need help, please call me anytime,” I said.

“Thank you very much.” With that studied reply, she turned and walked away. I watched her grow smaller in the distance until she disappeared.

After that, Cururunelvia’s student officially led our country as its second queen. She dressed all in black, as if she were in mourning; her eyes were black, and she tied her black hair with a blue ribbon like the one Cururunelvia had worn.

This woman, black almost from head to toe, was named Carredura.

A name she shared with the person whose shop sold so many sancta of such malice.



Night

"Thank you so much for helping me..."

The seasons were changing, and night was coming earlier now. A man stood in the door of the antiques shop, bowing to me, Riviere, and Elaina; behind him, I could already see the stars twinkling in the sky.

"Try to be more careful from here on out," Riviere said, waving at the man with a pale hand and giving him a disinterested look. Instead of nodding, he bowed again, and then he turned and disappeared into the darkness.

The shop was quiet except for the jingle of the bell as the door closed behind him. The moment there were no customers left, the thread of tension that had been holding us up was cut, and Riviere heaved the deepest of sighs.

"I'm so tired..." She sat down on the sofa and stared up at the ceiling. She always seemed especially spent after disenchanting something. As she pulled her glove back on, she said, "Would you get me some tea?"

"Gladly!" I said, and I hurried to make the dark tea, as a little way of thanking her for her effort.

As I got the drink, Elaina asked, "Would you like to close the shop early today?" I'm sure she saw how tired Riviere looked, too.

"Not a bad idea," Riviere said, adding as she peered out the window that it was already fully dark out.

“And to think, it was just twilight when that guy came in,” I said. It was autumn, all right. I set three teacups on the table.

The man, Julio, had walked in our door almost exactly an hour before.

“Excuse me... Do you have...do you have any sancta that might help me?” he had finally asked me after wandering in a daze among the shelves. He was obviously pretty out of it. I wasn’t sure what to say—that was a fairly vague request.

His pallor was poor, and I decided to start by having him sit down and tell me what was going on. What had brought him in today? Was something the matter? I peppered him with questions like a doctor evaluating a patient.

“Urgh...”

Julio presented with terrible fatigue, and eventually he opened up to me about what was going on. He’d been fired from job after job, he said. He worked as hard as he could, yet no one appreciated what he did. Until just the other day, he’d been using a sancta to help his work go better, but the antiques shop where he’d been getting them was out of stock. At a loss for what to do, he’d decided to try our place.

“Do you have any...Look-Again Cigarettes here?” he asked. Or some kind of substitute sancta for them? He was desperate for something, anything that would help him.

Riviere put a hand on Julio’s shoulder. “You’re under a curse,” she said, looking at him with sharp, perceptive eyes. “What really draws people’s attention to the Look-Again Cigarettes is the smell of the tobacco. It affects the user just as much as everyone else, until they become obsessed with the cigarettes.”

The more you used them, the harder it was to stop thinking about them. That, she said, was the nature of this sancta.

She had obviously detected the veritable miasma of cursedness that clung to Julio the moment he entered the store. She interrogated him about the situation even more thoroughly than I had.

“Who sold you this sancta?” she asked.

“It was Antiques Carredura,” he said—a name we knew very well. She sold sancta in order to make people unhappy. She would appear seemingly from nowhere and vanish before you knew it—she was this country’s nightmare.

“Oh, I see.” Riviere nodded at the name, understanding—and took off her glove.

Job done, she took a sip of her tea. “Ah, delicious.” She let out another sigh, and I could hear in it how tired she was.

Elaina was right; today would be a good day to close early. I zipped over to the door and flipped the sign to the CLOSED side. That would protect us from any more customers showing up, at least as long as nothing *really* out of the ordinary happened.

No sooner had I had the thought than the bell jingled again and the door opened.

“Is Miss Riviere here?” asked the newcomer. I recognized him and his black uniform—he was a policeman.

“Ah, Henri.” When she saw him, Riviere’s expression darkened. Henri specialized in cases involving sancta, and when he came knocking at our door, there was usually only one reason. “Has *she* appeared again?” Riviere asked.

“I’m afraid so.” Henri made a beeline for where Riviere was resting on the sofa and placed something in front of her. “This is the sancta that was used in the incident.”

It was a preserved butterfly specimen.

“What’s that?” Elaina asked, looking a bit grossed out.

Atop its board, the butterfly’s wings drifted slowly up and down. It was pinned in place, already dead, and yet the butterfly didn’t seem to realize that. It wanted to fly away again.

“This sancta was found in the possession of a man we arrested today for stalking a young actress.” Then, loudly enough that we could all hear, Henri said, “What is this sancta, and what does it do?”

Riviere gave him a puzzled look as she replied, “Didn’t the man tell you?”

“We asked, but there’s always a possibility he was lying.”

“I see. Yes.” She let out a breath, then nodded and looked down at the insect. “This is called the Memory-Guiding Specimen. You think of someone you want to meet and pull out the pin, and the butterfly will guide you to them. Perfect for when somebody is lost.”

“All right,” Henri replied, apparently satisfied that the man had been telling the truth. He nodded, glad.

I wondered where this sancta had come from, though. It didn’t seem like the healthiest thing to have around.

“Where did he *buy* this?” Riviere asked, even though she probably knew the answer.

“From a woman dressed in mourning clothes, he said.”

Riviere looked at Henri, expressionless, and nodded. Maybe she even seemed a bit frustrated.

That was not a person we wanted to hear about twice in one day.

“Do you think we could use this sancta to track *her*?” Henri asked. So he’d come here to do more than just report to us. Pointing to the butterfly, he said, “We’ve been unable to track down Carredura, but wouldn’t this sancta lead us right to her?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Riviere said, shaking her head. “This specimen isn’t capable of that.”

“It isn’t? But why not?”

Hadn’t Riviere just said that it could go to anyone you were thinking of? Henri looked very confused.

Riviere said simply, “Because that woman is not an ordinary person.”

That explanation sounded vague—but it certainly made everyone in the room fall silent.

When I thought about it, it actually explained a lot. She wasn’t an ordinary

person, which was why she could make other people unhappy so easily. It was why she had gone all these years able to evade both Riviere and the police.

“Who or...*what* is Carredura?” I asked before I knew what I was saying.

I’d met so many people who had been in crisis because of her. Like Julio, the guy who had just left our shop, and Freja. She toyed with people’s hearts, and she was hiding somewhere in town at this very moment. I hated the thought.

Surely, Riviere must know something about her.

There was an extended, heavy silence, and then Riviere heaved her umpteenth sigh of the night. “I could tell you...but it’s a very long story.”

“I don’t mind. Please tell us.”

She was quiet for another moment, but then she nodded. “All right. Let’s take a little trip down memory lane.”

Then she began to relate the tale of Antiques Carredura, and how she came to be a most unordinary person.



Prayer and Curse

“You just make sure to fulfill your role to the best of your ability, Riviere. I’m sure that’s what my mistress would have wanted.”

I’ll be fine on my own.

She ran a hand through her hair as if she might convince herself of her own statement. The blue ribbon that held her hair back was the proof that she was able to stand on her own two feet; Cururunelvia had given it to her on the day she had become a full mage.

And who was Riviere? Just some woman Cururunelvia had dragged along. An ordinary woman. *She* hadn’t received Cururunelvia’s personal instruction. *She* hadn’t grown under Cururunelvia’s guiding hand.

The great witch of prayer had only one student, and it was Carredura.

“If you need help, please call me anytime,” Riviere said.

“Thank you very much.”

With that studied reply, Carredura left the funeral venue behind.

Ask her for help! Inconceivable.

There’s nothing I would ever want or need to ask you for, she thought. Carredura had her pride as the witch’s student. If it weren’t for those sancta, she could be exercising her magical powers even now. If it weren’t for Riviere,

the sancta would never have been completed.

So it was that Carredura hated two things: the sancta, and Riviere.

After Carredura had been promoted from student to second ruler of the country, her life became an ongoing series of tribulations.

At first, she stayed cooped up in her office, working constantly. The citizens began to complain: *Our new ruler is so cold*. What was that supposed to mean? As it turned out, Cururunelvia had taken almost daily walks into town to connect with the people.

Her student Carredura hadn't even known.

"Well, if that's how the game is played..."

If that was what people wanted from their queen, then Carredura would oblige. She went into town as the people desired.

One day, the owner of a restaurant she had gone to approached her, pleading. "Please, milady, might I ask for your advice?"

The owner said that a beastkin had built a house beside his restaurant, but this newcomer was apparently of a nocturnal disposition and had complained that the noise from the restaurant during the day was a disturbance. Could she do something about it? He was indirectly asking her to speak to this beastkin herself.

Carredura had only been waiting for her food to arrive, and she was openly confused. "That's not really the ruler's job...", she said. So she declined. If she got personally involved in every quarrel among the citizens, there would be no end to it. If she agreed to this request, soon people would be knocking on her office door whenever they had the slightest grievance. It was important, she decided, not to set a precedent for this sort of thing.

"What? It's not?" The owner seemed genuinely surprised. He grumbled, "The last queen always helped with things like this," and then he left Carredura alone.

It seemed to take a very long time to get her food.

Was she wrong about this? No, she kept telling herself as she ate her tepid meal.

She learned later that in fact the previous ruler had indeed listened attentively to the citizens' problems and endeavored to resolve them. Hence why people seemed to approach her every time she walked through town.

"My queen! The crops in my field suddenly withered. Do you think you could help me figure out what's going on?"

"My wife and I haven't been getting along lately..."

"I tried to tackle a new project, but it's not going well at all!"

Maybe the first queen really had lent an ear to each and every woe of the common people, but Carredura simply couldn't manage it. She was beginning to think she was just built differently from Cururunelvia.

Instead, she turned down all these requests. "That's not the ruler's job," she would say.

This was never what the people were expecting, never what they were hoping to hear.

"The last ruler would've done it," someone whispered.

"Our second queen is so cold," came another murmur.

They all wanted help, all felt like they were standing in front of walls they couldn't climb.

Carredura and her mistress had each become a mage after expending blood, sweat, and tears, yet she began to think there was something fundamentally different between the two of them. Each time the thought entered her mind, she knew in her heart that she couldn't live the way the kind, gentle Cururunelvia had.

The people of this town her teacher had loved began to look foul and ugly to Carredura.

Finally, she returned to the way things had been when she first became queen, staying shut up in her office. If she never saw the people, then they couldn't dampen her mood.

Already, the only reason Carredura continued as ruler of this nation was out of a determination to see through the duty her mentor had given her.

One day not long after she had retreated to the sanctuary of her office, Carredura was reading the newspaper as she did every day, when she spat, "Such foolishness!"

The front-page story was about a crime involving sancta.

There had been an ongoing dispute between a nocturnal beastkin and a man who operated a restaurant during the day. Unable to take it any longer, the restaurant owner had gone to the cathedral and prayed, "Let my noisy neighbor shut up!" That was how it had started. The cathedral had granted his wish and given power to one of his possessions.

Sometime later, the man was getting ready to open his shop when his beastkin neighbor came in yelling. The owner, in his chef whites, was trying to work, so he shooed the beastkin away like he always did, giving him a shove to get him going. But to his shock, the moment he touched his neighbor, the beastkin was seized with agony and collapsed on the spot. People started to gather around the strange scene. The beastkin began to have trouble breathing and died shortly thereafter.

An investigation revealed that the owner's chef whites had become a sancta. The effect? Touch a noisy neighbor, and they'll be shut up.

And just so, the beastkin had been silenced forever.

A sancta had killed somebody.

Carredura saw it all too clearly: She had been right. Sancta were too powerful for the people as they were now.

People didn't know how to pray, because they didn't know how to use power. Because they didn't know how to pray, problems arose with the sancta their prayers created.

Eventually, Carredura announced limits on sancta. A very small portion of the population, mostly those who had once been mages themselves, supported her policy. They were derided as rebels, plotting with Carredura to take over the government. Most people regarded the limits as a repudiation of the project that Cururunelvia had poured her heart and soul into.

Voices of dissent got louder. People flocked to the cathedral and prayed that the second ruler might be deposed. Thankfully, no sancta that might have harmed Carredura were produced, but day by day the people grew more vociferous in their disagreement.

It drove Carredura to spend more time in her quiet office—which drove more people to the cathedral, until finally Carredura restricted entrance to the building, just as she had said she would. Still no sancta appeared that might harm her.

However, a certain nuisance, an eyesore, came knocking on her office door instead. It was Riviere, saying, “Limiting access to the cathedral goes against Cururunelvia’s wishes!”

Riviere, the woman who had usurped Carredura’s place at Cururunelvia’s side. She’d grown—a little—since Carredura had seen her last. She comported herself with a dignity befitting her appearance, which was now that of a woman in her early twenties, and she tried to reason with Carredura.

“She created sancta as a way to eliminate inequality among the people of this land. If you place limits on them, then the gaps between groups of people here will never go away!”

“Sancta are far too potent for the townsfolk to handle. The restrictions will remain until the citizens become people worthy of such power.”

“If the restrictions are never lifted, then the inequality will continue forever!”

“And if they *are* lifted, it will only result in overweening power being wielded by all and sundry.”

“Gee, feeling a bit pessimistic?”

“I’m simply looking squarely at reality—unlike our overconfident populace.”

Neither of them was willing to give an inch.

“Cururunelvia trusted the people of this land—that’s why she gave them sancta!” Riviere said.

“That may be so, but I’m still not about to lift those restrictions,” Carredura replied.

Riviere sighed. They were talking past each other. Her shoulders slumped, and she knitted her brow. “I’m disappointed. She had faith that you would carry on her will and guide the people in the right direction.”

“I am guiding them. The people are simply stupider than my mistress thought.”

That was the end of their conversation. Riviere spared one final glance at Carredura and then left the office behind. The room fell silent but for the scratching of Carredura’s pen. She would do her duty. See through the mission with which her mistress had entrusted her.

She had despised sancta since the day this country had been founded. And she had begun to despise the people of this land since the day of her accession.

In spite of it all, Carredura endeavored not to betray her late mentor’s hopes. Outside the window, cherry blossoms were falling. Summer had come at last.

A handful of extremists began demonstrations in an attempt to unseat Carredura from the throne. They watched her every move, and if she took so much as a step into town, she would be ridiculed and vilified. So she kept herself more and more isolated.

Fall arrived. Riviere sometimes knocked on Carredura’s door, but the queen refused to open it. She refused to see anyone, in fact.

Carredura no longer went about town, but her reputation did—and it was getting worse and worse. One day, there was a report that she was secretly using sancta herself. Another day, rumors swirled that she’d harmed some of the demonstrating citizens. Throughout it all, Carredura merely gazed out her office window.

Autumn went by, and she began to feel the chill of winter. She no longer

knew what she was living for. Why she was the queen of this nation.

As she performed her tasks in her office, however, she found something: a journal she'd found by pure coincidence while she was working.

"Mistress," she whispered, placing it on her desk. She had some qualms about what felt like peering into her beloved mentor's very heart, but in the end, Carredura's curiosity won out, and she opened the book.

The pages described a truth that Cururunelvia had never uttered to anyone. The journal spoke of the time when she was traveling in an effort to find some way to counter the illness that consumed her. It spoke of meeting everyone she could meet, trying everything she could try, and failing again and again.

Cururunelvia had met many people in her travels who were tormented by discrimination, and the diary told how she started to feel she had to help those people. The things she saw on her travels gave rise to her desire to found her own country.

Eventually, she took a student, a young woman bursting with talent for magic. Her name was Carredura. She was an orphan, and she quickly attached herself to Cururunelvia when the witch visited her hometown. She did anything Cururunelvia asked. Alongside her amazement at her new disciple's magical proficiency, Cururunelvia described their daily life together, and Carredura found herself smiling, memories bubbling up as she turned the pages. And still Cururunelvia's illness wasn't cured.

She took magical drafts to prolong her life and kept traveling.

Not long after that, she began preparations for founding her country. Carredura could fend for herself now, so Cururunelvia left the island in her care and resumed her journey. At last, Cururunelvia caught wind of someone who was said to be immortal. She rushed straight to them and discovered a red-haired girl about fourteen years old. Her name was Riviere—and she was Cururunelvia's last hope at curing the illness that afflicted her.

After that, the diary entries began to bristle with Riviere's name. The journal reveled in recounting their various failures in the most amusing terms possible—but no matter how many pages Carredura turned, it was all Riviere, Riviere, Riviere.

Only at great length did the diary return to the island where Carredura waited, but even then, Cururunelvia spent all her time with Riviere. Soon, Cururunelvia had finished her research into Riviere's physiology and arrived at a way to cure herself.

If I used Riviere's heart, I might be able to make myself better, she wrote. But she chose not to. Even Riviere, for all her healing abilities, would almost certainly die if her heart were torn out.

Cururunelvia relinquished the possibility of recovering and instead devoted herself to creating the device that would be for the benefit of her island—she perfected the sancta.

The last words in her diary were like a prayer: *Please let this country have a bright future*.

There the journal ended. Having completed her sancta system, Cururunelvia could no longer use her magical medicines, after which she quickly declined and died.

To the bitter end, Carredura's beloved mentor had been thinking of the land she'd founded.

"Mistress," Carredura murmured again, and then she stood and went to the window. She looked down over the city blanketed in falling snow, and she could see citizens holding signs. Demonstrators opposing the restriction on sancta. The moment they saw her, they started hurling abuse.

This was the lot for whom Cururunelvia had held such high hopes? Why should Carredura continue to sacrifice for the likes of them? Why should she spend herself in their service?

There was a mountain of paperwork in her office, among which were letters from Riviere, addressed to her.

If it weren't for her..., Carredura thought.

If it weren't for her, Carredura's mistress would still be alive.

"Foolishness," she growled, and she threw away all the letters.

Idiocy, all of it!

When her hatred of sancta crested higher than her sense of duty, Carredura left her office—and in it she left her blue ribbon, the one her teacher had given her.

Soon she arrived at the great cathedral.

The Cururunelvia statue loomed at the country's very center, as it always had. For this, Carredura's mistress had laid down her life. For this, the people continually agitated.

An anger rose in her chest that she could hardly bear.

So she prayed.

"Please," she said, "let all those involved with sancta come to grief."

With this malediction on all things, Carredura abdicated the throne. No one ever again spoke of her as queen.



Once she was no longer the ruler but simply another citizen, Carredura hid herself away on the island's outskirts. Her dwelling was very plain. Now that her mistress was gone, she had no attachment whatsoever to this little rock in the sea. She had every intention of boarding the ship when it made its annual departure and leaving this country behind.

If there was one thing she had during these days, it was time, and she found that fulfilling in its own way. Jeering voices no longer came from outside her window, and her friends among the former mages sometimes visited her. Amid the laughter and small talk, they whispered that someone in town was even now attacking people using the name of Carredura. Was there an imposter about, or was it simply an elaborate rumor? Carredura no longer cared either way.

Then spring returned, and the ship arrived in port. With her bags ready and her ticket in hand, Carredura put her house behind her.

She would never go back there.

Yet at the same time, she never left the island.

No sooner had she stepped out of her house than a voice said, “Good day to you.” A woman was standing in front of her.

“Hrm?” Carredura was flummoxed when she saw how the visitor was dressed—for she was clad all in black, as if she were in mourning. Her hair was black, as were her eyes. Carredura felt as if she were standing in front of a mirror.

But her face—Carredura couldn’t quite parse the woman’s face. Her eyes seemed hazy, her mouth hard to pin down. Her entire silhouette seemed imprecise, like several portraits painted one on top of the other.

“Who...are you?” Carredura asked this strange presence.

The thing in front of her smiled—and then it reached out toward her. “I am Carredura,” it said.

Lovely pale fingers brushed Carredura’s cheek. They were cold as ice. Somewhere beyond them, countless eyes stared at her.

Carredura had made two miscalculations.

One was that it was not true that the many, many wishes the people had offered up to unseat her from the throne had gone unanswered.

The other was that the Carredura who went furtively through town, bringing people to grief, was neither a rumor nor an imposter.

The eerie thing in front of her spoke again.

I am Carredura.

“The Carredura brought forth by the townspeople, and you.”

Some had prayed that Carredura would be alone. Others had wished that she would lose her position. Still others, that she would lose her very life. All of them had contributed to this uncanny thing in Carredura’s form, had helped to shape it.

“Allow me to grant their wishes, and yours.”

Dozens of overlapping black eyes peered at Carredura. She almost took a step back, afraid. She almost cried out. But she couldn’t do either. The hands on her cheeks had—when?—slid down to her neck and wrapped around it. Her feet

were dangling in the air. Gasping and struggling, Carredura glared at the thing that claimed her name. The thing gazed back up at her, and slowly, gradually, its form solidified. Those eyes were dark, dark as the lightless depths of the sea. The skin was pale, and the lips curled in the slightest of smiles. The hazy silhouette sharpened and defined until it was Carredura's spitting image.

And then one wish—someone's wish—was granted.



"Carredura is lurking around town?" I asked.

The rumor found me at my newly opened shop, Riviere Antiques, shortly after Carredura had shut herself in her office and stopped coming out.

At the time, I was the only person with a store that bought and sold sancta, and since the restrictions on sancta had just been imposed, I had plenty of customers in those first days. Naturally, all the rumors roiling the town reached my ears.

Yet many of them left me doubting what I heard, no matter how many times I heard it.

"The queen herself sold me a sancta!" said one customer who sold her prize to me—a sancta that would have destroyed her had she kept using it.

"Yeah, same with my friend," said a man with a sancta that was highly addictive.

I went to Carredura in hopes of finding out the truth of the rumors. The controls on sancta had just gotten stricter.

She was in her office, as always, working away. Even the people who knew her best told me that she largely left her room only to eat, use the toilet, and maybe take a bath. She hardly ever went into town, they said. And yet eyewitness sightings of what people claimed was Carredura went on unabated.

"It's not just the selling of sancta," said a policeman who occasionally visited my shop. "She seems to have been behind several dangerous incidents as well." A number of citizens claimed that Carredura had stabbed them. Was it an act by demonstrators hoping to unseat her, or were these real reports? There was no

way to be sure, and my police acquaintance was at the end of his rope.

I went to Carredura's office several more times after that, but she always declined to see me. In spite of her refusal to cooperate, I suspected that the Carredura in town was an imposter, and with that as my working theory, I began to investigate. I followed this person's trail as best I could, but it was like chasing smoke; she was gone almost as soon as she appeared. She would present herself to someone, work her ill, and then vanish again.

"The victim had recently been agonizing over a breakup with her boyfriend," the policeman told me. He was standing in front of a dead body. According to witness testimony, Carredura had appeared to the victim and presented her with a pair of rings, telling her, "I have a sancta here that will join together that which has been put asunder." As promised, the rings made the two of them into one—but having become one creature, they were no longer human, and they died.

"She was suffering from terrible insomnia," a student told me tearfully. Carredura had approached her best friend several days earlier; the friend had told this student, "The queen gave me sheets that she says will help me sleep soundly!" In the end, she never woke up again.

The sancta this fake Carredura was distributing were profoundly dangerous, not things people should be using.

And most of them were not ordinary sancta.

"What is this thing?" I mumbled. Deciding that the sancta involved in this particular incident was too dangerous to be allowed in this world, I touched it with my bare hand, breaking its curse. The moment I touched it, the sancta took on a whitish cast and then melted into a viscous pool.

My investigations later revealed that most of the sancta the fake Carredura was selling had never existed to begin with. They were created *ex nihilo* from pure magical energy.

So this fake Carredura could *create* sancta. A few of her wares were actual objects she had gotten somewhere, but those with the most dramatic effects were sancta she had fashioned herself.

I continued tracking her every move, but in the end it didn't come to much. Maybe someone with some sort of grudge against Carredura was behind the crimes.

Meanwhile, I kept trying to visit her, but her staff would always say, "Please go home." They seemed to be under orders not to let me through. I used to be able to simply walk into her office; now I couldn't even get close.

Instead, I wrote letters warning her of the danger.

She never replied.

It wasn't long before she abdicated the throne. I spent the winter mourning my powerlessness, my inability to do anything, but of course spring still came, and with it the ship that made port here every year.

From the steady stream of customers that visited my shop, I learned that Carredura was expected to leave this land. I went around to speak to all the former mages. They had always kept close ranks and didn't look favorably on a sancta dealer like me, but when I begged them to let me say one last good-bye to Carredura, they took pity and told me where she was staying.

The only question was, What was I going to say when I saw her?

I took some time to collect my thoughts, then set out.

As it happened, I bumped into Carredura on my way!

"Goodness," I said. There she was—those eyes, dark as the depths of the sea. The black hair and clothes like a mourning outfit. "Carredura..."

As long as it had been since I'd seen her last, she looked practically unchanged. I bowed my head to her and apologized. I told her I was sorry that I hadn't been able to give her help when she was cornered, that I hadn't been able to get rid of the rumors swirling around town. I was sorry that she felt she had to leave the country her teacher had created. I knew my apologies would not solve any of these problems, but it was important to me to at least tell her I was sorry.

And Carredura? She smiled at me softly, almost gentle. "Oh, it's all right." I had never seen such a smile on her face before. The only thing that shocked me

more than her expression was what she said next. “I’ve decided I’m not going to leave this land after all.” She bowed to me. “I’m going to stay here and continue granting the townsfolk’s wishes.”

With that, she left. As soon as she was gone, I realized I must have just encountered the imposter Carredura. Something was terribly wrong. I went to the house where Carredura had sequestered herself—and that was where I found her collapsed by the front door.

The real Carredura was already dead.

Her ticket for the ship was still clutched in her hand.



“The Carredura we know today was born just after we lost our country’s founder—our first queen, Cururunelvia. It was a time when people were confused and very anxious about the future,” Riviere told us.

She spoke of many dark wishes. Of a time of anxiety and despair. How the terrible prayers that people had prayed in those days had brought forth Antiques Carredura.

When I thought about it, it was true—so much of what Carredura as I knew her had done was focused entirely on using sancta to make people unhappy.

Elaina grunted. “What you’re saying is that Antiques Carredura is a manifestation of the malice of those people long ago, forever trying to accomplish their boneheaded prayers.”

Even her murder of the real Carredura was presumably because of a wish from someone who opposed her.

Riviere nodded. “That’s right. That’s why she lives on even now, never aging.”

Riviere wasn’t even sure if *living* was the right word for it.

When she’d said Carredura wasn’t an ordinary human, she’d been telling the truth.

It also explained why we could never predict exactly what she was going to do—because she was a thing, not a person. And of course, it was why we couldn’t

use the Memory-Guiding Specimen to find her: because it only worked for living human beings.

“And here I thought we might finally have a sancta that could lead us to Carredura... What a disappointment,” Henri said, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

We knew who Carredura was, but we still didn’t know how to find her. At this very moment, she might be leading someone astray, and by the time we found out, it would be too late. Gloom descended upon Riviere Antiques.

We sat in silence. Was there really nothing we could do?

“Maybe there’s, like...a sancta that finds other sancta,” I suggested. If we couldn’t track Carredura, maybe we could find the objects she dealt in. But almost as soon as I said it, I realized that if Riviere had had such a sancta, she would have used it already.

Riviere stared at the ground and shook her head. “Between us, the police force and I have tried to set traps for her a number of times, but nothing has ever worked. We’ve even tried pretending to be people in need to lure her out, but she only ever appears to those who are truly distraught. She’s very perceptive about when someone is trying to trick her.”

In other words, we were never going to catch Carredura by canvassing the town. We weren’t even going to find her.

“She’s like a natural disaster,” Elaina said. And not even human! She shrugged. “Sounds to me like we’ll never catch her unless we spot her in the process of actively meeting with one of her victims.”

But even that was going to be nearly impossible. The more we thought about it, the more hopeless the situation looked. We sat there, oppressed by our own inability to help anyone.

I couldn’t hold back a sigh. “This is why you never told us the truth about Antiques Carredura, isn’t it? So we wouldn’t get like this.”

I had heard that name so many times since I’d started working with Riviere. I’d asked about Carredura once in a while, but Riviere had always given evasive answers. Now I realized that had been to spare me and Elaina the frustration of

knowing there was nothing we could do.

Or so I thought, but Riviere shook her head. “That’s not quite true.” She set down her teacup and looked at me—she was even smiling a little. I guess she was trying to take the edge off my dramatic depression.

“Then why not?” I asked, befuddled.

“I told you because this time, I think we *can* catch her.”

That’s all. She made it sound so simple.

Then she reached toward the sancta. The butterfly hung there, pinned in place, its wings drifting slowly up and down. It didn’t even know it was dead.



Antiques Carredura

A woman crouched, collapsed to her knees, on the night road, reaching out as if for help. A customer who had wished to block her ears to the vain chatter of those around her—Layla was her name. In the end, her prayer had cost her any sound at all. No matter what Carredura said to her, she didn't hear, and at the same time, she couldn't speak.

Just as Carredura had expected. She smiled.

Another person brought to grief by a sancta.

It felt good. It felt *right*.

"It's your own fault for using a crutch like that," Carredura said. And why shouldn't she? Her pitiful client couldn't hear her anyway.

Carredura was done here. She turned and walked away, melting into the darkness. Antiques Carredura had to find its next customer.

She would find someone in need and offer them a helping hand, a sancta that could solve their problems. That was how she had made her living to this day. She did exactly what an antiques dealer would do—but all of her offerings led to destruction.

"To whom shall I give a sancta next?" she mused, smiling to herself there on the street. Her words were a wish for destruction, but no one heard them, no one apprehended them; they simply melted into the darkness of the night.

Then Carredura hid herself away, to find someone else to ensnare.

At least, that had been her plan—until a voice said from behind her, “You say the most awful things.”

The words pierced her. It was almost as if the speaker had heard everything Carredura had said to herself. Who was that? Was it Layla? No. Not possible. She wasn’t supposed to be able to hear anything.

“I *turned* to you, and you gave me these earrings knowing that by the end, I wouldn’t be able to speak, didn’t you?” It was Layla, right behind her, speaking clearly. “You’re a terrible person.” There was heartfelt contempt in her voice.

Not possible. How was she managing to speak? Was she utilizing some other sancta besides the one Carredura had given her?

Very amusing.

Carredura turned to see what was behind her out of pure, simple interest. Curiosity.

When she saw who was standing there, she was disappointed.

Her client Layla was there all right, crouching in the street and glaring at her—and beside her was an antiques dealer. Red hair that shifted like a flickering flame in the night. A scarlet dress to match. Fingers ensconced in gloves, hand wrapped around the handle of an umbrella.

The woman who had served as an antiques dealer since the founding of Cururunelvia, the land of prayer.

“Hello, Carredura. It’s been too long.”

Riviere, of Riviere Antiques. The woman who had chosen a different path from Carredura all those years ago.



Riviere had picked up the Memory-Guiding Specimen and looked at all of us. “It’s not impossible to use this sancta to find her,” she said. Well, color me confused. I thought she had just explained at length that the Memory-Guiding Specimen could only track people—whereas Carredura was more like a sancta

herself.

“Didn’t you just say it was?” I asked with a puzzled look. It felt like this was some kind of riddle.

“I said it can’t take us directly to Carredura herself,” Riviere replied.

“Uh... Which means what?” I wasn’t very good at connecting these kinds of dots.

“We simply need to ask it to take us to the person who’s currently being victimized by Carredura.”

Well, there was the answer. It sounded so simple when she said it. This sancta led you to people—well, then it could lead us to Carredura’s victim.

“So you want to find this person and ask them to help us out?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

If we could get that person to cooperate with us, then we could figure out the rest somehow. Maybe the person could tell us where to find Carredura or help lure her out, acting as the bait in our trap. Our missing connection to Carredura suddenly fell into place. If I had one doubt, it was...

“Do you really think this person will help us?” Henri asked, furrowing his brow. What if they turned out to actually feel grateful to Carredura? They wouldn’t help us track her then. They might even tell her we were on her trail.

Riviere, however, was clear: “It will be all right.” She released the butterfly specimen and said, “Not one person has ever met that woman and gone away happy.”

Freed from its pin, the butterfly began to fly off in accord with our wish. Its time, so long stopped, began to flow again.

“Ahh... Urgh... Wha...what tho I doo?!”

The town was draped in the cloak of night. We found a woman crouching on the roadside and sobbing. I didn’t know who she was—I’d never seen her before. But it was clear that she was one of Carredura’s victims.

The butterfly fluttered along, guiding us, and then it came to rest on her shoulder.

I went straight up to the woman. “Are you okay? Stay with me!”

“Wha? Wh-who are you?” she asked, looking at me in confusion. Fear was written all over her face.

“I’m a friend,” I said, and I explained to her that we were with Riviere Antiques, and we were there to save her from Carredura. Was she all right? Was she hurt?

I tried to sound gentle, reassuring, but she said, “I’m...sorry. What are you saying?” She still looked terrified. Maybe this was all too sudden; maybe she couldn’t follow what was going on.

But no.

“I can’t...I can’t hear your voice!” she wailed, weeping.

Her name was Layla—and she was another of Carredura’s victims.

We quickly shepherded Layla back to Riviere Antiques, where Riviere broke the curse on her.

“You’ll be all right now,” she said, her pale, slim fingers brushing Layla’s ears. This sancta, she said, was called the Earrings of Silence. It caused you to cease to hear sounds that you found unpleasant; the original owner had ultimately stopped hearing anything at all when they came to find every sound in the world too hideous to bear, and finally they ceased to speak themselves. “She probably gave them to you hoping that you’d end up just like that original owner.”

In any case, Riviere said as she slid her glove back on, she was glad we had been able to help Layla. She patted the other woman on the shoulder.

“Thank you...so much,” Layla said. She bowed again and again, tears rolling down her cheeks. She listened attentively to our explanation of what was going on, nodding eagerly the entire time as if to catch every single word we said—maybe a byproduct of so recently having had all sound stolen from her.

She'd also just been brutalized by Carredura—so when we asked her if she would be so kind as to work with us, she happily agreed.

“Do you have any plans to meet with her?” Riviere asked.

“Not plans, no. But...” Layla reached into her bag and took out a black business card. “She told me that if I ever wanted to see her, I should use this.”

Riviere took the card and studied it intently. If Carredura herself had given this to Layla, then it was no ordinary object.

“I guess this is what you would call the Business Card of Summoning Carredura If You Wish to Meet Her,” Elaina interjected.

“Why do you suppose she would give out something like that?” I asked.

“Search me,” the witch replied. “Maybe she just wanted to watch her deafened client squirm. If you lose your hearing and have no one to turn to, the only thing you could do would be to use the business card.”

“That’s gross...”

“Cruelty *is* gross,” she replied.

It wasn’t enough just to make someone unhappy—Carredura’s job wasn’t done until she had mocked her broken, pleading victim.

At the root of that savagery, however, was her certainty that she wouldn’t be found, her pride—and those created a big opening that we could exploit.

“Do you think you could use this to lure Carredura out?” Riviere asked, handing the card back to Layla. “Once she’s out in the open, we’ll handle the rest. We’ll do everything in our power to ensure no harm comes to you.”

“I can survive a little harm,” Layla said. She just wanted us to do this, and do it right. She was seething with the rage of someone freshly wronged.

Then we discussed what we would do, the exact means by which we would capture Carredura. The linchpin to our plan was, by necessity, Riviere, who possessed the ability to neutralize her counterpart’s power.

“I’ll face Carredura myself,” she said. “MacMillia and Elaina, if you would be kind enough to act as my support.”

Henri, meanwhile, would mobilize the police force to set the stage for our encounter. They would set up a dragnet so Carredura couldn't run away, make sure the citizens stayed inside, and generally try to minimize any damage. They would also be responsible for keeping Layla safe, of course.

Once they had laid the trap, it would be our job to do what we could to stop Carredura.

That was Riviere's plan, in broad outline.

"What, concretely, should Miss Elaina and I do?" I asked.

It showed that I wasn't exactly a brilliant tactician, but Riviere was kind enough to answer. "You just need to keep her in one place. Then I can break the curse."

"That's very...nonspecific," I said. It didn't amount to much of a plan—Riviere was basically saying, *Just figure something out, please*.

Elaina didn't look much more convinced than I felt. "Okay, so we're going to fight with Scary Sancta Person, I get that. Do we have any weapons we can use? I don't think we're going to be very effective if we go in unarmed."

Excellent question! I nodded along with this most obvious thing to ask.

Riviere, strangely, just smiled. "How many years do you think I've been chasing Carredura?"

"No idea."

"Well, it's a very long time now. And I haven't spent it unprepared."

She stood up and headed for the back of the store. There was a room there where she kept all the sancta that she had confiscated in cases involving Carredura. Traces of her, left at the scene whenever someone was reduced to grief. Little shards of cruelty that brought us teasingly, tantalizingly close but never actually led us to the culprit herself.

"I deliberately refrained from disenchanting some of these sancta." Riviere brought out everything that was in the storage room. All of it was weathered and old. She began to explain what the objects did. "These are sheets that kill whoever's wrapped up in them. At a moment when the country was in turmoil,

Carredura sold them to a client while claiming to be the queen.” The buyer shortly fell into an eternal sleep.

“This is sealing wax that grants volition. It can give force of will to your possessions and cause them to move around. Carredura gave it to a young man who had lost his father and begged to get closer to his possessions. I’m sure he was hoping to forge some kind of connection with his father’s personal effects.” The young man was later discovered dead. His father had been a bandit.

“These are handcuffs that eternally bind those connected by them. Long ago, a woman in the throes of love used them so as never to leave her partner alone.”

Eventually, the man stabbed the woman, and she died. He explained later that they hadn’t even been dating; the woman had harbored an entirely unrequited interest in him. Even today, there were records at the police station of when the man had appeared there, dragging along the corpse he was chained to.

“This is the Controlling Lipstick. It causes anything you kiss to belong to you. A greedy woman once used it to take control of one man after another.”

But the lipstick was not capable of controlling people’s hearts. A struggle for hierarchy broke out among the men whom the woman had made her own, until her little empire ate itself from the inside.

That was just a sampling of the sancta Riviere had in that room. Each was something Carredura had sold in some measure for her own amusement—and whose outcome she had mocked when it arrived.

Confronted by all the sancta Riviere pulled out of that storage room, I felt like I had to sit down. “It just goes to show you how many people she’s hurt over the years...”

“That’s right.”

Given that there were other objects Riviere had already disenchanted, not to mention probably some she never got her hands on, the real number of victims almost defied calculation. What was clear was that people were still paying the price for reckless wishes made by a few despairing souls during the dark days

after the founding of this country.

But maybe we could put a stop to it. We had to.

So I said, “Let’s do it, Miss Riviere,” and reached for my weapons.



“Your own deeds brought this on you, Carredura.” Riviere began to fire off the story, listing the things Carredura had done as if she could see right through her. Carredura stood there, looking scandalized.

Riviere was so calm, she could have been chatting about bygone days with an old friend—and in fact, she had known “Miss Carredura” for a long time. In a weird way, it almost looked like a reunion.

“Thank you for that very long, very *pointless* story,” Carredura said. I knew that inside, she was no human. The way she gave a little bow as she answered, she clearly believed she was still in control of this situation. Almost as if she thought that by this point, nothing could go wrong for her.

She might look like an old acquaintance of Riviere’s, but whatever was in there, it wasn’t the Carredura whom Riviere had known. And I assumed this entity felt nothing at all for Riviere.

She gave a mocking smile. “Tell me, what brings you to me, so cavalier? Just here to say hello?”

“If you’ve got any last words, I might consider listening to them. Because today is the day you die.”

“Goodness gracious. You would treat a *thing* like me as if I were alive? The vaunted immortal antiques dealer really *is* different from any ordinary human.”

“Not as different as a thing that sells things.”

“I prefer to think of myself as doing the glorious work of producing new brethren and giving them a purpose.”

“Speaking of which, do you recall how many of your ‘brethren’ you’ve sold in your time?”

“I make it a point not to put a number on joyous occasions.”

“And what they did?”

“The same principle applies.”

“Hmm. If you say so.” Riviere nodded, and she looked relieved. Then she looked me right in the eye...where I stood behind Carredura. “Then allow me to reintroduce you.”

Those words were the first signal. I let fly with the whip.

It was a sancta Riviere had given me some time before. All you had to do was think about wanting to capture something within its range, and it would grab that thing. I used the whip in combination with the sheets to pin Carredura’s arms to her sides and wrap her up.

These were the sheets that could put a person into an eternal sleep, of course.

“Aren’t you cute?” she said, turning and glowering at me.

It had been a gamble whether the item would work on Carredura, who was neither a person nor an object—but the gamble had paid off. Everything above the sheets sheared off and fell away. Everything from the waist down slid and tumbled to the ground. The whip returned neatly to my hand, bringing just the torso with it.

“You know, I do remember selling a toy like that a very long time ago.” Carredura’s top half, lying in the road, melted and paled like a candle, merging with her lower half as she looked up at me and laughed. Her torso, in the sheets, began to change into seemingly every imaginable shape. A knife, an outfit, a glass, a pen, a book—a collection of weather-beaten objects with no discernible similarities came raining down. Wrapped up in the all-destroying sheets, they couldn’t even maintain their proper forms, already coming apart as they rolled along the ground.

“Ahh, a shame. A part of me is gone.” The melting Carredura chuckled and stretched upward, changing her form. “But it’s futile. Did you think that would be enough to catch me?”

An arm sprouted from the morass, then a leg. Shifting, changing, regenerating her lost body, she got to her feet and looked at me as calmly as if nothing had

happened. It was like seeing a person formed out of clay before my eyes, but her movements were unmistakably *not* human. To put it in the simplest possible terms:

“Oh man! That is so *gross*!”

It was all I could say. I sucked in a breath and took a step back.

“I have to agree,” Elaina sighed. She picked that moment to rush in from out of view, moving almost too fast for the eye to see. By the time Carredura turned, Elaina was already on her. She was holding the handcuffs.

Click! She snapped one of the cuffs over Carredura’s right wrist, then jumped back again.

The Cuffs of Love. A sancta that eternally bound together those connected by it. The chain between the cuffs led to Elaina’s own wrist. “No more running away for you,” she said. Even though their previous owner had perished, the cuffs still did their work; she would never be able to take them off. “While we’re at it, maybe we should keep your feet in one place, too.”

Elaina backed up to where Riviere was standing, then drew the bowstring and loosed two arrows, quick as the wind. They went straight into Carredura’s feet and stuck fast into the ground.

“Hmm? Ahh, I see. You’re trying to pin me in place.” She smiled as if she were playing a game with a child. Did she not even feel pain? Could arrows through the feet really not stop her? “You do love pointless displays,” she said.

Then, slowly, she raised one foot. She took a step toward Riviere, leaving the arrow stuck in the ground behind her.

“You *know* there’s no way you can stop me.”

Her right hand dropped away, handcuff and all. Then she took another step. There wasn’t so much as a scratch in her foot—or for that matter, at the end of her arm. Her missing hand was already regenerating. No matter what we did to her, no matter how we tried to hold her back, she came through unscathed.

Even, for example, when I tried again to get her with the whip. I was right in her blind spot.

“Yaaaah!” I cried.

“Not very imaginative,” she snapped. She sounded like she was in complete control of the situation. She only looked mildly annoyed as she glanced back at me, then simply *melted* her way out of the whip that had wrapped around her. Her body was phantasmagorical; no attack could do anything to it!

Elaina tried the bow several more times—no luck. I cracked the whip—nothing doing.

“Futile! Simply futile,” Carredura said with a merry laugh, melting and breaking and dodging everything we threw at her. “However, I can’t say I enjoy the view with the lot of you hanging around.” Her hands turned into something like mud, producing two ropes. “If you’re so keen to tie someone up, how about a sancta like these?”

She took me in with a glance, and a rope flew from her hand. The moment it hit the ground, it twisted like a snake, slithering toward me and Elaina.

“Oh, *gross!*” I said again. In spite of my distinct queasiness, I managed to crack the whip—but to no avail.

“I imbued that rope with a wish that it would allow nothing to catch it until it binds the chosen target.”

Just as Carredura said, the rope jumped up and crawled along my whip, following it straight to me and wrapping me up tight. I mean very tight. I couldn’t move enough to even use the whip again.

“Well, this is no good,” said Elaina, who was bound so fast that she couldn’t wield her bow and arrow.

The two of us had tried to bring down Carredura, and now we couldn’t have resisted a kitten.

“What exactly were you hoping to accomplish?” Carredura looked at us, a faint smile still on her face. She was clearly feeling confident. Certain that nothing and no one could capture her. Haughty and proud.

She never suspected that everything, all of this, was going exactly according to plan.

“What we wanted was a piece of your body.”

The answer came from Riviere, brandishing Carredura’s right hand. The one she had dropped earlier.

It hadn’t melted. It still had the pale, lovely fingers. It hadn’t been touched by the fatal power of my sheets; Carredura had simply cast it aside of her own free will, and it retained the shape of a human hand.

“It was all for this,” Riviere said, and she clasped the hand close.

Maybe that was when Carredura started to get a bad feeling about things. Or maybe she was just grossed out by seeing someone hug a part of her like that. Whichever it was, for the first time, her face began to drain of color and her smile disappeared. She’d spent all her time so far strutting around me and Elaina, but now for the first time she rushed toward Riviere.

There was a knife in her newly grown right hand—when had that gotten there? What kind of effect did it have?

She was planning to stab Riviere. To kill her. As she charged my shopkeeper, it was unmistakable: There was murder on her mind.

All Elaina and I could do was watch as Carredura tried to kill Riviere.

But Riviere simply said, “Too bad,” and did one simple thing. She didn’t dodge. She didn’t defend. In fact, she completely ignored the onrushing Carredura.

Instead, she kissed the severed hand.

“Huh?” Carredura gasped. Whatever she had been expecting Riviere to do, it wasn’t that. Her bemused exclamation seemed to carry all through the night-darkened town.

The knife never made it to Riviere. A sword came flying out of nowhere and cut Carredura’s arm off at the elbow.

But it was the kiss, the gentle press of Riviere’s lips to that disembodied part of her, that Carredura really couldn’t seem to understand.

She was grinning. “Are you sure you want to give me your first time?” She pointed at Riviere and laughed, the contempt welling up from the bottom of

her heart.

Riviere smiled right back. “Oh, you’re not my first.”

Then she held up the sealing wax that bestowed volition. And the Controlling Lipstick. Both sancta that Carredura had created—and both of which Riviere had been using right up to that moment.

“What are those?” Carredura demanded. Maybe she had forgotten why she created these sancta. Maybe she didn’t remember what they did. She certainly sounded perplexed.

The question was hardly out of her mouth when a spear stabbed her through the chest. She didn’t react with pain—since she didn’t seem to feel that—but she did look down curiously. By her feet, she saw a pair of scissors. And a knife. And a book. And a glass. Objects Carredura had created, but no longer remembered, surrounded her.

They were all sancta she had made in an effort to mock people. Then she had thrown them aside, and Riviere Antiques had taken them in. Riviere had made them her own with the lipstick, then given them volition with the wax. Now they beat Carredura, stabbed her, crushed her, maimed her, tore her apart, bit at her.

“Hngh! You stinking little...!” An arm dropped away. Her head was shaved down. Everything below her knees went flying. No matter how fast she regenerated, this woman who was neither human nor thing couldn’t stand against the sheer force of numbers.

As the pieces of Carredura’s body were torn free, they melted and took on the shape of other objects: A mirror. A watch. A lantern. A mask. Sancta created by wrathful wishes long, long ago were pulled loose from her.

Carredura got smaller and smaller.

“You don’t look like much,” Riviere said. As she stooped toward Carredura, she removed her glove. “I’m going to put an end to your suffering. The same way you did for your victims.”

“You think...you think you’ve beaten me?”

“This was always how you were going to end up from the moment we found you here.”

“Well, don’t you just have it all figured out.”

“Unlike you, I take my job as an antiques dealer seriously.”

Riviere came to a stop. All that was left was the disenchantment. Then Carredura would be finished.

Yet for some reason, Carredura seemed utterly calm as she looked up at Riviere. She didn’t seem bothered by the sancta tearing her apart, taking their revenge on their creator. Instead she said, “You really used your head in this attempt to capture me, didn’t you?” Riviere was about to lay her hand on Carredura. “But you came one step short.”

Carredura’s body exploded.

Bits of pale flesh spattered around the street, taking the attacking sancta with them. They smacked against the walls of nearby houses, flew over the rooftops, went just about everywhere.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The bits were accompanied by laughter—a veritable storm of hilarity.

The voice leaped away from us, over the rooftops, into the sky, far beyond our reach.

“What a shame!”

Riviere was left standing alone, her hand stretched toward empty air. A voice resounded, mocking her.

“All that effort—all for nothing!”

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere, triumphant. We could try to stop her, try to capture her—but she could divide her body into pieces at will. That was why she’d looked so calm to the bitter end.

Knowing how much Carredura loved to see people in pain, I was sure she must have been watching us at that moment.

Riviere looked up at the sky and said softly, "You said one step, didn't you?" Carredura didn't answer, so Riviere kept talking. "May I take that to mean that was your last resort?"

She was still holding the hand. Carredura's severed hand that she had kissed, making it her own. It was still there in all its glory.

"Then maybe I should use my last resort, too."

Carredura probably hadn't noticed that, along with the beating she'd received from her enraged abandoned sancta, a ring had been tucked into her body.

Riviere had another of an identical design.

"This is something you sold to someone agonized by a breakup around the time I started my antiques business. A sancta that makes one that which has been torn apart."

The customer had used the rings on herself and her former partner. As promised, the rings had certainly made them "become one."

The result of which was that they were no longer human and promptly died.

Well, the rings still worked.

"Wha?"

As soon as Riviere placed the ring on the finger of the hand she was holding, an antiques dealer dressed all in black, someone we thought had flown away, was suddenly there.

"N-no! This can't be! But how?"

This time, she wouldn't be able to run away again.

Still holding Carredura's hand, Riviere smiled. All of this was the simple result of sancta that Carredura had created.

"Your own deeds brought this on you," she said.

Then she reached out her hand.



“Is it going to be all right?” I asked quietly.

It was long ago, back when I was spending my time with Cururunelvia as she lay on her sickbed.

I knew she didn’t have long. Once she was gone, what would happen to this country? It was obvious to see that people’s anxieties would spill over when we lost Cururunelvia. Would danger stalk the streets? Would the people despair? Would mobs form or riots break out?

“Don’t they always say it’s darkest before the dawn?” Cururunelvia asked, placing a hand on my shoulder. “We always lose track of what’s right when the world is on the cusp of changing.”

“Then I wish you’d be so kind as to live a little longer.”

“Believe me, I’d love to.” She shrugged, and the motion looked genuinely... energized. “But I think the emphasis would be on *a little*.” Her attempt at a joke. It was almost like she wasn’t really imagining a future in which she had died. I guess you could call her the ultimate optimist. “Well, I’ve done you all a favor—I’ve at least left you the sancta. There’s nothing to worry about!”

“But what if people misuse the sancta?”

“Then it’ll be up to you and Carredura to set it right.”

“And if there’s no fixing it?”

“Then just keep chipping away at it until it’s better. Just like how I’ve taught you, one thing at a time.”

Well, well.

“I think these days, I’m doing more for you than you are for me,” I suggested.

“Nothing of the sort! You’re still just a little chickie, Riviere!” Cururunelvia looked away from me with a snort, like a sullen child.

She told me I would do the same thing over and over. And in time, people would come to engage with sancta at the appropriate distance.

After her death, I founded Riviere Antiques to manage the sancta.

I stood quietly in front of the mirror in my shop and let my hand brush my hair. A blue ribbon bobbed on my head. Cururunelvia had given it to me from her bed.

“What’s this?” I had asked her, smiling.

“Proof that you’ve come into your own,” she said.

“Why, just the other day you told me I was still a little chick.”

“Oh? Hey, I think I feel a pout coming on. Maybe I’d better wait to give this to you.”

“It was just a joke. I would be honored to take it.”

I was thrilled to receive any kind of gift from Cururunelvia. Both of us knew there might never be another chance for her to give me anything.

So now I used this blue ribbon to hold back my hair, wearing it with pride.

“Let’s tackle this day!” I told the mirror. My reflection and I were the only ones in the shop, but I wanted us to be able to throw ourselves into our work.

The job was a series of challenges at first. Neither I nor the people of the town really understood the extent of the sancta’s powers, and there were a lot of imprecise wishes that resulted in very unusual items. Plenty of people also made selfish wishes that made life harder for someone else. Things only got more chaotic when, some time after Cururunelvia’s passing, Carredura abdicated the throne. Each time a problematic sancta appeared, I would purchase it and put it on my shelves.

So the seasons passed. Maybe I was doing something right, because more and more people began to pray for proper things. My shop, which had been doing booming business, got a lot quieter. It became just an old antiques place sitting almost unnoticed in the middle of town. People knew *of* it, but they didn’t know *about* it.

It turned out, she had been right. As time went on, the townspeople changed. Once I removed the curses that had been born in the nation’s earliest days, our land would be even more peaceful than it already was.

“Farewell, Carredura.”

Beams of sunlight came from the far side of town. Bereft of her magic and no longer able to maintain human form, Carredura had returned to being just a collection of objects, too many for me to hold in my hands. They tumbled to the ground. To my eyes, each and every one of them was glowing.

We could no longer hear Carredura's voice. Those curses, brought to pass so long ago, were finally gone.

"It's over," I said.

There was just one thing left in my hands: a blue ribbon.



CHAPTER 11

Riviere Antiques

About a week had passed since we'd dealt with Carredura.

A young woman stood outside Riviere Antiques thinking hard and muttering, "Hrrmmm..." Her hair was ash gray, her eyes the color of lapis lazuli. Now, who could that be?

"Well, if it isn't Miss Elaina," I said, waving hello.

"Well, well," she said, waving back when she saw me. "What's going on, Miss MacMillia?"

"That's what I'd like to know," I said. I pointed at the store's signboard. "It's closed today. Again."

The lights were out, and the door of Riviere Antiques was shut tight.

We hadn't seen Riviere since that night. The last I had seen of her had been just after she'd disenchanted Carredura. "I think I'm going to take a little time to rest," she'd said, and since then, not a peep. What in the world could be going on?

"You think she's still resting?" Elaina asked with a puzzled tilt of her head.

Unfortunately, I didn't know. "If she is, it's been an awfully long time." I made the same sort of *Hrrmmm* as Elaina. I didn't doubt that disenchanting Carredura had required a considerable amount of power, so maybe it would take a while to regenerate, but it still seemed like we should have seen her by now. There

was leaving us in the dark, and then there was leaving us in the dark! I was, in a word, to put it very simply—worried.

“You don’t suppose she collapsed in her house, do you?” Elaina’s tone was joking, but the unpleasant suggestion only fueled my concern.

“You know, a week is a really long time to not hear *anything*. Maybe we should try to get in there and check on her, even if we have to break down the door.” My anxiety-addled brain produced a mildly overdramatic suggestion and managed to force it out of my mouth.

“She’d get angry if we broke down her door.”

“Miss Elaina. Emergencies excuse a certain amount of breaking and entering.”

“I’m not sure I’d call this an emergency.”

“My boss disappeared right before payday, and now I don’t have next month’s salary!”

“Ah. So you’re the one with the emergency.” She didn’t sound impressed.

Okay, so the stuff about my salary was mostly a joke. But the store had definitely been too quiet, and by today I was starting to think seriously about forcing my way in.

First I tried knocking and calling “Miss Riviere?” several times. “I’m going to break it down,” I warned, and then I took a step back.

“What, you’re really doing this?” Elaina asked, also backing away—but from me, not the door.

“For my salary? Yes!” I said. I also really was worried about Riviere.

“Wow. Okay,” Elaina said, maybe sensing how serious I was. She shrugged.

“Here I go!” I gave a great cry and launched myself at the door.

Which was exactly when it opened.

“Good heavens. Could you keep it *down* out here?” My familiar red-haired shopkeeper appeared from within. Riviere. “What in the world are you—?”

She looked very annoyed by all this, standing in the doorway. Or in other words, exactly where I was charging.

“Huh?” For a moment, she didn’t seem to process what was going on.

“Oops!”

Shoot! By the time I realized what was happening, I already had too much momentum to slow down.

Instead of a joyous reunion when I saw my boss for the first time in a week, I gave her a solid head-butt.

“*What* is wrong with you?” Riviere asked as she pressed a handkerchief to her nose. Now she looked very, very annoyed as she sat on the sofa across from me.

“Yeah, I’m...really sorry...” I scratched my head and offered the most heartfelt apology I could. Maybe it didn’t *look* very heartfelt, because I was grinning when I said it. But what was I supposed to do? I’d been so afraid that my boss was down for the count. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“I’m not okay at all!” Riviere scowled, nursing her aching nose.

Beside me, Elaina gave another perplexed tilt of her head. “What have you been doing this past week?”

“Living my life.”

“Huh! Life, huh,” Elaina replied—a noncommittal social nicety. Really, she was busy looking around Riviere Antiques for the first time in a week. There was stuff everywhere. On the floor, on the shelves; even the sofa we were sitting on was piled with objects. They were all things that used to be part of the store’s inventory. The place looked like it had been ransacked.

What *had* she been doing for the past week?

...was clearly what Elaina wanted to ask. Instead she said, “You’re not much for tidying up, are you, Miss Riviere?”

“I’ll thank you to give me the benefit of the doubt. The shop doesn’t look this way because I enjoy living in a pigsty.” Then she told us, quite simply, “With Carredura gone, this seemed like the perfect opportunity to do a little

organizing.”

The aftereffects of disenchanting Carredura, she told us, had lasted about three days, after which she had returned to her usual body. For some time now she’d been storing sancta that were either somewhat dangerous or ethically dubious at the shop, rather than disenchanting them, in hopes that they would help her deal with Carredura. She’d devoted the last four days to going through the stock and mopping up a bit.

“We just turned out to have somewhat more stock than I realized...” Riviere sighed as she looked at the state of her shop.

Riviere Antiques had been in operation since the country was founded. Who knew how many sancta it had handled? A few things that even Riviere had forgotten about popped out during the process of excavating its shelves.

At least now we knew what had been happening.

“You could have asked us to help,” I said.

“That’s what I was about to do when I opened the door earlier.”

Oh! Uh... Oh.

“Now you’ve got the story. And I do want some help from you today.” She added that we would reopen the store once we were done organizing.

Then she smiled, the same soft expression that so often graced her face.

Even with all three of us working away, cleaning and organizing turned out to be pretty time-consuming. Practically heavy labor, if I do say so myself.

We went through the profusion of sancta, putting anything we didn’t need back in the storage room. We pulled everything off the shelves, then rearranged what was displayed there with an eye toward making it neat and balanced. It was sort of like a gigantic puzzle that took days of continual work to solve. At one point I asked if there wasn’t a sancta that could make this job a little easier, a suggestion that was met with the reply, “Maybe you should go pray at the cathedral and make one.”

I asked if there was a sancta that could take the edge off the fatigue, at which Riviere shrugged again and said, “Try praying.”

That pretty much sums up how the days went. And it did take days. Maybe because everything in here held memories for Riviere, making it that much harder to throw away.

There were a bunch of sancta I was seeing for the first time. Some of them were so old that they couldn’t be used anymore. I would ask, “What’s this here?” and Riviere would inevitably smile and say, “Ahh, that takes me back...”

“And this?”

She smiled especially wide when I held up...a tree branch. A tiny stick of blooming cherry blossoms. Not something you would normally see in the winter—I guess that was the sort of thing sancta made possible.

“That’s called the Eternal Cherry Blossom,” she said, adding, *So that’s where it went.*

“What does it do?” I asked.

“Nothing much. You probably couldn’t even sell it.”

I gave Riviere a puzzled look, and she plucked the branch from my hand. “This sancta was created from a broken-off branch. The effect is very simple: The cherry blossoms on this branch are always in bloom. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Huh!” She was right that that seemed a lot less dramatic than most of our sancta. If you wanted to see cherry blossoms, you could always just wait for spring.

“You just thought, *If you want to see cherry blossoms, you can always just wait for spring*, didn’t you?”

“Erk.” I flinched and straightened up a bit.

Riviere’s expression, though, was still gentle. “And you’re absolutely right. Cherry blossoms are hardly something you need to pray for.” She shrugged, almost like she thought it was a little silly. “But a long time ago, there was someone so desperate to see them that they would even pray for it.”

“Who created this sancta?” I asked.

Riviere gazed fondly at the Eternal Cherry Blossom. “I wonder. It was so long ago, I seem to have forgotten.”



“Riviere, do you know what kind of tree this is?” Cururunelvia asked me. It was back when she was still well. We were in the cathedral’s garden, and her fingers lovingly brushed one of the trees that stood there.

She said it was called a cherry blossom: a tree that put forth the most beautiful flowers in spring. She’d first encountered them in a land far to the east and fallen in love with them, so she’d brought them here to this island.

“These poor trees live for only a short while, and they’re very fragile. They can’t thrive on their own, so they have to be stuck to the branches of other young trees to support them. They all came from a single plant originally, so one good sickness can kill them all off. That’s how this tree is.”

“Sounds like these ‘poor trees’ you brought take a lot of work,” I said.

Were they going to be all right? I must have looked pretty skeptical. I worried that they would soon wither.

“You’re right. So I need you and the people of this country to look after them, to make sure they don’t.”

“Excuse me, but you can’t just dump this responsibility on me.”

“I’m expecting great botanical things from you, Riviere.”

“Hello?”

At the time, I didn’t know she was nearing the end of her life. I thought she was just joking, giving me another job to do. So I puffed out my cheeks and said, “Why would you pick a tree that takes so much looking after anyway?”

She smiled, just like she always did. “It’s all the work that makes it perfect. If you still have time to look after these troublesome trees, it’s proof that this nation is doing all right.”

I gazed at our recovered treasure, the Eternal Cherry Blossom, and thought about those days when the country was new. I'd made this sancta so that *she* could see the cherry blossoms she so loved. Even now that its job was done, it was still covered in small, lovely flowers.

I placed it on the windowsill as a decoration, and suddenly it seemed like spring was already here, an early turn of the season inside my shop. A cold wind blew outside the closed window. Once we were done organizing the place, we reopened for business, with plenty of customers making the bell over our door jingle. First we started to see snowflakes on their shoulders, and then winter got really nasty. Through it all, the Eternal Cherry Blossom sat by the window, waiting for spring.

The snow-clad scenery at last gave way to piercing sunlight, the snow melting away without a trace. I opened the window to find a gentle breeze ruffling my hair. The blossoms on the little branch bobbed in time. The breeze proceeded inside, dancing around the antiques shop. I closed my eyes and savored the familiar aroma it brought me.

Spring had come again.

There was one thing you could see in this season—but only this season.

“What do you say we go cherry-blossom viewing today?” I asked MacMillia, and together we left the store, heading for the cathedral. Specifically, the garden.

The trees were there—trees I had tended and cultivated assiduously even during the difficult days after Cururunelvia's passing, and the chaotic times during the transition of power. Trees standing in neat rows, as if with their arms outstretched. And, today, in full bloom. I looked up, and my vision filled with blossoms, so pale they were almost white.

So long as I lived, this country would continue.

So long as the flowers blossomed, this country would be well.

Cururunelvia...are you watching?

“Spring is here, and it’s brought the flowers with it. Like it always does.”

It gave me the confidence—the faith—that every yesterday could lead to a better tomorrow.



[Afterword](#)

It was just past eleven o'clock at night when my doorbell rang twice. *Ding-dong! Ding-dong!*

The apartment building I live in has an automatic lock, and the doorbell rings a different number of times depending on whether someone has come to the front door or to the door of my room. Just by the sound, you can know where they are at that moment. If the person is calling from the entrance, the chime rings once. If they're right outside your door, it's twice.

So I was pretty surprised when the doorbell rang twice at darn near midnight. If I was right about the number-of-rings thing, then my caller was already through the front door and standing right outside my room.

That seemed, well, strange. Was it one of the other residents? What could they want at this hour? Ever so gingerly, I went to the door and looked through the peephole.

That only made things even more confusing—because there was no one out there. I opened the door experimentally, but I was right; there was no one on the other side. Was it just a prank? Or—and here a nameless dread began to grip me—a paranormal phenomenon?

That kind of thing has actually gone on about ten times since I moved into this apartment. It's weird, sure, but it's not the only unexplained thing that's happened to me in this room.

For example, once, late at night, I was asleep when I was awakened by a knocking at the window. Maybe one of the cats was playing around over there? I looked, but to my surprise, I found them both sleeping soundly by my bed. *Must be someone's idea of a joke*, I thought groggily, and I pulled the covers up over my head. On reflection, though, I realized my room is on the fourth floor,

and there's nowhere for anyone to stand outside the window.

After that and similar things happened a number of times, I started to think, *Hey, is my room one of those places with, you know...a history?* I decided to move.

I'm officially going to get out of here in May, so hopefully this kind of stuff stops happening...emphasis on *hopefully!* *Wandering Witch*, Vol. 21, should come out in October, so if I'm still complaining about my living situation then, you can think to yourself, *Ah, poor guy got another bad place.*

So there you have it! This has been Jougi Shiraishi! With that, I'd like to comment on each of the chapters. Readers who'd prefer to avoid spoilers, this is your chance to turn around and read the book!

Chapter 1: Rain

Volume 3 starts off with a pretty heavy conversation, huh? (Okay, I don't have any particular comments on this one...)

Chapter 2: Look-Again Cigarettes

You'd almost expect to see a certain Moguro F****zou around. Being the center of attention means a lot more things might happen to you, both good and bad. It's easy to long for a life of fame, but maybe we don't realize how precarious it is at those vaunted heights—you never know when you might slip up and fall down or even die.

Chapter 3: The Weird House

This chapter is based on my own experience... Okay, no it's not, but there are a couple of details that match up with things that have happened to me, which occasionally sends a shiver down my spine. You think maybe my room is possessed, just like this house?

Incidentally, I cribbed the "punch line" of this story from a hoary old classic of

the horror genre.

Chapter 4: The Memory-Guiding Specimen

This story compares and contrasts people who survive their present lives by imagining the past as more beautiful than it was with those who use the past as a stepping stone to a better future. Maybe you sensed this—but I really had a blast writing Chapters 2, 4, and 6, where Carredura appears, and they came very easily.

Chapter 5: Burning Love

Ah, a story of students in love! I wanted to do something lighthearted before we began the final arc (it being pretty long and pretty grim), and this is what I came up with. I wrote this right after I'd been hard at work on a comedy series, *Nana ga Yarakasu Gobyō-mae* ("Five Seconds Before Nana Does It"), and my initial draft was even more over-the-top. A little *too* over-the-top, I figured, so I walked it back a bit during revisions.

Chapter 6: A Silence Obtained

Once you block out one voice, the next starts to grate. When you block out that voice, there's *another* to get under your skin. The more you seek perfection, the more sensitive you become to the smallest sounds. We all know that compromise is essential to living our lives, but these days it sometimes feels like no one remembers that anymore. Maybe it looks to us like perfect idealists live simple, easy lives.

Chapter 7: On the Founding of the Land

Here, we find out where Riviere came from. I knew that once I wrote this, I would have to pair it with Carredura's story, and I wasn't able to do that in Volumes 1 or 2, but I finally got to it here in Volume 3. The background for Riviere's physiology might make a bit more sense if you read this book in

conjunction with *Wandering Witch*, Vol. 18. When I wrote that book, I actually had something different in mind for Riviere and Cururunelvia's travels, but when it came to writing this one, I decided it might be more interesting if Riviere was still at a young age as she journeyed—and so here we are. That means there's actually a slight conflict between this book and the text of Volume 18 of *Wandering Witch*. Just chalk it up to Cururunelvia playing it fast and loose with the facts...

Chapter 8: Night

This chapter parallels Chapter 1, "Rain," and also serves as a sort of prologue to the final arc. (No particular comments!)

Chapter 9: Prayer and Curse

This is the tale of Carredura's past. I originally wrote everything from Chapter 9 to Chapter 11 as a single sprawling chapter, but the tempo just wasn't working, so I split it up. I won't lie—writing this wasn't easy. Poor Carredura just gets nothing, nothing for all her efforts. But that happens, right? You can be working yourself to the bone, just like she was, and then suddenly one day you think, *You know what? Screw it.* By the time you're thinking that, it's usually as if your HP is already at zero, but you're still being attacked—so when you have that thought, I encourage you to listen to it and get some rest!

Chapter 10: Antiques Carredura

This is the chapter that sees the confrontation between Carredura and Riviere. The battle isn't actually the main point of this story, so I figured this would be a short one, but it turned out to need some more material for flow.

My original idea was that Riviere would be able to bring Carredura (the sancta) around, but that just as she had a change of heart, one of her former victims would kill her. But then I thought, she doesn't seem like she could be killed with just a bit of stabbing, so I ditched that idea. Also, corpses would be

considered objects for the purposes of sancta, and we know that Carredura (the sancta) changes form depending on the time and place. So in some of my original materials, I had the idea that immediately after Riviere disenchanted Carredura, a bunch of human bones would pour out—including the original Carredura's. But honestly, the image is just...unpleasant. So I nixed that, too. There's a lot of stuff around Carredura that I sort of backed away from on ethical grounds.

Chapter 11: Riviere Antiques

I positioned this story as an epilogue to this volume. It serves as at least a partial resolution to the story about Cururunelvia, so just like in Chapter 1, I devoted the second half of the chapter to Riviere's POV.

And that's *Riviere and the Land of Prayer*, Vol. 3!

It took about a year after the publication of Volume 2 for this to come out. Sorry for the wait...!

Riviere is different from *Wandering Witch* and *Five Seconds* in that it skews heavy, and that takes a bit more time to write. I'm really sorry about that...

I don't have many friends or acquaintances in the light novel industry, but even I've been hearing how frequent early cancellations have become—series that don't even get to Volume 2 before they're axed. In that context, I'm so happy to have been able to put out three volumes of *Riviere*. When I first started writing this series, I said to myself that I wanted to include a kind of ending in Volume 3, so having gotten to do a "reboot" after the mass-market paperback edition, I'm so glad I was able to write about the country's name (which I changed) and the details of Riviere's background.

If I get to put out a fourth volume and beyond, I'll be very happy indeed!

And if there were to be a drama CD, well, I'd be tickled pink!

I'm a greedy author, and I want everything.

All right, a brief word of thanks!

To Azure-sensei, Miura-san in the editing department, and everyone who helped make this book a reality. I know I say this every time, but thank you so much! I can't tell you how thrilled I am to have your support and assistance even though *Riviere* is so different from the general run of light novels. I only hope you continue to stick with me for a long time to come!

To all my readers: Thank you so much for reading three volumes of *Riviere and the Land of Prayer*! I certainly hope we can meet again in Volume 4.

All right, hope to see you another time! Jougi Shiraishi, signing off.

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