

1 JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE





RIVIERE AND THE LAND OF PRAYER

and the Land of
Prayer



“Ha-ha-ha!
I’m much
too diligent
for that,
ma’am.”

“I’m
not a
diligent
young
lady.”

MACMILLIA
The newest
member of
the staff at
Riviere
Antiques.

ELAINA
A self-
proclaimed
beautiful
genius of
a witch.

“Would
you like
to try
working
with me?”

RIVIERE
Able to
remove the
curses from
sancta, objects
that possess
mysterious
powers.



"Yikes..."

"I have
the perfect
job for
you, Miss
Witch!"

"You'll
give me
this much
to—?"

RIVIERE AND THE LAND OF PRAYER

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EPILOGUE After That



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JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

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RIVIERE AND THE LAND OF PRAYER



JOUGI SHIRAISHI

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A Fairy Tale

There's a fairy tale I read when I was young. It went like this:

Once upon a time, there was a girl.

She was an ordinary girl who lived an ordinary life in a small frontier town, beloved by her parents...

...until one day, she was snatched up by a terrible goblin.

Why her? She'd just been living her life. She hadn't done anything wrong. It was purely bad luck that the goblin's eye had landed upon her.

The goblin put the girl in a cage and declared that when he got hungry, he would eat her.

The girl's parents grieved. The townspeople were furious. They banded together to fight the monster and rescue the girl, but the goblin proved both strong and resilient. No matter how many times they killed him, he always came back to life. It was like trying to fight the raging sea with nothing but a sword, and indeed, the townspeople's efforts availed no more than foam on the waves. Struggle as they might, they could not best the creature.

As the townspeople realized the futility of their efforts, they began to lose faith. They began abandoning the fight one after the other.

Eventually, even the kindest and most good-natured left the field. Finally, the girl's own parents gave up hope of getting her back.

The girl watched it all from her cage.

It was all right, she told herself. The terrible creature that had abducted her was immortal. She closed her eyes and wept no more, telling herself all she had to do was endure this creature's torment. Simply hold her breath and *last* until the day when the goblin ate her. *Just let everyone forget about me.*

She resolved to spend those days in loneliness and isolation so that her family and the people of her town could be happy.

And thus it continued until, one day, a witch appeared before the goblin.

This witch possessed immense strength, and the goblin discovered he had a true fight on his hands. The witch fought him volley after volley, day and night, without end. At last, the goblin was overwhelmed by the witch's power, and he fled into the woods.

The townspeople paid homage to this great witch who had rescued the girl when every other soul had given her up for dead. They gave her land and money.

As for the girl the witch had rescued, she went back to town and stayed with the witch in peace for all their days.

And they lived happily ever after. The end.

A beautiful story, lovely and inspiring... A perfect work of fiction.

I read it all those years ago, yet even now that I'm grown-up, I can still remember every word.

I wonder *why*, though.

The question popped into my head one day, and then it popped right out of my mouth as I stood there, looking puzzled.

"Probably because there are no witches in this land," replied the owner of the shop where I worked, her voice cool and calm. Her sleek, long red hair bobbed as she looked up, fixing me with her ultramarine eyes.

Our small island country, Cururunelvia, the land of prayer, is home to beastkin, elves, humans, and much more, but no mages. I've heard they have them in other countries, beyond our borders. They say mages look just like

regular people, but it doesn't matter—there aren't any here.

The owner thought that was why the story had stuck fast in my memory.

“People always become fixated on the unattainable. Here in this land without magic, of course magic users are thought of as heroic figments of one's imagination.”

She rose from her desk and walked slowly through the shop.

I felt a twinge of sadness. Was that why I took such an interest in mages? Because this country didn't have any? Wasn't her suggestion just another way of saying that if a terrible, evil creature like that goblin showed up in our homeland, there would be no one who could drive it away?

My thoughts were interrupted by the shopkeeper. “Interestingly, I think the use of magic in the lands beyond our island might be much akin to the way we use these items.” I saw her gaze sweep across the objects in the shop. There were dolls, music boxes, flower vases, combs, statues, mirrors—all arranged neatly on the shelves and tables.

Sancta. Objects invested by prayer with special powers—you could almost call them magical. And we sold them here in our shop.

She gazed at them and said, “I think there's a reason we have no mages here, MacMillia.”

The reason she gave? *We don't need them.*

Riviere, the owner of this antiques shop, spoke with utter conviction. As she always did.



The Scent of Fate

It was a weekday afternoon.

If you ever see a woman sitting on a bench in a plaza, sort of staring into space and crying while eating some of the worst bread she's ever had in her life, one thing you absolutely should *not* say is "Hello, miss, what are you doing there?"

Why not, you ask? Because there's a very good chance that woman is desperately searching for a job, and there's a near equally good chance that the moment you ask, she'll snap.

"I'm looking for a job! What the hell else would I be doing?!"

The ordinary woman's yell resounded off the buildings of the town like a roar, echoing in the quiet plaza in front of the cathedral. Talk about disturbing the peace.

The woman, however, with her messy short-cut brown hair, couldn't have cared less. She was too busy staring daggers at the two men who had dared to speak to her. "Just look at me... Can't you tell?" she said, sighing dramatically. She was wearing slim pants and a shirt, a very spring-appropriate ensemble. No, they couldn't tell.

"Jeez, I think we bit off more than we can chew here!"

"Y-yeah, leave it to us to pick the weirdest girl we can find..."

The two men retreated, awkwardly. It was only natural.

No sooner had the perfectly ordinary woman stopped shouting than she looked at the ground and started muttering, like she was repeating an incantation. “Give me a job, give me a job, give me a job, give me a job, somebody, please, anybody, please...” She was past the point of disturbing the peace; she had become the embodiment of terror.

She had a good reason, though. Time itself, the ever-shifting eras, had left her cornered. She had a sad story—tragic, in fact. Anyone would weep to hear it.

It had all started three years earlier. She’d just turned eighteen and gotten her very first job, at a newspaper publisher, and as far as she was concerned, it was a match made in heaven—destiny, baby! Sure, it was the first place she’d ever worked, but she swore to herself that she’d stay with the company for the rest of her life, for better or for worse, for richer or poorer... Okay, so...it wasn’t all sunshine and roses. They had a habit of sticking their nose into celebrities’ love lives and taking sordid photos for a quick cash grab, which was trashy...or at least, you know, trashy-adjacent...but then again, the comics they ran were sort of funny sometimes, and she liked that about them. That sense of humor came across as all the more charming when compared with the trashy photos.

The divorce, like so many divorces, was sudden and brutal. One day she showed up to find out the president had been arrested. Tax evasion. (How cliché.) The reeling company quickly “rightsized,” and, well, last in, first out. She was shown the door.

Looking back on it, she saw she’d had terrible luck with employers ever since then.

After a short search, the next job she met was a cute little café located in what could charitably be called a back alley. It was wild—handsome, you might almost say—an irresistible splash of glamour on an otherwise seldom-traveled street. A girl in town had handed her a flyer and winked at her: “Wanna come chase a dream with me?” The ordinary woman had indeed chased the dream straight to the café, where she joined right up. She was a real go-getter, and it didn’t matter to her what kind of job she was doing as long as she could work.

Only after she started the job did she notice how *short* these maids’ skirts

were. And the job was constantly referring to some kind of “service” that she didn’t really understand.

“What? You didn’t know?”

She was supposed to be chasing the dream, but she found herself grabbing a man by the necktie and emptying a glass of wine over him while he crouched in front of her on all fours, like a dog. Suffice to say she had a hard time wrapping her mind around the idea.

So much for the glamour.

Nooo! I’m still a virgin!

She quit the job the same day she got it.

What should come around next but a brainy-looking pharmacy gig? A STEM job! That was the play these days!

Things seemed pretty good at first. It was a clean place, regular hours. She fell in love with the straitlaced atmosphere. Everything was peachy for the first six months...and then the company’s dark side reared its ugly head. A whistleblower revealed that the place had been marketing one of their products as a highly effective medicine when it was hardly more than a nutritional supplement. A placebo, in other words. The company imploded.

For the ordinary woman, a series of jobs followed after that. Librarian, hotel receptionist, then a construction place, followed by a boutique, nursing, and a factory job. She’d do anything. She could hardly remember how many jobs she’d been through, but each time she swore to herself that she was done starting over, that this was the one, only to have her hopes dashed when she wound up jobless again.

She’d been going on this way for three years now.

“I can’t *take* it anymore!”

Perhaps now you can understand why she would be sitting in front of the cathedral, eating bread and crying.

It was her tradition: When she was looking for a job, she always got her bread from a local shop where she knew the stuff was awful. It helped her *taste* her

struggle, and helped her believe that tomorrow she would eat something far tastier.

Though time flew by, it wasn't easy spending so long trying to find a job. The more résumés she had to write, the more people were suspicious of her and rejected her applications. She was munching her bread, trying to let it carry her through this awful day, but she'd chewed it too much, and there was no flavor left.

The hunt was especially difficult at the moment. Springtime meant every company had done their annual intake and was bursting with new hires. No one was looking for new blood. She searched and she searched, but she came up dry, and it almost broke her. To have a couple of guys try to pick her up at that exact moment probably struck a nerve, so if you would be so kind, please forgive her the somewhat hostile response. She would have been thrilled to have them talk to her if they were bringing her a job opportunity.

You might be wondering, Why have I spent all this time telling you about this ordinary woman's heart-wrenching history? That would be because that woman is me... That's right, yours truly.

My tragic, lamentable self.

I want a job!

"No! Don't leave! Give me a joooooob!"

Slight change of subject, but in Cururunelvia, the small island known as the "land of prayer," where I was born, it's said that if you toss a coin to the cathedral and offer up your prayer, it'll be answered.

I'm not sure I'd count these instances as having one's prayers answered, but they say sometimes—only sometimes—when you pray, it bestows a special power on an object in your vicinity, and that object will somehow grant you the ability to answer your own prayer.

You might notice a lot of hedging here. That's because I'd been going to the cathedral every single day, and I sure as hell hadn't had *my* prayers answered.

Ever since I went out into the world, every time I lost a job, I would trek out to the grand building, which was covered with vines and leaves, and beg: "Let the

next time be the last time! Please!” I would fling my money at the Cururunelvia statue, but as you can tell from my current situation, my prayers haven’t exactly been answered yet. If I had time to petition a statue at the cathedral, maybe I should have struck out and actually looked for a job instead. I couldn’t keep giving what little money I had left to the statue!

Fast forward to shortly after my shout.

“You’ve got a good pair of lungs. Why don’t you come work for me?”

A beastkin with the poofy hair only a member of genus *Panthera*, family Felidae—in other words, a lion—could possess put his paw on my shoulder and held out his business card. It had the name of a well-known real estate company on it.

“Huh? For real?”

“Yes, join up with my company.”

“Seriously?!”

So I gained a connection at what might as well have been my zillionth company. (I’d lost count.) Who needs some dusty old cathedral, anyway? I should’ve known I had to make my own luck!

Wish I could get back all the money I tossed at that statue.

Anyway, that was three days ago.

“My goodness, MacMillia. It’s the strangest thing. I feel like we’ve known each other for ages!”

What’s the most important thing to do right after you’ve changed jobs? Let an expert in job changing (*not* proud of it, by the way) tell you. It’s relationships! You have to start building bridges. If you can get even just one person on your side, you’ve got a good shot at making it through your first days at your new workplace.

“What, really? Aw, shucks, you think so? Hee-hee!”

For the sake of networking, I laughed my most girlish laugh. I had officially been hired as a real estate salesperson, and the other women in the office had taken me under their collective wing right away, so I was busy playing the part

of the ditzy new girl. None of them suspected I was a seasoned job-hopper with a résumé that would make anyone recoil.

The first thing I discovered upon starting my new job was that the quality of my voice had nothing to do with the actual work. Like, nothing at all. You were just showing rooms to clients who were standing right next to you, so there was no need to shout. I admit, when the guy handed me his business card, I did wonder what the heck he was talking about, but a job was a job, so I kept my mouth shut. Turns out I was right; my shouting and my selling had nothing to do with each other.

Sitting with the other women and munching my bread at lunchtime, I asked a few careful questions and discovered that Mr. Floofy Beastkin, who ran this place, had a habit of recruiting cute young ladies from time to time. The others nodded and said it was the same with them—which I took as a roundabout way of saying that they were cute and they knew it.

Still, at least we were talking. It was a friendly chat, and it meant I was getting close to the other women almost as soon as I had joined the company.

“You should watch out, though,” said Miss Curly Hair (sorry, ladies, I don’t remember all your names yet, so we’re going with prominent physical characteristics) to my right, picking at her boxed lunch. “The president doesn’t waste any time. He likes to put the moves on new hires, and he doesn’t hesitate to stoop to sexual harassment. Why, just the other day, he patted my head!”

“Oh, I know! He was trying everything with me. The way he put his hand on my shoulder!” Miss Short Hair, to my left, shrugged expressively.

Apparently, the president had an insatiable appetite for women.

Young Miss Ripply Wave, sitting across from me, raised her hand. “Me too! He did the same kinds of things to me until a week ago. And he kept begging me to go to dinner with him. ‘Just once,’ he said! ‘Pretty please,’ he said! It was a nightmare.”

Ripply Wave continued to munch on her sandwich as she complained. She didn’t notice the ominous silence from Curly Hair and Short Hair. A few minutes later, Miss Short Hair heaved a sigh that sounded like it could have meant anything.

“I’m sure he’s left you alone ever since I gave you that perfume,” said Miss Curly Hair, adding that we should all be grateful.

Oh? What’s this?

“What perfume are you talking about?” I asked. It’s an ironclad rule, and indeed a privilege of new hires that they can immediately voice any questions they have. I supplemented mine with a puzzled look.

Curly Hair gave me a smile that was clearly pasted on. “You want to know?”

Looking back on the experience, I can tell it was a bit of a loaded question, but at the time I didn’t really think about it; I just nodded.

Curly Hair shot the other two a look. Short Hair nodded, but Ripply Wave cocked her head.

“Hand over the perfume,” Curly Hair said with a touch of irritation.

Ripply Wave seemed a little confused, but she said, “You mean this?” and plonked a gaudy pink bottle down in the middle of the table.

“You had your week,” Curly Hair said, fixing Ripply Wave with a look. “I think it’s about time you shared with the new girl.”

“Aww, do I have to?” Ripply Wave huffed. She didn’t look thrilled about it. Me, I just sat there smiling, because I had *no* idea what they were talking about.

“Don’t be difficult. You had your fun this week. And all the riffraff stopped chasing you. Now it’s MacMillia’s turn to make some *happy* memories.”

What did she mean? How did the perfume give you happy memories? None of this was making any sense.

Curly Hair gave me a puzzled look. “Don’t tell me you don’t know about sancta, MacMillia. Everyone who lives in this country knows about them.”

Sancta...

The word was well-known in Cururunelvia; it referred to objects that had been imbued with prayers. And what did that mean? Exactly what you’d expect it to mean. They could be almost any object, imbued with almost any prayer, and it all came of praying to the statue of Cururunelvia.

For example, a girl freezing from the cold might be given a match that, once lit, showed her a fantastic vision. An aspiring magician might get a door that led to a faraway place. There was no magic in our land, but these objects, born of prayer, might as well have been crafted from pure magic. *Sancta* was the general name we gave to such objects with all their varied and unusual powers.

What she was saying was that the bottle of perfume sitting in front of me was very special—something someone had prayed for at some point in the past.

“Um... Yeah, sure, I know about them,” I said. “It’s just...”

This was my first time seeing a sancta in person. I stared at it for a long moment, but it just looked like an old, slightly beat-up bottle of perfume to me.

“The way I got this sancta was, well...special. I only let my closest friends borrow it.” Curly Hair leaned in and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “But I’d be happy to let *you* use it, MacMillia.” She grinned and added that it would do *wonderful* things for me.

At that moment, a gust of wind came through the window and caught Ripply Wave’s hair. The smell of roses tickled my nose.

“Awww, no! I don’t feel like sharing!” Ripply Wave grabbed the perfume with both hands, pouting.

That piqued my interest. “If I may ask, exactly what kind of prayer is imbued in that perfume?” I said to Curly Hair. Whether I decided to take her up on her offer or not, I thought it would be prudent to find out the effect of the prayer first.

“Well, I suppose I can tell you...”

In retrospect, it’s possible I was already under the influence of the perfume then. The whole time Curly Hair was talking, I couldn’t take my eyes off the bottle.



The women had a pet name for this perfume: They called it the Perfume of Destiny.

“Do you believe in love at first sight? Destined meetings?” Curly Hair asked. What a romantic high note to start out on. She claimed that just wearing a hint of the perfume could attract the person you were destined for. “This perfume has a special property: From the moment you put it on, people you want nothing to do with stay away from you.”

That included the president, who was probably the least popular person among these women. They said that after only a spritz of the perfume, he left them alone completely. Not only that, but *anyone* at the company, regardless of gender, whom they didn’t get along with quietly seemed to make themselves scarce.

“You get to spend all your time enveloped by the lovely aroma of roses; plus, the president stops hitting on you—it’s been so wonderful!” Ripply Wave said.

Not only did it shoo away unwanted interlopers and give the women their ideal environment, but gradually, the person of their dreams showed up.

“Thanks to this perfume, I’ve started going out with that guy in Sales who I had my eye on!” Short Hair whipped out a photograph, eager to show off.

“The same thing happened to me,” said Curly Hair, giving a flutter of her hair.

“Well, I didn’t get a boyfriend, but I feel like good stuff has been happening to me, too.” Ripply Wave said.

Apparently, this Perfume of Destiny had made their lives shimmery and great. All three had gotten what they wanted after using it, which seemed to be pretty good evidence of its effectiveness.

“Think of this as a little sign of our friendship. We want to get to know you better and better. Hee-hee...” Curly Hair coughed and placed the perfume in front of me.

It was all...too neat. You know the expression “too good to be true”? Didn’t it seem weird that three people I barely knew were just *giving* me this powerful, coveted object?

If I’d been coolheaded and rational, maybe that question would have occurred to me. Instead, this average woman—me, if you’ve forgotten—reached for the perfume with both hands and a cry of “What? You’d do that for

me? Aw, thank you!”

I hope you’ll forgive this ordinary woman (me). It was only my third day on the job, and my endless days in Job Hunt Hell were still fresh in my mind. I was desperate to carve a place for myself in this company, even if I had to ignore some disquieting questions to do so. For that reason, I jumped on the women’s offer without a second thought.

Okay, maybe I did have a second thought. But I was determined not to have a *third* one. What, me, worry? One thing I knew was that life got easier in direct proportion to how obviously you could breeze through it.

“But of course. All right, here goes.” Curly Hair put a spritz of the perfume on my wrist. She didn’t rub it in or anything, but she seemed to be savoring the fragrance.

We enjoyed a little more friendly chatter, and then lunch was over, and we returned to our respective tasks.

Destiny, huh? I just wanted my destiny to be right here, at this company. Finally.

“Well, heck!”

I hadn’t been sure I believed the women’s story about the perfume, but I didn’t have to wait long to witness its power. In fact, things around me started changing that very day.

“This is for you! A little something extra for one of our best customers,” the bread baker said, giving me an extra-large loaf when I did my shopping.

“Oh, um, hey. We’re really sorry we bothered you. We should have known you were busy. I dunno what’s wrong with us. Here, take this. Our way of saying sorry.” It was the guys who’d tried to pick me up a few days before, offering me money in apology!

“Congratulations! You’re the ten thousandth customer to enter our store since we opened!” exclaimed the clerk of a random restaurant as I walked in. It turned out my entire meal would be comped.

This sort of thing had never happened to me before in my life.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

So, naturally, I sat there laughing like a big, dumb idiot, luxuriating in the wineglass in my hand. How long had it been since I’d eaten my fill? The thought made me cry a little inside.

“Say, you there. How about I tell your fortune?” asked an ashen-haired fortune-teller I met on the street. I sat down with her, and of course she exclaimed, “My! What amazing luck you have! I’ve never met someone so fortunate in my entire life.” She waved her hands over her crystal ball. “You’ll have many wonderful encounters; yes, a brilliant destiny awaits you...”

Aw, stop. I’m blushing.

“Oh, ha-ha, really? Y’know, I *do* feel like I’ve been awfully lucky lately.”

“You might like to know that your ‘lucky item’ is bread. If you eat delicious bread, you’ll find luck is ever more on your side.”

“Nice! I eat bread every day, so no worries there.”

“Excellent, excellent. If I may ask, what bakeries do you recommend in this land?”

“I know two places—one where you can get bread that’s cheap but tastes terrible, and one that’s more expensive but pretty darn good. Which would you like?”

“Both, please.”

When I told her about the bakeries, she said she would comp my fortune-telling in exchange for the info.

If the perfume keeps harmful people away from you, by definition, it also makes you luckier. As soon as I put on that perfume, I found everything coming up roses for me—weekday or weekend, every time, everywhere. When I stopped in to do my shopping on my way home, they always gave me a little something extra. Kindhearted people said nice things about me. I walked around town with a song in my heart and a tune on my lips. Each day was wonderful, and everything was great.

I was enjoying that time to the fullest...until one of my days off. I thought I felt

someone watching me, but when I turned around, there was no one there. The perfume was supposed to keep bad people away from me, so I was sure whoever had been watching me didn't mean me any harm...but still, it felt weird.

I was still standing there, perplexed, when a girl coming the other way down the street waved at me. "Oh! MacMillia, it's you!"

She had a sort of "floaty" vibe. It was one of my coworkers from the real estate office... The one who had given me the perfume, in fact.

"Oh, hey, Ripply Wave," I said.

"Hey...who?" Ripply Wave gave me a funny look. She told me she'd had time to kill on her day off, so she decided to come into town to do some shopping. In other words, both of us were free, and both of us were by ourselves, so we decided to drop in on a nearby café.

"Hmm," I murmured as we sat there. I was still trying to decide why I'd felt like I was being watched earlier.

"What's the matter?" asked Ripply Wave, sitting across from me.

"Oh, nothing." I shook my head.

"Hey, MacMillia, how's it going? ...With the perfume, I mean. Have things been looking up for you?"

Had they ever!

I told her all about how everything in my life seemed to have changed from the day I put on the perfume. She nodded along eagerly.

"Really? I'm so glad to hear that," she said.

We segued into some friendly but not very interesting small talk. I found out that the real estate agency was her first job, and she had never once in her life had to change her place of employment. Color me jealous!

"Wow, lucky you," I said. "Talk about purehearted love!"

"I'm sorry?"

"I mean, I go through companies like socks. It's serial monogamy of the worst

kind!”

“I’m...sorry?”

Ripply Wave was looking pretty confused. Even so, she confessed to me that she’d been thinking about changing jobs lately, and since an expert in the field (albeit reluctantly) had appeared before her, she was eager to pick my brain.

I told her that if she was happy with my anecdotes, I was happy to share, and for the next little while I told her my story. She nodded along enviously and muttered, “I wish I could change jobs.”

Not long after that, we broke up our impromptu conference. She covered my meal as thanks for my insight—her words, not mine. I didn’t think my life story was all that impressive, and I took out my wallet to pay my own way, but she said, “Let your senior coworker treat you, won’t you? Please?” Then she gave me a friendly wink. What a good person.

I was sorry to hear she was planning to move on, but at least it sounded like she was going to stay with the company through the end of the year. It was great to know I’d be able to work with someone so lovely, even if it was only for a little while.

“All right, see you at the office,” she said and gave me a wave. Then we both went our separate ways.

On the walk home, I was by myself again, which gave me plenty of time to think. When I’d asked Ripply Wave why she was thinking of quitting, she’d hesitated for a second but then said, “The biggest reason is that there’s something else out there, something only I can do.”

She was actually in a jazz band that she’d started with some friends on a whim, just for fun. But not long ago, they’d been invited to go pro. (She played the trumpet, in case you were wondering.)

“I think the connection that got us that invitation... It might have been because of the perfume, too,” she’d said, like she was trying not to look too happy about it.

If she was going to take her act professional, though, she was going to have to quit her job at the real estate office and focus full-time on her music. That was

her biggest concern: Leaving a company was unknown territory for her.

“You’ll be fine!” I’d told her encouragingly. “I know it can be pretty nerve-racking if you’ve never changed jobs before, but there’s nothing to be scared of!”

Even as I’d said it, though, I was wondering—was there something out there that only *I* could do? The thought kept nagging at me as I walked home, but in the end, nothing came to mind. All I could do right now was do the best at the job I had.

The sun was setting, casting a warm orange glow over the people walking down the grand avenue in front of the cathedral. The road went straight as an arrow, and everything on it seemed to shine impossibly bright. The town was haloed in gold, the color of turning maple leaves, and a cool spring breeze caressed the evening.

There weren’t many people on the road past the cathedral at this hour. There were three reasons for that. First, because hardly anyone had business at the cathedral anyway. Second, because most of the shops in that area closed relatively early.

Not even many tourists made it down this way. Which was compounded by reason number three—practically no tourists *ever* came to Cururunelvia, the land of prayer, the small island country on the frontier.

Pretty much the only people who would be walking around this area after dark were those who lived in the cheap apartments near the cathedral.

Which included me.

“I hope tomorrow is as good as today,” I murmured. The cheap apartments weren’t so bad. I got beautiful scenery like this all to myself, after all.

Those thoughts filled my head as I trotted along...until I came to an abrupt stop. I had spun around almost before I knew what I was doing.

I felt the same weird gaze I’d sensed that afternoon. Like somebody watching me, but I couldn’t tell where from. Who could it be, though? Unlike this afternoon, I was alone now, so I stood and stared, studying my surroundings. There was definitely someone watching me. I was sure of it.

I stood there, stone silent, squinting as hard as I could. Ten seconds passed, then twenty, then thirty.

Then I saw it.

A small shop facing the avenue. An antiques shop that looked pretty antique itself.

A sign hanging above one of the windows read RIVIERE ANTIQUES. I could see a face peeking between the curtains.

The face belonged to a woman who appeared to be a few years older than me. She had hair as red as flames and a dress to match (not very subtle). She was captivatingly beautiful, and her ultramarine eyes were focused right on me. I could see her lips moving; she seemed to be muttering something.

I watched her for a moment. Couldn't hear a word she was saying, but she was definitely saying *something*; I saw her eyes open wider.

"What a scary lady..."

It was all so sudden, my brain couldn't keep up with what was happening. Had I done something to her? If the perfume was still working, then she couldn't possibly mean me any harm—but then she slammed her hand against the glass, *bam*, and pressed it there, talking louder and faster. I still didn't know what she was saying, but she was starting to scare me. This was definitely someone I wanted to keep away from.

Now she was shouting, and I could see from her face that she was furious. I tried to think back, but I couldn't come up with anything I'd done that might have hacked her off like this. I didn't even know her! I'd never even been to any antiques shop!

She was still talking, and I held her gaze while I racked my brain. At last, the woman took a step back from the window.

Uh... Maybe she gave up?

Nope. She walked out of the shop. As one does.

Except she was holding a cleaver.

"Hey, you!" she said.

“Eeeeeeeek!” I said. Then I spun and raced to my house. I can’t remember the last time I ran so hard. I didn’t stop until I was safely under the covers at home, where I cowered, shaking. I was completely convinced that woman was the source of the mysterious gaze I’d been feeling all day.

Okay, let’s review.

It started with the perfume Curly Hair gave me at work.

She’d said something about it leading to destined encounters; that was what it was supposed to do.

“So why did I catch the eye of this super-scary and obviously dangerous person?!”

I got to work extra early the next day and breathlessly related to Curly Hair and Short Hair what had happened. I mean, that’s what new hires are supposed to do, isn’t it? Communicate, consider, and consult, right?

Ripply Wave was off today, by the way. Probably practicing her trumpet with a passion right about now.

“Huh. But she didn’t come any closer to you, right? That shows the perfume’s still working,” Curly Hair said, not sounding very interested.

“What?! But you said I wouldn’t even see anyone who means me harm!” This was not what I had been promised! I was feeling thoroughly petulant. I think I needed a few minutes to cool down.

“Maybe the perfume’s effect is wearing off?” Short Hair said gravely, patting me on the shoulder. “Or maybe the perfume was the only thing that saved you from something worse! Starting tomorrow, maybe you should take an extra-big puff of it.”

I caught my breath. Now that she mentioned it, after I’d put on a bit of the perfume at lunchtime on my day off, I’d gone a whole day without refreshing it. Maybe the smell had faded away...

“If someone who has their eye on you looks like trouble, that’s all the more reason you should keep that perfume close. In fact, I think you should make sure you refresh it regularly. That’ll keep them away from you,” said Curly Hair.

“Y-yeah, you’re right.” I nodded, highly suggestible.

I did my work as normal and, indeed, had another lovely day. I just wasn’t used to wearing perfume—that’s why I hadn’t noticed the smell fading. I should pay more attention to my own odor.

“Mm, there! That’ll do it!” I told myself as I headed home, having taken a fresh spritz of the perfume. I was feeling invincible. My plan was foolproof.

And yet, in spite of my flawless countermeasures, I could still feel those eyes on me as I walked past Riviere Antiques. *Okay, it’s okay; she won’t come near me*, I told myself—but I picked up my pace just the same.

Then I paused.

“I can’t help wondering...”

The perfume was supposed to keep the likes of her out of view, but when you feel yourself being watched, it’s hard not to want to look back. I glanced over my shoulder.

The door of the shop was open.

“Good evening,” called the red-haired woman, who was half peeking out the open door. For some reason, seeing her there absolutely terrified me. Maybe it was the horrific spiked morning star she was holding.

“Kay thanks bye!” I said, and once again I set about escaping with all my might.

Maybe the perfume’s effect wasn’t quite strong enough?

The next day, I tried puffing some of the perfume on myself as I reached the antiques shop—but as I went scuttling past, I heard her voice again, this time from in front of me. I looked up, and there she was, the mysterious red-haired lady.

Terror gripped me again. This time she was holding a sun umbrella. Even though it was nighttime.

“What could you possibly be protecting your skin from at this hour?!” I exclaimed.

I'd put on the perfume immediately before walking past the shop, but it still wasn't working! Maybe there was some invisible barrier that kept the scent of the perfume from reaching her?

"K-konbanwa?" she ventured the next night.

I wasn't sure what to make of that particular greeting, but I decided to play the game of coming on strong. The moment I saw her, I sprayed the perfume on myself. From this distance, she would never be able to avoid the smell.

Hah! How do you like that fragrance? I grinned at her in triumph, but she only said, "Mmm, roses. What a lovely smell." Then she giggled and gave me the slightest smile—quite beautiful, in fact. It would have been perfect if she hadn't been holding a massive frying pan.

I ran home again. Yes, she was beautiful when she smiled, but there'd been something in her eyes, something that scared the crap out of me. The most unsettling part was that I had *no* idea what she could possibly want with me.

Well, wait. Hold on.

What if...?

"The perfume isn't affecting her at *all* !" I sighed with utmost drama as I related the situation at work the next morning. (No point in coming up with some excuse for a new hire to do what I did—I just had to get it out.)

How much perfume did I have to put on before the creepy lady wouldn't come after me anymore? Maybe if I took a bath in the stuff?

"Hrrm..." I was chagrined to discover that over the past several days, I'd used more of the perfume than I'd realized—it was only this morning that I'd noticed with a rush of anxiety how little was left in the bottle. It wasn't even mine—I was borrowing it!

I did my best to pin the entire thing on the red-haired woman, while tossing in a moderate apology for having used more than I'd meant to. I really had practically used it all up.

"Hee-hee-hee. Don't worry your little head—you can have it," Curly Hair told

me with a smile. Incidentally, thanks to the perfume, Curly Hair was making good progress with her boyfriend—she let it slip casually over lunch that if things kept going this way, they “might get married this very year!”



So she gets a boyfriend and a potential marriage proposal? Why is it that all I get is a mystery cleaver lady?

I sat there in silence. Ripply Wave looked worried to see me so run-down. When I realized she was looking at me, I glanced up. She made a thoughtful “Hmm,” then leaned in close and whispered, “Hey... Maybe we could have a chat later? Just the two of us?”

What was the come-hither whisper all about? Well, not that I cared.

After lunch, Ripply Wave all but dragged me to the ladies’ room. She was careful to keep her voice down, but the first thing she said was “I’m really sorry...” And she did sound sincerely guilty. She even bowed to me.

I was utterly confused. Why was she apologizing to me? She hadn’t done anything. I gave her my most puzzled look. That was when she started to fill me in.

“That perfume... There’s still some left, right? How much, would you say?”

“Uh...” I took the bottle out of my pocket and held it up for her. We could hear a small *splish* from inside. Didn’t *sound* like a lot.

“Haah...” Ripply Wave sighed deeply. “Do you think you could give the perfume to someone else? I mean, right away?” She looked at me: *Someone, anyone at all.*

“Um... Why would I do that?” I asked, thrown off by the way she was suddenly so serious.

She sighed again, then apologized again, and then she told me something very important. Something I’m sure they’d all been meaning to keep secret from me.

“The perfume? You have to give it to someone else, or it will make you the unluckiest person alive.”



It had all started about a month ago.

“You there! The lovely young lady.”

Curly Hair was walking down the street in town when a mysterious woman sitting on the corner called out to her. Laid out at the woman's feet was a weird collection of stuff—a bottle of perfume, a comb, a jar, shoes, a pair of glasses. If they had something in common, Curly Hair couldn't tell what it was. Was this woman selling stuff?

She gave the woman a funny look, and the woman told her that this was her antiques shop, Antiques Carredura.

"Won't you take one? I have the perfect thing in stock for a lovely young lady like yourself."

"Perfect? For me?"

"I know what a girl like you wants. You want to meet your destiny!"

Curly Hair was struck dumb. As a matter of fact, she *did* want to get married. She spent every day at the office, with no hint of romance anywhere, but she never stopped hoping that her true love would come along one day.

The day "Antiques Carredura" stopped her on the street, she'd been nursing such worries. The mysterious woman sounded like she had seen straight through Curly Hair.

"If you want to meet just the right person, let me offer you this perfume. With but a puff on your wrist, you can reach the fateful encounter that's coming to you that much faster."

"You mean it?" Curly Hair asked. The woman had her complete attention.

Anyone born and raised in Cururunelvia was familiar with the power of sancta.

"I certainly do! You'll be able to have the most wonderful, the most *wonderful* encounter!"

And it would only cost her two thousand lain, the woman informed her.

As a point of reference, if you converted two thousand lain into the cheapest bread at the bakery I went to (the stuff that makes you wish you could forget your life), it would work out to about twenty pieces, or ten days' worth of meals for me back when I was looking for work. It's enough to make a girl cry. Still, it

was a lot cheaper than what perfume normally costs. The woman even told her she could return it for her money back within three days, no matter how much she'd used.

"Huh! That's a pretty good deal. All right, I'll take it," Curly Hair said, and she purchased the perfume without a second thought.

"Heh! You won't be disappointed. A pleasure doing business."

Just as the woman had promised, Curly Hair's life took a dramatic turn for the better the very next day. Men lined up to chat with her, practically fighting for the privilege of picking her up. She'd had no idea there were so many guys who were head over heels for her. Curly Hair evaluated them carefully, going on dates and letting them treat her to meals, making herself ever more beautiful and being heaped with more and more lavish praise.

It was bliss. She couldn't stop smiling.

Eventually, she ended up going out with the most successful guy in the sales division. Now she really couldn't stop smiling.

A few days later, though, things began to change.

She was walking down the street when she suddenly felt someone watching her, but when she turned around, there was no one there. Just an eerie darkness.

"Is someone...watching me?"

She started to get really scared. A mysterious presence creeping closer and closer to her. Her body began to shiver. She could think of one thing that might be behind this: the perfume.

"Well, that's destiny, isn't it, young lady?" the antiques dealer said when Curly Hair rushed up to her. She was selling her junk on the street corner just like always. Curly Hair could almost hear the smirk in her voice as she said, "Fate doesn't have to be good. It can be bad, too." She didn't exactly sound like she felt guilty.

Curly Hair was understandably upset. "Excuse me? You didn't say anything about that! This isn't what I signed up for!"

“I don’t recall saying *only* good things would happen to you.” The woman chuckled: Silly girl; didn’t she know the risks of making assumptions?

The antiques dealer went on kindly, “There’s no need to fret, young lady. There’s a perfectly good solution when unpleasant fates come calling...”

Scene: the next day.

“Hey, listen to this! I’ve got a little secret. I’ve been going out with this guy in Sales for a while now...”

At lunchtime, Curly Hair opened up to her colleague Short Hair about how her life had been going. Short Hair was pretty surprised when Curly Hair told her exactly who she was seeing: He was one of the most popular men in the firm. Naturally, Short Hair wanted to know all the details. How had this happened? How had Curly Hair wound up dating this guy?

So Curly Hair leaned in close and said, “Well, just between you and me, I’ve got this little thing I call the Perfume of Destiny...”

The antiques dealer had told Curly Hair that when bad fate started coming along, she simply had to give the perfume to someone else, and Curly Hair would escape its clutches.

So, the “Perfume of Destiny” passed from Curly Hair to Short Hair, and not long after, from Short Hair to Ripply Wave.

And then, about a week later, I showed up.

I remembered Curly Hair saying “You’ve had your week” when Ripply Wave didn’t want to give up the perfume. Curly Hair had practically had to pry it out of her hands.

It was about three days after that that I’d started to feel the mysterious eyes on me—well, they weren’t that mysterious. They belonged to the stalker from Riviere Antiques.

“So I guess... This woman MacMillia’s been talking about, she must be her bad fate... Right?”

The moment she got back from her day off, Ripply Wave had told Curly Hair and Short Hair about my situation. She was really worried that they hadn’t

warned me what would happen.

The other two looked surprised, though. “No, it’s too soon for that. Let her enjoy the perfume a little longer.”

Time passed: four days, five. Each time the red-haired woman came out of her shop, stood in front of me, and talked to me, she was a little bit closer. Finally, it had been nearly a week, and the bottle was practically empty.

“Um... At this rate, MacMillia’s going to use up the perfume...”

What would happen then? Was there another bottle somewhere? Where had this perfume come from anyway? Ripply Wave had hesitantly asked all these questions when I wasn’t there.

That was when Curly Hair had given her the whole story. The creepy antiques dealer. The fact that this sancta was unique—there was no other bottle.

“So when MacMillia runs out of perfume...”

She won’t be able to escape her fate?

None of them knew what exactly that would mean. Anything could happen.

“What do you care? Sounds like it can’t make the kid’s life any worse,” Curly Hair said.

“But—”

“Besides,” Curly Hair went on, coldly interrupting Ripply Wave, “doesn’t she seem a little too...eager? She’s been friendlier than a puppy since the day she showed up.”

It would be easier for all of them if I were to disappear, she suggested. Why not let me use up the perfume? And the whole time she said this, she smiled as innocently as anything.

I’m sure it was the same smile that had been on the face of the dealer at Antiques Carredura.



“Sigh...”

I had overtime that day. The light at my desk was the last one on in the entire office.

Sure, it was a little sad being all by myself in that big room, but it was better than walking home, where I knew a bad destiny would be waiting for me on the road.

“Do you think you can give the perfume to someone else? I mean, right away? Otherwise, who knows what will happen to you?” Ripply Wave had said to me in her ripply way, adding that she didn’t want anything bad to happen to me. It turned out my efforts to fit in had backfired, but apparently, Ripply Wave was still on my side. That made me happier than anything.

“What am I gonna do?”

I gave the perfume bottle a shake and listened to the sad *splish* from inside. If I gave it to someone else, that would only mean they would suffer instead. And there was hardly any of it left—whoever I gave it to would definitely be the last person to use it.

“I’m supposed to make someone else unhappy?” I muttered. I was way too much of a coward to do that. It didn’t help that I didn’t actually know anyone I could give the perfume to. Heck, I didn’t even *want* to do that to anybody.

So I didn’t mind just suffering a terrible fate, then? No, I definitely had complicated feelings about that outcome. A young maiden’s heart is a difficult thing to comprehend.

I sat at my desk, confronted with both my worries and my unfinished work and getting nowhere with either of them, when someone behind me said, “Staying late? What a hard worker.”

“Eeyikes!” I yelped—highly embarrassing—and turned around.

Who should it be but the floofy beast-person who owned the place.

“O-oh, uh, yes, sir! Uh, thank you, sir!” I automatically straightened up when facing my savior, the one who had hired me. I was still grateful for that, even if it had led to me being stuck in this whole perfume situation.

“Mm. I appreciate a strong work ethic, but it’s much too early in your career

for you to be staying until this hour. Do you really have that much work piling up?”

“Oh, no, sir. It’s not so much that it’s piling up...”

“In that case, I think you should head home for tonight. All work and no play will take its toll on your health!”

“But, sir...”

“Young MacMillia. When someone offers you a modicum of decency, I do think you should take it.”

What a great president!

“Ha-ha... Well, if you say so, sir...”

I gave him a polite good-bye, but inside I was crying. There was a scary red-haired lady on my way home!

“Hmm, it’s after dark already. Maybe I should see you off. You live over by the cathedral, don’t you?”

What a wonderful president!

He was offering me another bit of decency, and this time I didn’t argue.

We chatted amiably about nothing as we walked through pools of light cast by the streetlamps. He asked if I was getting used to the work, if I enjoyed it, how things were going with my coworkers.

“Oh, you know, it’s all right” was all I could manage. I couldn’t exactly tell him I’d overplayed my hand from day one and made myself an object of resentment among the other women.

Ahead, I could see a street shining golden. It was the avenue that led to the cathedral.

Ugh! I don’t wanna go home!

“Say, you wouldn’t happen to have a few minutes to spare right now, would you?” the president asked. “Maybe we could go grab a drink together.” He stood between me and the avenue, blocking the light. “Somehow I always seem to end up drinking alone in the evenings... Just once, it would be nice to have

someone to share my cups with. I know a place near here. What do you say?"

I wasn't much of a drinker myself. Anyway, what was going on here? He'd been so insistent on my hurrying home, and now he was inviting me out for a drink?

"I'd love to!"

I nodded furiously. That's where I was at that moment. Anything to keep from having to go home!

We cut across the road to the cathedral and headed down a side street lit by those same small, glowing lamps.

"You seem to live near the cathedral. If I may ask, you don't live with your family, do you?" the president said.

"No, sir. My family lives in the suburbs. I'm on my own here in town." I was starting to warm to the conversation. "Oh! But we get along just fine, so don't worry about us!"

"That's good to know. I can't help noticing—your body is quite toned. Do you happen to play any sports?"

"Who, me? No, not especially..." I wasn't thinking too hard about my answers, but suddenly I noticed his eyes working their way across my body. I felt a chill. "I used to work on a construction site, though, so I'm not afraid to do some heavy lifting!" I chirped, forcing myself to smile as hard as I could in an effort to dispel the nasty feeling I was getting.

"That's good to know," he repeated, nodding. All he'd done that night was nod and agree. "I just have to ask—are you seeing anyone right now? A boyfriend, maybe?"

"Huh? No, sir, never had one of those in my life..."

There were fewer and fewer lights on the street.

"Any good friends? Acquaintances with whom you regularly keep in touch?"

"Um... No, not especially..."

"No? Good, good. By the way, I can't help but notice you're not wearing your

perfume today.”

“Sir?”

My perfume? Why were we suddenly talking about that? For that matter, how did he even know about it?

As the questions crowded in on me, I had a thought: Was there really a bar way out here? There were hardly any streetlamps, let alone any businesses.

The only light in this darkness came from the president’s eyes, which glinted in the gloom.

“It’s been, oh, a week now since I first realized how much I liked the smell of the perfume you were wearing. I wish you were wearing it now. Truly a wonderful aroma. Where in the world did you get it?”

“Uh...”

This was definitely too much, too fast. I didn’t know what to say. I stumbled back a step.

“Whenever I see someone to my liking in town, I ask them to join my company, but you were my very best find. I knew the moment I saw you. That lean frame. That youth. That pale skin. All of it looked so very, very, very... delicious!”

“Delici-huh?!”

The president closed in on me, his breath coming hard. I took another step back, then another, until I felt the wall behind me.

“Put on the perfume. I know you have it with you. Just a spritz, and everything will be perfect. Impeccable. The smell—I love it! Argh, I need it! The perfect seasoning! Come now, put it on already!”

“Uh, um, Mr. President? What’s happening? You’re...you’re joking, right?”

“I know the women in the office speak ill of me behind my back. They poured poison in your ear, didn’t they? Told you I go around trying to pick them up?”

“Well, I mean... I guess they did say something about you hitting on them...”

“The agony! They’ve got it all wrong!”

“Oh, they, uh, they do, sir?”

“Out of the kindness of my heart, I only invited them out to *eat*!”

“You *are* a piece of trash!”

“No, no, you misunderstand! There’s nothing *sexual* about any of this!”

“Oh?”

“I speak of the physical appetite—I want *food*!”

“That’s not any better...”

“Until this moment, I have resisted. I know I mustn’t let my true feelings show. My ethics, my morals, have allowed me to keep a lid on all that. That’s why I’ve never laid hands on anyone!”

“Um, most people haven’t done that, sir...”

“And then you come along! You come along and spoil it all! You have the most perfect body of anyone I’ve ever brought into my fold! The aroma surrounding you has unleashed the desires I formerly suppressed! I can stand it no longer... I *must* eat you! I *will*!”

He was panting, and in his eyes there was no trace of the kindness and compassion I’d seen on the day he’d recruited me.

“All this time I’ve found attractive young ladies and hired them for my office, and I’ve always resisted eating them. Yet this past month, I’ve wanted nothing so bad as to consume one. The urge has haunted me every hour! I can’t take it anymore!”

He was crazed; he didn’t look like a beastkin any longer, but merely like a beast, salivating over his prey.

“I-I’m sorry, sir, but I’m not into that kind of thing! I don’t think I can help you!”

“One bite! Just one bite, I beg you!”

“No, don’t! Please stop!”

“You might like to know, I’m a thigh man. Give me one of those luscious legs!”

“Why are we still talking about eating me?!” I cried, tears in my eyes. Didn’t I say no?! I edged along the wall, looking for some way to escape.

Incidentally, are you familiar with the “wall-slam”? It’s what all the boys seem to do to the girls in this sort of situation in the books I read these days. If an inexperienced young maiden like me may be so bold, let me explain it to you just in case you don’t know. It’s when there’s a wall, and the guy plants his hand firmly against it, like, *slam!* Then he stares straight at the girl. That’s the wall-slam.

The president must have known the heart of a young maiden, because he obligingly slammed the wall so hard that his paw took a chunk out of it.

“Don’t you run from me!”

“Yes, sir! I mean, no, sir!” I said, briefly cowed by the extraordinary force of his wall-slam.

From so close that I could feel the heat of his breath, the president growled, “Put the perfume on.”

How did we get here? How had I wound up in this situation?

I’d gone through job after job, I got let go every time, and my subsequent search had yielded no new employers. When someone finally asked me to join their business, I only ended up despised by my coworkers and tricked into putting on some weird perfume, and to top it all off, now I was about to be eaten!

Perfume of Destiny, my ass! I didn’t meet a single destined partner this entire time. All that waiting and hoping, and for what?

“U-um... Are you really going to eat me? Could we just stop now? I promise I won’t tell the police.” My voice was shaking, but I somehow managed to at least pretend not to be out of my mind with fear. I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t give up. He hadn’t eaten me yet.

“I don’t care what you promise. Put on the damn perfume.”

“But—”

“Do it already!” He slammed the wall again, taking out another chunk.

“Y-yessir! Sorry, sir!”

If I didn’t do what he said, he looked like he might just swallow me whole. I dug through my bag until I came up with the perfume. I applied a spritz to my wrist.

A faint smell of roses enveloped us, and even as I watched, the president’s terrifying expression softened. “Ahh! Yes, that’s the stuff! That’s the smell I’ve been waiting for!” He was on cloud nine. He breathed deep, his shoulders rising and falling, looking as satisfied as if he’d already had his meal. But he hadn’t—and he pressed closer to me.

“H-hey, um! I really wish... I wish you wouldn’t! Could you stop? If you get any closer, Mr. President, I mean, it...it would be criminal!”

“Me, a criminal...? Yes, that would be a problem.”

“S-so you’ll stop?”

“What I’ll do is eat my fill tonight and consider it my last meal!”

He crouched down and grabbed my leg with both hands. I heard him gulp. He looked ecstatic as the breath rushed from his nostrils. He opened his mouth to reveal a row of perfectly sharp fangs, which gradually advanced toward my leg...

My mind went blank.

“Roses *are* such a lovely aroma, aren’t they?”

What? When had she gotten there? She was facing him where he crouched in front of me.

“Wha—?” I said.

It was the red-haired woman, the owner of Riviere Antiques, holding a closed umbrella...

She didn’t seem too worried that I obviously had no idea what was going on. She brought the umbrella down on the president; it whistled through the air and cracked him on the forehead. It didn’t look like much of a hit, but in the space of a second, the president had flown down the street.

“Wha—ghhaaaa!” he cried as he tumbled head over heels.

Wait... What just happened?

I must have had question marks floating over my head—my brain couldn't keep up. The woman had *helped* me? Why? Hadn't she been out to get me?

"Stay behind me," the woman said, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. Then she moved so she was between me and the president.

"Heavens... That was quite a bolt from the blue," the president muttered, climbing slowly to his feet and glaring at Red Hair. His eyes were still sharp—and so were his fangs. I saw the muscles ripple on his body. "Interrupt my meal, will you? We can't have that..."

He sounded calm, but his words were accompanied by a low growl from deep in his throat. All I could think was how terrifying he was. But even confronted with my beast of a president, the red-haired woman standing between us was perfectly calm.

"That Perfume of Destiny is a textbook example of a problematic sancta," she said. "It has a curse on it: It amplifies people's feelings toward whomever it's sprayed on. Looks like some unscrupulous dealer came up with a neat and tidy way of explaining it and tried to foist it off that way. But this sancta won't bring you your destiny. It never could."

She spoke casually, but most her explanation was lost on me. I was too busy pointing down the street and making incoherent noises.

The president rushed at us with a howl. "Hrrraaaahhh!" This didn't seem like the time to be chatting!

"I'll show you what good and bad destiny *really* look like."

Poink! She popped open the umbrella and sent the president sprawling into the night again, until he disappeared in the darkness. Never mind that he was several times her size.

"My guess is this beastkin finally snapped after days of being exposed to the perfume's smell."

Undeterred to have been sent flying, the president appeared again, leaping from the darkness. I could just make him out past the red-haired woman, and I

could see he was a beast now—we weren't going to talk this out.

“Do you know who offered up the prayer to create the Perfume of Destiny? It was a girl who lived almost a century ago,” the red-haired woman said, casually dodging the president's attack and still looking no more bothered than if she were taking an afternoon walk. “Beset by one heartbreak after another, she went to the cathedral all those years ago and prayed for a love that would come true. The cathedral granted her wish, and a bottle of perfume she carried with her was transformed into the Perfume of Destiny.”

Even as she told me the story, the woman (whose name, incidentally, I still didn't know) ducked around several more attacks. The president's roars sounded more and more desperate. He was frustrated that he couldn't so much as scratch the woman; his breath was growing ragged.

None of it stopped the woman from going on with her story.

“The cathedral's perfume did indeed cause her love life to blossom—but it also drew out the strongest feelings in *everyone* around her. When she landed the most popular guy in school, the perfume turned her classmates' amazement into violent jealousy, and she found herself alienated, hated, and isolated from the people around her. So her prayer became a curse instead.”

That was the truth of the Perfume of Destiny—nothing more than that, said the nameless red-haired woman, unimpressed. She folded up her umbrella. Which seemed like a weird choice, since the president hadn't given up by any means; in fact, he was leaping at her with open jaws right at that very moment!

“Hey, you might want to—” I backed away in a hurry, terrified now that the thing that had been protecting us from the president was gone. I moved so quickly that I fell smack on my behind, to my embarrassment.

Just as I was about to shout again, the woman brought her right hand to her mouth and pulled her glove off with her teeth. A lovely hand with pale, slim fingers appeared. She reached out to the president as if offering it up to him.

“He's growing tired. I think our moment has come,” she told me, and then she brushed those pale fingers along the president's nose.

There was a flash of blue-white light.

“Gaaah!” The president fell unconscious, collapsing like a puppet with his strings cut. He tumbled to the ground beside me and the woman, carried by his own momentum, and scooted along the road. It looked very uncomfortable.

“M...Mr. President?” I said. He gave no sign of getting up. Was he alive? Was he dead? I wasn’t sure, but it seemed safe to assume he wouldn’t attack us anymore... Didn’t it? The thoughts raced around in my head as I gave the president’s shoe an experimental prod with my finger. He didn’t so much as twitch.

W...was I safe?

“When curses are broken, they disappear.”

The one placed on him, she added, and any others...

I turned back in the direction of the woman’s voice and found her holding out her pale hand to me and looking the slightest bit pleased with herself.

I still had no idea what was going on; I just couldn’t keep up. For that matter, why was she sticking her hand out like that? What did she want?

Oh! Money! Payment in gratitude.

“I’m so sorry. This is all I have on me,” I said, managing to rifle through my bag without ever getting up off the ground. I gave her all the cash I had.

“Dummy.” She tapped the umbrella gently against my forehead, then gave me a smile. “The Perfume of Destiny. You have it with you, right? Give it to me.” She held out her hand again—and, incidentally, returned my money.

“U-um, oh. The perfume. Right.”

“I didn’t help you in order to get money from you,” she said with an exasperated shrug as she took the perfume.

Sure. That’s right. She’d been talking to me for several days now, even though I had no idea why, or what had brought her here at this moment. Upon realizing I was safe, I felt the tension flood out of my body and be replaced by all the questions I’d been ignoring until then.

“Say, uh...” I opened my mouth, but I wasn’t sure what to ask first.

The woman was examining the perfume. Then a bluish-white light appeared, like the one she'd used on the president, between her hand and the bottle. Finally, she seemed to notice I was talking to her, and she looked down at me.

"Riviere," she said.

That was her name. She told me to call her Riviere.

She was still illuminated by the pale light as she spoke. I guess she and her shop had the same name.

As the light faded away, Riviere reached out to me again, her slim hand once again covered by a black glove.

What was going on here?

Oh! Payment!

"I'm sorry, I promise this is all I've got..." She hadn't seemed to like my money, so this time I gave her the bread I'd been planning to eat for dinner.

"Dummy." She tapped my head with the umbrella again. "But this one...I guess I'll take." She took the bread and put it in her bag, not looking terribly pleased. Finally, she reached out one more time, saying, "How long do you plan to sit there?"

I suddenly realized I was still on the ground next to the unconscious president. Jeez, talk about embarrassing.

If I was going to try to get some answers out of Riviere, I should at least stand up first.

"Thank you...very much," I said, and then I took her hand. It was warm.

"You're very welcome," she said with the faintest of smiles.



"I...I'm so sorry! I'll never get anywhere near you again! So please don't hold this against me, will you? I know! I'll pay you an indemnity. Just, please, forget all about what I did..."

The president looked a bit the worse for wear from the fight as he came

around; he hurried to straighten himself up—and started talking. Based on what was coming out of his mouth, it sounded like he remembered everything.

“Of course he remembers,” said Riviere coolly; she was still standing beside me. “Because he wasn’t manipulated into it. True, the sancta gave him that final push, but it only awakened what was sleeping within him all this time.”

I was at a loss for what to do. The president removed his wristwatch and held it out to me, a down payment on his “indemnity.” When all I did was look at it, he exclaimed, “I’m sorry! Is that not enough?” and pushed every bit of cash in his wallet at me.

I stared at him incredulously. He started begging, telling me he’d do anything if I’d let him off the hook.

“Don’t worry,” I said, looking right into his eyes. “I won’t tell anyone what happened today. So—”

“You won’t?! You mean it? Thank you!” He cut me off, taking my hand and squeezing. His desperation was written all over his face. “I promise I’ll bring you more gifts in apology, and more indemnity money!”

Apparently, a verbal promise was enough for him, because he soon left us, bowing profusely as he went. I guess he didn’t wonder what else I had been about to say.

“See you around!” the president called, waving from afar, and then he disappeared down the street into town, which left me and Riviere from the antiques shop standing together on the dark, dark street. I looked at the watch the president had given me; it was clearly very expensive. And the money he’d pressed on me was more than I knew what to do with.

In the end, he hadn’t even bothered to listen to the rest of my sentence.

I didn’t need a watch or a wallet full of cash. I’d hoped for something else.

Since I had taken the watch and the money, I figured that meant I’d agreed to his conditions—I would look the other way about tonight, and he would steer clear of me. I guess I couldn’t go back to the office.

“Darn... I really liked that job.”

All that time I spent trying to find somewhere to work, and I finally landed at that real estate office—only to end up needing to pound the pavement again. My résumé wasn't going to be doing me any favors at this point.

I guess I would go back to sighing in the plaza, munching on crappy bread, and hoping tomorrow would be better.

"I'm so tired of this..."

Why did this always happen? The moment I thought things were looking up, the moment I was starting to enjoy myself, something unexpected happened and cost me my job. Every single time, it seemed to go this way. How many more workplaces was I going to go through before I finally found where I belonged?

I heaved my very biggest sigh. Time to resign myself to my situation yet again. At least, I thought distantly, I'd sort of made a friend in the owner of the antiques shop. I should at least say thank you to her.

As I stood there moping, Riviere started talking, almost to herself. "A week ago, when I saw you go by my store, I noticed right away—I could see you were under a sancta's curse."

Curse?

What did that mean? She'd used that word a few times.

She saw the puzzled look on my face and said, "You should try to remember that word. A *curse* is what I call the prayer imbued in a sancta. As the owner of an antiques shop, it's something I'm rather particular about." She didn't seem to worry that someone might think it was kind of a weird thing to be a stickler for. "With my line of work, I can tell immediately when someone is cursed. That's why I was keeping an eye on you whenever you went by. Every day, the curse seemed to grow thicker around you, until I got so worried about it that I started talking to you. I guess I ended up scaring you off in the process."

"Uh, yeah... I was pretty convinced you were 'bad' destiny, Miss Riviere..."

"Please just call me Riviere."

"But we just met! I could never!"

“We haven’t *just* met.”

“Okay, but it’s the first time we’ve really talked.”

“What’s your name?”

“MacMillia,” I said after a second.

“Good. Say, MacMillia.” (Ohmygosh! She called me by my first name, just like that.) “You’re looking for work, aren’t you?”

“Yeah... I guess I am.”

“Is there something you *want* to do?”

“I just want to do a real job and make an honest living,” I said.

“You’re being modest.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not like you can just pray for whatever you want and it’ll come true.”

At that, Riviere was silent for a long moment, peering into the darkness down the street. “And what if you could?” she finally asked. “What would you pray for?”

I knew where she was looking: toward the cathedral. A miraculous place where any wish might be granted, as long as you prayed long and hard enough. But my wishes never came true, no matter how often I visited.

If I *was* to go back there and offer up another prayer, though, it would probably be...

“I’d like to make a living doing something only I can do.”

I’d always been so busy trying to make ends meet that I’d never really thought about my future. I was too busy every day to spend time daydreaming about what my life might look like down the road.

When I told Riviere all this, she turned back to me and said, “I think what you’re saying is that you want to do decent work and make an honest living that will also give you time to discover what it is you truly want to do. Does that sound right?”

I guess?

“In simple terms, pretty much, probably,” I said. I was almost embarrassed to hear it articulated like that.

“In that case, you’re in luck,” Riviere the antiques dealer said, and then she giggled. Because, she told me, that was a prayer she could answer.

“What do you mean?” I asked. That sounded very important and all, but I wasn’t following.

Her answer was impossibly simple. She said, “Come work at my shop.”



“Gosh... Sounds like you’ve had it rough.”

It was a weekday, several days later, and I was having lunch with Ripply Wave, who’d ducked away from the office for a few minutes. We went to the same café we had before. The president had kept his promise to stay away from me, in part because I left the company without really saying good-bye to anyone.

Ripply Wave was the only person who stayed in touch with me after I quit.

In turn, I kept my promise to the president—I never specifically mentioned his name when I told Ripply Wave what had happened. I only said that a “bad destiny” had come after me and nearly cost me my life, so I’d quit. She seemed to understand. She’d experienced the power of the Perfume of Destiny herself, after all.

“So, what are you doing now that you’ve quit? Do you have somewhere to go? Got enough money saved up? If you need anything, we could probably set you up with something...”

“We” was in reference to her band, presumably. She said things were going well with the jazz group and that she might even be able to leave the real estate agency earlier than expected. I didn’t doubt it would be fun to join her in chasing her dream, but I shook my head and said, “Thanks, but you don’t have to worry about me!”

“Are you sure? But how are you supporting yourself?”

“Well, I got a generous severance package...”

She looked surprised. “I didn’t realize our company gave even brand-new hires severance pay. Who knew?”

All right, all right. So it wasn’t a severance package so much as hush money.

As we chatted over lunch, we each shared what was going on in our lives. Ripply Wave told me things were pretty much the same for Curly Hair and Short Hair, who were still trucking along with their boyfriends. Riviere had said that those affected by the perfume found their feelings amplified—that was all. Relationships built on the basis of those feelings didn’t disappear just because the effect of the perfume wore off. Still, without the perfume, the passion it inspired might cool. It would be up to the couple to keep their relationship going.

“You should have heard them complaining about their boyfriends yesterday! They were really into it. I guess the guys told them they wish the ladies would go back to wearing the perfume they’d used when they first started dating. Oooh, the girls were so mad!”

“Really?”

Yep. It would be up to the couple.

As a point of interest, Ripply Wave also reported that the president was keeping a bit more distance from the female employees than he used to. She said he seemed to change overnight, starting the day after I quit. “You know anything about it?” she asked me, but of course I shook my head.

“Maybe he just learned a little self-restraint,” I said.

“I wonder...”

The upshot was that even now, after the perfume’s effect had worn off, the president didn’t try to hit on Ripply Wave. It had to be a good thing for her—she was devoting more and more time to her jazz band and quietly getting ready to leave the company.

“I guess we’ll both have to do our best going forward,” I said.

Her with her jazz band. Me with...my stuff.

“We’re not coworkers now—I don’t have seniority over you anymore. You

don't have to sound so stiff!" Ripply Wave said.

"What? Really? Well, all right!" I grinned and resolved to treat her like a real friend.

She smiled back. "Great. And because I'm not your senior anymore, I'm not treating you today!" she said sweetly, and we proceeded to enjoy a lovely lunch as equals, as friends.

From now on, if anyone asks if I have any friends, I'll think of her. Ripply Wave.

I mean, uh, Linabelle. That's her real name.

She was probably my first real friend.

"So tell me, *do* you have somewhere to go?" she asked a little while later.

I realized I hadn't actually answered her question. I gave a quick nod and said, "Yeah, I'll be fine." Then I grinned. "I had a stroke of good luck, too."



I walked along the avenue toward the cathedral, broad flagstones underfoot on the arrow-straight road. It was relatively well traveled on a weekday afternoon. Nobody was barking for customers, but no one seemed bored, either.

It was just another day in the small frontier island country of Cururunelvia, the land of prayer. Not the kind of place any tourists typically visited.

Rows of white buildings ran alongside the avenue. Come nightfall, they would shine golden, but at the moment, they stood silent, as if sleeping.

A bit farther down the street, I stopped in front of one building in particular, a place obviously older than the structures that slumbered around it. It was low-set, with a weathered brick facade and a faded sign that said RIVIERE ANTIQUES.

My new workplace. It was standing right there.

I took a deep breath and put my hand on the door. I remembered what had happened a few days before:

“I’m sorry. Did you just say...?”

I’d stood there on the darkened street, doubting my own ears. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing from the shop owner, Riviere.

Looking mostly at the Perfume of Destiny she was holding, Riviere went on smoothly, leaving me ever further behind: “I happen to be in need of an assistant. A shady antiques shop has been flooding the town with sancta lately. More than I can deal with by myself.”

She was shorthanded, she explained. She looked at me, but I didn’t know why she decided to hire me, of all people. I took a step back, feeling wary. The last time I’d been personally recruited by the owner of a business, I’d nearly gotten eaten.

It had only taken me three years as a would-be productive member of society to learn to be skeptical of people once in a while.

Riviere didn’t sound bothered by my vigilance. “I happen to be looking for someone relatively young, ideally a girl—and who has excellent street smarts.”

Hey, that sounds familiar...

“I also need her to be up to speed on current youth culture, have experience with a wide variety of jobs, but also be a people person.”

Hold on! Was it possible that description fit...me?!

“The ideal candidate would be someone who’s had personal experience with the problems sancta can cause.”

I caught my breath. That description definitely fit me!

I looked at her in amazement, and she smiled gently. “I think it’s possible you drew me here.”

The Perfume of Destiny attracted both good fate and bad. It made people’s feelings toward you stronger. Maybe she *hadn’t* been immune to its effects.

That was when I remembered something. I hadn’t had a “lucky encounter” like Curly Hair and Ripply Wave had. They each told me about the great people they’d met, but all I got was chased around by the president. That didn’t seem very fair, did it?

“Would you like to try working with me, MacMillia?” Riviere asked. She offered me her hand. She’d taken off her glove, revealing her pale, slender fingers. “If you’ll join me—well, for starters, I’ll eliminate that curse on you.” Although, she added with a smile, the remaining effect of the perfume would wear off shortly in any case. She held up her hand, the same one that had absorbed the curse from the president and the perfume bottle.

Could I really trust her?

I wondered, yet I didn’t worry. I knew in my bones now how the Perfume of Destiny worked. If it made people’s feelings stronger, then this woman had never meant me any harm from the start.

So I took Riviere’s hand. “Just don’t eat me, okay?”

A faint light glowed between us for a second, and I caught a whiff of roses. I could feel the curse that had been on me disappearing into her palm, leaving behind a simple, unremarkable rose-scented perfume.

Still, she didn’t let go of my hand but continued to give me that soft smile.

Which brings us back to the present, when my hand was resting on the door.

I gave it a push, and it creaked as it opened, accompanied by the timid jingle of a bell.

Inside, the shop was absolutely packed with stuff. Dolls, music boxes, flower vases, combs, statues, mirrors—all arranged neatly on the shelves and tables.



Farther inside were sofas for receiving guests—at that moment, a red-haired woman was sitting on one, reading the newspaper. She wore a red dress the same color as her hair, and her eyes were ultramarine blue. At last, she seemed to register the sound of the bell and looked up.

“Welcome, welcome. I’ve been waiting for you, MacMillia,” she said. And then she—my boss, as of today—smiled. Just like she had when she first took my hand on that dark night—the same soft, gentle expression.



CHAPTER 2

On the Subject of My Most Beloved Shopkeeper

Humans can get used to just about any situation after a few days. That's my personal opinion anyway, based on three years of my job-hopping life. As I greeted the morning on my third day as an employee of the antiques shop, I felt it happening again.

"Quiet today," observed my shopkeeper—i.e., Riviere—as she sat at the desk at the back of the store and savored some dark tea.

"Sure is," I said from where I sat staring into space on the sofa. I was starting out on day three here, and the shop was all crickets. Quiet hours and lovely tea: That seemed to describe most of Riviere's days. In Cururunelvia, an antiques shop is usually a place that deals in sancta, and as far as I know, there aren't that many of them. It's a real niche business—like, if you went around town asking for the nearest antiques shop, chances are no one would actually be able to name a place.

As you might expect, a tiny little business like ours didn't get a lot of customers. The two of us sitting there, one of us lounging vacantly on the couch and the other enjoying a few moments with some morning tea, told the whole story.

The shopkeeper set down her teacup on the desk, cocked her head, and said, "Let's talk about something interesting. Do you have anything?" Right out of the

blue like that. She sounded like someone's pestering girlfriend. Another sign of how little there was going on today.

"Aww, why me?" I said, not trying to hide my disinterest.

After three days together, I'd started to get a pretty good sense of her lifestyle, so maybe this would be a good chance to expound upon the subject of my most beloved shopkeeper.

First: My shopkeeper, Riviere, loves dark tea.

"Eating and drinking are perfectly acceptable in this shop, so feel free to grab a bite if you need to. I always keep a pot of tea brewing, too. Help yourself anytime you like," she'd said early on. For some reason, she'd puffed out her chest as she added, "I use a variety of tea leaf called Refrain, by the way. It helps calm the nerves. That's why I'm always able to keep such a cool head. And this here is Carmine, a tea with a pronounced crimson hue. Very fragrant."

"Oh, uh, okay..."

Suddenly, Riviere really warmed to her subject. Her eyes sparkled like an excited child's. I guess she was thrilled to have someone to talk about this stuff with.

"So! Which would you like?"

"Umm..." I tried to act like I was thinking about it. I really would have been perfectly happy with either of them, but I thought it would be rude to say so.

While I stood there agonizing, Riviere giggled. "Hee-hee! Don't worry—you don't have to say a word. I know exactly what you're thinking." She winked at me.

Ah! My brilliant shopkeeper! She knew what was on her employees' minds without them having to say anything. What a wonderful person.

Riviere put a hand on my shoulder and said, "You want to try all of them!"

"What?"

No, that wasn't what I wanted at all!

"You want to savor the differences between all the various kinds of dark tea—

that's what you're trying to communicate!"

"Um."

She didn't understand it all!

"Hee-hee! Greedy child."

"No, I..."

What was *with* her?

"Come right this way, then. I'll teach you everything I know, from how to steep the perfect cup to how to enjoy every last drop. By tomorrow, you'll be a tea master yourself!"

A tea master? What even was that?

In spite of my doubts, I spent the rest of that day learning how to make a cup of tea and offering it to Riviere.

"Mmm, that's not bad. You've got a knack for this. You pass!"

"Thanks. Uh...I think?"

I thought I'd been hired at an antiques shop, not a tea shop, but at the same time, I was bent on doing whatever job I was given as well as I could. The very picture of a productive member of society.

"I like the Refrain in particular. It makes me feel so relaxed."

"Oh, really?" I asked, taking a sip of it. I looked at the teacups lined up in front of me. By the time I had brewed them, I'd already lost track of which was which.

"Hee-hee! If you can't tell them apart by flavor, that means you still have much to learn."

I was beginning to understand that Riviere had an uncommon interest in teas. I was determined to bear that in mind—a unique fact about my shopkeeper that would be worth knowing. For one thing, I suspected that when we ran out of tea, it would be my job to go get more. I wondered if I should take some notes so I could remember what the packages of her favorites looked like.

I pulled out one of the packages and looked at it. "Hey, this one's past its expiration date."

“I *thought* it didn’t taste very good. No wonder.”

Bonus fact: Riviere has a *terrible* sense of taste. So bad that I figured when we needed more tea, I could just drop by any old store and grab whatever was on the shelf.

Now, of course, I’m not saying it was my job to sit and drink tea all day long.

You might be wondering, How did Riviere Antiques come by all these antiques that it dealt in? I certainly did. I didn’t beat around the bush—on my first day, I just blurted out, “So where does all this stuff come from?”

Riviere simply replied, “Customers bring them to sell to me, for the most part.” Totally unfazed. Ha! Now that’s a mature, grown-up woman for you. At least, that’s what I thought on day one.

Come the next day...

“Hee-hee-hee! Look, MacMillia! What do you think? Great, huh?”

When I arrived in the morning, Riviere confronted me with a white vase and peppered me with questions about how I liked it. When I asked her what exactly it was, she started to get really excited.

“This is a talking vase! Its personality changes depending on how much water you fill it with. It’s the most peculiar thing.” She demonstrated by tipping it upside down and pouring the water inside into a bucket.

The moment she did so, the vase, which had been silent until that moment (like most vases, I guess), suddenly began to shimmy and cheer. “Huzzah!” it exclaimed. I could hardly believe my ears—it was really talking. “Hoo-wee! You are one fine-looking young woman, if I may say so!”

Quite a mouth that thing had. Figuratively.

“Miss Riviere, did that vase just...?”

“The trick is that the level of water corresponds to its level of intelligence. Fill it all the way up, and it becomes reflective and wise, but empty it out, and it gets empty-headed, too.”

“I’ve never heard an analysis so on point and yet so...brutal,” I said.

“As you can see, it’s currently dumb as a bag of rocks, a real piece of trash.”

“Yeah, but do you have to say that right in front of it? I can’t help feeling a little bad for it...”

“Huzzaaaaah!”

All right, I didn’t feel bad anymore.

“Who sold you this thing anyway?” I asked.

“Nobody sold it to me.”

“So you...”

“Just picked it up.”

“Where? Where did you find it?”

“Somewhere with lots of unneeded things.”

“You went rooting through the trash, didn’t you?”

Was she sure about this? Nobody was going to get mad, were they?

“Where I found it isn’t important, MacMillia. It’s what *role* it can play.”

“Hey, ladies, how about we head back to my place for a little fun tonight? Whoo!”

Listen to this dumb vase! “Can this thing help *anyone*?” I asked, truly flummoxed.

“Hey, now!” the vase said. “What a thing to say! That’s a big *non, non, non*, my dear!”

I didn’t exactly follow, but Riviere gave the vase an annoyed “Quiet, you” and filled it full of water to shut it up. Then she said, “Value is in the eye of the beholder—every person has a different idea of what it means. Even something like this might have its uses.”

“Indeed so,” the now-full vase said earnestly.

If she said so. But when was a vase with a split personality going to be any help?

As it happened, I was to discover the answer to that question that very day.

There were two main types of people who patronized Riviere Antiques. One of them wanted to sell sancta, and the other wanted to buy them. The particular customer we were working with at that moment was one of the latter, a young woman living by herself.

“The evenings just get so lonely,” she said. “I’ve been looking for a good man to help fill the empty place in my heart...”

The poor bachelorette stared at the ground. She told us she’d been without a boyfriend for such a long time, and she couldn’t take the loneliness anymore.

Ah, okay. But, uh, wasn’t she at the wrong kind of shop?

“Hee-hee, well, you’re in luck,” my shopkeeper said, taking the lonely lady’s hand and giving her that gentle smile, never mind that this sort of request didn’t seem like our wheelhouse. “I have just the thing for you.”

She went to the back of the store and emerged with a flourish, holding...

No way.

“Huzzah!”

Yeeep.

“This has been just waiting for you—a talking vase! You can change this sancta’s personality with the amount of water you put in.”

She’d only picked that thing up this morning, but here she was treating it like it had been sitting around the shop for ages, waiting for the perfect owner. Riviere peppered her speech with eerily on-point salesperson jargon: “I wouldn’t sell this to just anyone”; “It’s clear this meets a great need for you”; “I feel like this is destiny”—that sort of thing. Wait—objectively speaking, was she selling, or did it sound like she was running some sort of weirdo scam? I guess it showed how well she knew her business.

“Whooo! That’s some body you got there, baby! How about we head back to —?”

Riviere interrupted the vase with a ruthless deluge of water to quiet it down. She was as accustomed to handling sancta as she was to selling them.

“If the vase gets a little *too* talkative, you can always add more water, just like

that.”

“Consider me your humble companion on life’s path,” the vase said calmly.

“Goodness!” the bachelorette said. The vase’s silky baritone seemed to have stolen her heart. “What a wonderful voice you have!” She clutched her hands to her chest. I guess she was a sucker for a husky guy...’s voice.

She bought the vase on the spot. I mean, what else could you do, if you were in love?

“Come again!” Riviere said. She emptied the vase back out—she probably thought it was mean to make a young woman carry a vase full of water all the way home by herself.

“I promise you I will! Thank you so much!” the woman said, beaming as she left.

“Mais oui!” added the vase inanely.

I couldn’t believe Riviere had managed to move the thing the same day she found it.

“Hee-hee. How about that? Didn’t I tell you? I knew I could sell it!” She puffed out her chest, very pleased with herself. I had to admit, she’d been right. I felt bad for having doubted my shopkeeper’s shopkeeping prowess in the days since she hired me.

Fast forward a few hours. There was a very deliberate knock at the door, and someone came in.

“Hello! Is Riviere here?” The newcomer was a middle-aged woman in a work uniform—I realized she was a public servant. “Oh, hello there,” she said when she saw me. She gave me a quick smile, then popped some papers into Riviere’s hand. “You went taking trash without asking again, didn’t you? You need to stop. I’ve told you—you need to submit the proper application beforehand, or the numbers don’t match up when we do collections!”

“Wha—? Oh, er, y-yes, I’m so sorry...” Riviere, who had been sitting at her desk with a smug look on her face, straightened up like a child who’d been caught red-handed being naughty.

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry. Just don’t do it again!” The woman stood with her hands on her hips, furious. “When you ‘acquire’ junk for your shop, you need to submit an application first! We’ve been over this!”

So this wasn’t her first offense.

“But I never used to need an application...”

“I told you, the rules changed! I’m done turning a blind eye to this. Write up an application right now! And you owe a fine, too. Come on, don’t dawdle!”

“Hng...” Riviere bit her lip. Her shame was plain on her face.

“The fine is nine thousand lain,” the woman informed her.

“N-nine thousand?! That much?” Riviere stammered. That was practically what she’d sold the vase for.

Ah, but all things are fleeting. The woman didn’t budge. “Yes, because you keep doing this. It’s not the biggest fine we can charge, either.”

Riviere gave her the money, and the woman counted to make sure it was all there.

“Don’t let this happen again!” she barked as she left the shop.

The vase had sold for ten thousand lain, incidentally. Meaning that, in simple terms, the woman had siphoned off 90 percent of our income for the day.

“And I managed to get such a good price for it...” Riviere looked devastated.

I was starting to get a clear picture of something I’d sensed from the very first day—that Riviere didn’t really keep up on the most current trends. That included recent rules and current fashions. Maybe it was because she dealt in antiques, or maybe the store took up all her time, but she seemed to be ever so slightly out of step with everyone else.

On that note, don’t you agree that it’s the new hire’s job to cheer up her bummed-out shopkeeper?

“Here,” I said and set a teacup on her desk. I was putting into practice the things I’d learned on the very first day of work. I wasn’t sure if I was a “tea master,” but I thought I’d gotten pretty decent at brewing a solid cup.

“Ahh, that does calm the heart,” Riviere murmured, sighing sadly even as she savored the drink. “I know this flavor. This is the Refrain, isn’t it?”

A few sips of tea were all it took to bring her back from despair.

She watched me as she sat there, looking smug and sipping tea. I guess when you drink something every day, you do learn to tell the varieties apart.

I still had a lot to learn about the different kinds of tea leaves after just a few days on the job—I had to look at the package to be sure which one I had made. “Oops, I’m sorry. This is the one that’s past its date,” I said.

“Ah, no wonder it doesn’t taste that good.”

“How’s that for an interesting story?” I asked. She’d wanted me to entertain her, so I’d decided to narrate everything that had happened to me in the three days since I’d joined the staff of Riviere Antiques.

Unfortunately, it looked like I had failed to grant my shopkeeper’s wish.

“Hmm... No, that wasn’t remotely interesting,” she said, no punches pulled—but she was beaming while she said it.



Huh? Something seemed strange here. “I told you about it because it all seemed interesting to *me*,” I said.

“It was nothing more than a series of vignettes in which *I* end up embarrassed,” Riviere said, puffing out her cheeks and wondering aloud how that was supposed to be interesting.

I snickered and said teasingly, “Well, I’m told value is in the eye of the beholder.”

Just like she’d told me, I pointed out.

As I spoke, I took a sip of the tea I’d made from the leaves I’d bought that morning. I hadn’t been working here very long at all, but I vowed to learn everything I could, one thing at a time—starting with the flavor of this tea.



The Ghost Wolves

I had just arrived at the antiques shop when I heard a tremendous crash from inside. It sounded like something huge had fallen over.

“Whoa! Wha—? What was that?” I peered into the shop, my dukes up, afraid that we might have burglars or a violent customer on our hands. I slowly scanned the cramped interior, which was cloaked in gloom, not a light on anywhere. Smack in the middle of the store I saw her, collapsed on the ground.

“Hngh... Urgh...”

Riviere. The owner of the antiques shop where I worked.

“Hey! Miss Riviere! What happened?!”

Her employee (i.e., me) came rushing over. I cradled her in my arms, and she gave me a pained look.

“Ah... MacMillia, you’re here...” She reached toward me with one quavering hand. Something terrible must have happened before I got here. Whatever it was, it didn’t seem to have disturbed anything in the shop, though. What in the world could have—?

“Mac...Milli...a...”

She stretched out that shivering hand again. She was trying to tell me something; I was sure of it. I listened hard, waiting for her to say something, anything!

Her fingertips brushed my cheek, and then without another word, her hand dropped away, limp, like a blossom tumbling from the branch of a tree.

“Miss...Miss Riviere? Miss Riviere! Stay with me! Miss Riviere!”

I shook her shoulders and shouted her name desperately. My employer couldn't die now! It had only been a few days since I got this job!

Argh! Why would this happen?

“Don't do this to me, Miss Riviere! At least give me my first paycheck before you go!”

My desperate cries didn't reach her. She only lay there in my arms, an expression of agony on her face, and then without another word, her eyes drifted shut.

“No! Miss Rivieeere!”

Confronted with the cold, harsh reality, all I could do was howl out my despair.

It was another morning in Cururunelvia, the land of prayer. And on that day, my cries rent the air of the grand avenue.

I was told later that they had sounded like the howls of a wolf.



Let's take the story back to the previous day.

“Wow. They say the ghost wolves are on the prowl again.”

It had been exactly one week since I'd started this job, and I had pretty much picked up the basics. Days at Riviere Antiques mainly consisted of two main tasks: watching the store and dealing with customers. I mostly handled the first one. As for what “watching the store” involved, it could be pretty much whatever, so long as I was ready when a customer came in.

Riviere Antiques had very, very few customers. Meaning I had plenty of time to kill. I often spent that time learning from Riviere about the effects of the panoply of different items the shop had in stock, but when she wasn't around, I had to find something else to do.

I didn't actually know what you were supposed to do to watch a store.

"You can relax. Just like you were in your own home," Riviere would say whenever she left, as if it hardly mattered to her. I wasn't falling for that, though! I'd only been in this job for a week; I wasn't going to be put off my work that easily.

That, at least, was what I said that day when she went out practically as soon as we'd opened. I stayed behind at the shop. A few hours later, she returned to find an employee with a newspaper in one hand and a cookie in the other, munching on the snack and exclaiming, "Wow! This cookie is the best!"

...Yeah, I let myself get off task.

Her inattentive employee (i.e., me) was flipping idly through the paper and mumbling, "Huh, wow..." On the front page was a story about the alleged sightings of some "ghost wolves" that had been the talk of the town recently.

If I was remembering right, the ghost wolves had first appeared about two years before. They were said to have bodies made of smoke, so that light shone through them, and whenever they appeared, whether at nighttime or in broad daylight, they would attack and injure people. Some rumors speculated that they were monsters created by some kind of sancta. But wait...

"Didn't they get rid of those things?" I asked.

They'd responded to the trouble at the time by making a special tool to deal with the wolves, and then the police had gone from one end of the country to the other to make sure they were exterminated.

In all that time I had spent hunting for work, I'd never once seen these wolves—yet now they were supposedly appearing again, as if to defy those who dared to forget them.

The front page included commentary from experts, including one picture of a dour-looking professor beside the words *The appearance of the wolves on this occasion reeks of deliberate human malice...*

My fingers brushed the words, and I cocked my head. Did they think someone had revived the ghost wolves on purpose?

While I was deep in thought, Riviere came into the store, home from her errand. “I’m back!” she called.

“Oh! Welcome back! All quiet here!” In a single smooth motion, I hid the newspaper and cookie and jumped to my feet, snapping off a salute. True, she’d said I should make myself at home, but I still felt a little guilty letting myself get so badly distracted.

“What did you do while I was gone? I know we hardly get any customers around here,” Riviere asked, innocently.

“Information gathering, ma’am,” I said. Combined with a bit of a tea break.

“Oh.” She nodded and walked slowly through the store. “You didn’t have to. I said you could make yourself at home, remember?”

“Ha-ha-ha! I’m much too diligent for that, ma’am.”

“I see. Well, what with you being so diligent, shall we do like we do every day?” Her black-gloved fingers brushed one of the items on one of the shelves.

What we did every day—in other words, she would instruct me in the effects of the various objects in the store. This was the closest thing to actual work that I’d done in the week since starting this job.

I whipped out my notepad and pen. I already had notes regarding the variety and effects of more than half the sancta here.

“Let’s see. Perhaps we’ll start with this today,” Riviere said, and she picked up what looked like a tiny little mushroom. It fit neatly in her palm, rolling around in her gloved hand. When I picked it up, I found it was soft and squishy, but somewhat springy.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Originally, it was an earplug,” Riviere said. Then she asked me what curse I thought they carried. I considered for a moment, pondering what kind of prayer the earplugs’ former owner might have offered at the cathedral.

“Did they...want it to be quiet when they slept?” I asked. A bit too simple, maybe, but it was the first thing that came to mind.

“Bzzt! Wrong,” Riviere replied, looking completely serious despite the silly

sound she'd just made. "The person who prayed for these earplugs hadn't slept in days because he was afraid his wife was cheating on him. He prayed to the statue of Cururunelvia that he might be able to sleep peacefully."

"Oh! So I was right, pretty much."

"*Bzzzzzt!*" Riviere crossed her fingers in front of her face in a *nope, sorry* gesture. Argh! Too cute. She shook her head but looked pleased to be able to fill me in. Which she proceeded to do, telling me all about the prayer—or rather, curse—that was imbued in them. "The cathedral's statue had imbued a pair of earplugs the man had been carrying with a special power: the ability to suppress sounds anywhere the earplugs were placed."

"Um... Why?" I asked.

"Well, if he could get proof of his wife's infidelity, he'd be able to sleep, right?"

"Is it just me, or is the statue of Cururunelvia kind of twisted?"

"When you turn your wishes over to someone else to grant, you must be prepared to pay whatever price they might impose."

"I guess so..." I made a thoughtful sound, but then I noticed something as I rolled the earplug around in my palm. "Hey, it looks like there's only one of them." Where was the other one?

"Oh. I'm wearing it right now," Riviere said, and she popped the other mushroom-shaped earplug out of her ear and placed it in my hand. So that's where it had been.

...

One half of a pair of earplugs that could cancel out noise. And she'd been wearing it in her ear.

"These earplugs have another neat little feature—if you press the bottom of one, it plays back all the sound it's collected. Want to see how it works?" She giggled and gave me a questioning look. "For example, I can clearly hear you reading the newspaper and eating a cookie."

"Sorry, ma'am."

“Dummy.” She tapped me lightly on the shoulder with the handle of her umbrella. “I did tell you to relax and make yourself at home. Nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Yeah, I know, but still...”

I hadn’t expected her to overhear me completely goofing off within a week of being hired.

“I understand—there’s not a lot for a new hire to do. You end up with plenty of time on your hands,” Riviere said calmly. Then she took out a scrap of paper. “Want to try a bit of moonlighting? I just got another job while I was out. How about it?”

She looked at me and asked if I wanted to join her.

It had to do with that second part of the job—dealing with requests.

“Wait, you mean it?”

Yippee! Something resembling actual work!

Riviere had gone out often over the past week to answer requests for help, while I’d always stayed behind and watched her go. This felt like the first acknowledgment that I was a real employee. I was thrilled.

“So what’s the job this time?” I asked, taking the piece of paper from her. It bore some simple details about the person who had made the request, along with an outline of what they needed.

“I just met with them at a café. I’m heading out now to pick up his sancta.”

The customer’s name was Levin.

“Do you know him? He’s a pretty famous professor.”

Oh, I did know him. I’d seen him in the paper that very day, talking about ghost wolves.



Professor Levin was a big part of the reason the ghost wolves had disappeared two years earlier. He’d been the first to recognize their unique

properties and how they could be defeated. He created a wand to exorcise the ghosts. It was made of special materials, including an iron ball at the top. Whack a wolf with the iron ball, and the creature would disappear. How the wand was made was highly classified.

Professor Levin had made a fortune selling the wands to the Cururunelvia police. That was what the newspaper had said anyway.

When I saw his house I yelped, “Holy moly!” I guess it was true that he’d made a fortune—he’d have to, to live in a place this big and fancy. When we knocked on the door, we were greeted by a servant who showed us to a reception area festooned with the professor’s inventions. I didn’t know what any of them did, but they all looked very expensive. The sofa looked so fluffy and comfortable that I was afraid that if I sat down, I might never get up again.

Maybe Riviere was feeling the same way; I’m not sure, but she didn’t sit down, either. Instead, we both wandered around the room. I was on pins and needles.

“Very interesting... Is this what they’re doing these days?”

For Riviere, who specialized in antiques, everything in this room was full of the unknown. I even thought—although I wasn’t sure—that she might look a little bit excited.

“Hmm,” she said, gazing at each of the inventions on the shelf in turn. “Ooh, I see,” she said and picked one of them up. Then it was “Huh!” She was getting more and more bold. Until—“Oops!”—she dropped one of them. It was bound to happen eventually.

“What are you doing, ma’am?” I asked.

“N-nothing! Nothing at all,” Riviere said, scurrying to pick the thing up and put it back on the shelf. She whistled an innocent tune like a child trying to get out of trouble. Then she patted the invention with both hands and whispered, “Hey, y-you’re all right, aren’t you?”

Just then, the door opened.

“Hello, hello. My apologies for keeping you waiting,” said a golden-haired middle-aged man. The professor looked less severe than he did in the

photograph. In his hand was a leather bag.

We all sat down on the sofa. Then Riviere said, “Hello again. If I may formally introduce myself, I am Riviere, owner of Riviere Antiques. It’s a pleasure to be here.” She looked perfectly innocent, like nothing had happened...

...Even though moments ago she’d been playing around with his inventions and dropped one on the floor...

“Oh, um, I’m her assistant, MacMillia,” I said belatedly.

They didn’t spare any further time for chitchat, but launched right in.

“This is what I’d like you to take for me,” the professor said, pushing the bag toward Riviere. Whatever it was, I thought Riviere would pull it out, but instead she accepted the entire bag. She dipped her head and said, “Understood, sir.”

I gave the bag a puzzled look, wondering what could be inside.

Riviere giggled. “This is the *sancta* we’re taking today,” she said and pointed at the bag. Not at whatever was in it—the bag itself *was* the *sancta*.

“As I touched on at our initial meeting,” the professor said, keeping his eyes on the bag as he spoke, “I purchased that *sancta* two and a half years ago from an establishment called Antiques Carredura.”

At the time, he was burned out; his research was going nowhere, and everything felt futile. It was then that the owner of Antiques Carredura, a woman dressed all in black, had appeared unannounced at his door.

Any other time, he would have sent her on her way, just another traveling salesperson with suspicious wares, but in his exhausted state, he found he had ushered her into his dining room before he knew what he was doing.

The woman smiled as if she could see exactly what was bothering him. When the spirit feels its lowest, she advised him, it’s a good idea to keep a pet. Then she’d offered him the bag. The bag itself, she told him, was the pet.

The professor didn’t quite believe it, but he took the bag and opened it—and he was shocked. Something like balls of white fur, fluffy like cotton, drifted inside the bag. When he touched one experimentally, it gave under his finger, soft and yielding.

The furballs, the antiques dealer explained, did not need any care. Simply by being inside the bag, they would live forever. He didn't have to feed them, could treat them however he wanted—as long as they were in the bag, they would not die.

“What if I take them out of the bag?” he asked.

The woman was silent for a moment, then said only: “In the same manner, they will not die.”

Her silence struck the man as ominous, but he didn't press the matter. He looked down into the bag again, where the sweet little creatures were gathered around his tired fingers, like they were nuzzling at him. He could feel himself relax.

As if to seal the deal, the woman leaned in and whispered that anyone who owned these pets would find happiness. Hard to believe, but she sounded so sure. And the professor, after so many days at the end of his rope, was not thinking rationally.

Before he knew what he was doing, he had bought the bag.

He didn't know if what the owner of Antiques Carredura had said was true, but about six months later, his luck had turned around. It turned out that the truncheon he had been trying—and failing—to develop proved effective against the ghost wolves that had been terrorizing the populace. The Cururunelvia police turned to him for help, and by the time the ghost wolf incident was over, Professor Levin had more money than he knew what to do with. And it was all thanks to the bag he'd bought from Antiques Carredura...

“However, it's been two and a half years since then. As you can see, my situation has changed drastically. I'm no longer plagued by daily frustrations, nor do I ever want for money. Although the newspaper still uses my photo from two and a half years ago,” he said with a chuckle. He lived a full and satisfied life now, so maybe he felt he didn't need the bag of little puffballs anymore.

The professor smiled gently and said to Riviere, “Perhaps you would take this bag from me, now that I no longer need it?”

Me, I thought his story was a little bit sad.

Before I could stop myself, I asked, “You’re getting rid of your pets?”

He’d spent his then-precious money on these creatures—and who knew? Maybe they really had brought him happiness.

As soon as the question left my mouth, I knew how rude it was. It had been a reflexive outburst, but still. Nonetheless, the genial professor, with his fulfilled life, didn’t look the least bit bothered as he replied, “Rest assured, I regard the creatures in that bag as my friends and companions. Indeed, they saved me.” He nodded toward me, then spared a glance at the bag, which was now in Riviere’s hands. “But my pets are no longer in there.”

Riviere opened the bag and showed it to me.

It was empty. Just a yawning scrap of leather.

“The professor told me that around the time he started making his riches, the cotton puffs abruptly vanished from inside the bag. He kept waiting, but they never returned.”

That, she said, was why he’d decided to give the bag to Riviere’s shop.

Wow. I’d had no idea. I’d thought for sure he’d just forgotten the little guys now that he was rich and famous, but it sounded like the professor really had valued his pets in their bag.

“*Sigh...* I suppose it goes to show that one shouldn’t be too credulous. I bought that bag on the assurance that my pets would live forever,” he said with a touch of regret. Only after all this time had he made the choice to get rid of their home.

“I promise we’ll take good care of this bag at the shop,” Riviere said with a respectful bow. “Now, if I may, as to compensation...”

The fortune-granting pets might be gone, the bag like an empty shell, but it was always possible that the power the cotton puffs had possessed still resided inside.

“Ah yes, of course. You wanted information about the antiques dealer who sold the bag to me, right? Here, here you are.” He handed Riviere an envelope. It was the entirety of our payment.

“You have my thanks,” Riviere said as she took it, and she looked very, very happy.



“The shop that sold the professor this bag, Antiques Carredura, showed up on the antiques scene about three years ago,” Riviere told me on the way back to our shop. She held the bag close as we went.

According to her, Carredura dealt in sancta, just like Riviere Antiques, but the vast majority of their stock was sancta that made people *unhappy*.

“Just like the perfume that caused you so much grief,” she said.

Since Riviere was an antiques dealer herself, Carredura’s presence was a source of concern, because it could drag down the reputation of the entire antiques-dealing industry.

“It was a bit of good fortune that I was able to get this information.” She’d put the professor’s envelope in her pouch. She’d been pursuing the unscrupulous antiques dealership ever since she’d noticed its activities three years before.

“And in all that time, you haven’t been able to find them?” I asked. Cururunelvia, the land of prayer, was an island nation, surrounded by ocean on every side. You’d think that in three years of searching, she would have run across them at least once.

“It’s possible they have something like a sancta that can erase them from people’s memories,” Riviere said.

“You don’t have a clue where they are, do you?”

“I told you, tracking down people who have purchased sancta from them is the best I can do!”

“Okay, but this professor bought that bag more than two years ago, and he hasn’t seen this...Carredura...person since then, right? How do you even know his information is still good?”

“Ah, my sweet child.” With one of her patented smug looks, Riviere pulled a scrap of paper from her pouch. “Professor Levin met with the woman from

Carredura much more recently than that. Three days ago, in fact.”

The compensation for taking the bag, she told me, was info on the exact location where they’d met, what the woman looked like, and a partial list of her stock. Everything the professor could remember, Riviere had asked him to write down. Even if, presumably, everything he could remember had only resulted in that thin envelope.

“Why did he meet her?” I asked.

“Well, wouldn’t you complain to a store if something you bought turned out to be defective?”

“What I’m hearing is that you can’t find this person, but her customers can.”

“He claims she found him in town—sheer coincidence. It looks like the info *he* had about Carredura in his head wasn’t erased.”

“But I guess she wouldn’t let him return the bag, and that’s why he came to us. Is that right?”

“Mm, you’re a sharp one,” Riviere said.

“Uh, I’m pretty sure anyone would make the connection...”

On that note, my ordinary mind had made another obvious leap.

“Um, Miss Riviere?” I said, stopping in my tracks. I even tugged on her sleeve like a pitiful child.

“Yes?” she crooned. She stopped, too, and gave me the least comprehending of looks.

It sounded like, from any ordinary perspective, Antiques Carredura was best described as a nasty business that sold nasty sancta.

And Riviere and I were now walking around with one of their products.

Wasn’t that likely to make bad things happen to us?

There was a sound like an intake of breath.

A semitranslucent wolf stood down the street, blocking our way. Its body was made of smoke, which drifted and curled downward to form four legs. It wasn’t the cute kind of wolf—although to be fair, its shape was almost too indistinct to

really call it a wolf.

“Grrr...,” it growled. It did not look like it was in the mood to talk.

Yikes! Not cute at all.

Hello, Mr. Ghost Wolf!

Again, from this distance, it was definitely not sweet or cute or anything. In fact, it was kind of disturbing. It looked less like a real wolf and more like a child’s misshapen clay sculpture.

“My goodness,” said Riviere, turning as she finally registered what was going on. There was a wolf ahead of us. A wolf behind us. And when I looked up at the rooftops, yep, there was a wolf up there, too. We’d walked along chatting obliviously, only to find ourselves surrounded.

Riviere didn’t say anything.

I didn’t say anything.

We just looked at each other. Slowly, she handed me the bag, which was still warm from her clutching it. I took it equally carefully and stuck close to her.

“Just checking, Miss Riviere, but you didn’t happen to borrow any of those anti-wolf devices from the professor...did you?”

“Heh! Who do you take me for, MacMillia? I don’t need such things. *This* is enough to deal with some little pups.”

As she spoke, she opened her umbrella, completely blocking the wolves from view.

“Now, listen. As long as we’re behind this umbrella, it will deflect any attack. Remember how it protected us from your lion-man?” The fight hadn’t even started, and already Riviere sounded like she’d won. I can’t tell you how reassuring it was.

“Grrr...”

Until one of the translucent wolves simply walked right through the umbrella, trotting up to us.

I take back everything I said.

“Miss Riviere? It looks like one got through...”

“Huh! Very interesting,” she said. She *hmm*ed and muttered something like “So that’s how they work.” She closed the umbrella and took a small case from her purse. “Now, this is a very convenient box, MacMillia. It will freeze whatever’s inside.” Leave it to Riviere to make sure to explain every detail even at a moment like this. I nodded and duly took out my notepad. *Ah yes, I see.*

“Is that right, ma’am?” I said.

“Indeed,” she replied. Then she opened the lid of the box with a snap. “What do you think this is? Take a guess.”

There was some kind of red meat inside, covered in frost.

“It looks like meat,” I said.

“*Bzzzt!*”

“So what is it, then?”

“Beef,” she replied.

“How is that not meat?”

For that matter, what was she doing walking around with a box of meat in her purse?

Riviere crouched down, put the frozen beef on a plate, *plunk*, and offered it to the wolves.

There was a long pause, then one of them sniffed the meat.

“...*Hwww...*”

It shook its head.

“I don’t think it’s working, Miss Riviere.”

“Not bad, wolfie, not bad,” she muttered.

“I’m sorry—how’s that?”

Riviere put the beef back in the box and the box back in her purse, then pulled out her next strategy. “This should be enough to deal with some little pups!” she said, smug once more. In her hand she held...a bone.

“They’re wolves, not puppies!” I said.

“Just watch. *Fetch!*”

Riviere flung the perfectly ordinary bone through the air. It landed in the street with a bony *clack-clack*.

None of the ghost wolves even twitched.

“No! How could that not work?” Riviere gasped.

“I think it’s because they’re wolves,” I said. Anyway, if a stray bone were all it took to get rid of these specters, the professor wouldn’t have made a fortune. “Tell me you’ve got another idea, Miss Riviere...”

“Take my hand and hold the bag very carefully,” she replied.

“Can I, um, ask why?”

“Because we’re going to run!” she announced. Then she raced toward the wolves, dragging me along with her.

As the wolves howled, Riviere gave a mighty kick and launched herself into the air. We flew clear over their heads, Riviere pulling me along like a fish on a line. As shocked as I was by her tremendous leaping ability, I was even more amazed to discover that instead of landing, we continued levitating, floating just above the ground.

I looked at Riviere as if to ask what was going on, and I was met by that self-satisfied grin.

The umbrella was open in her hand.

“What kind of antiques dealer would I be if I didn’t know how to use the sancta in my own shop?”

She skidded through the air as if she owned the place, taking us straight past the surrounding wolves. She didn’t even neglect to pick up the bone she’d thrown. Then we turned tail and ran.

“All right, let’s not dawdle!” Riviere said, continuing to pull me by the hand as she folded the umbrella.

“Right!” I gave a little nod, but I was really watching Riviere, who was still

brimming with confidence.

Somehow, I had the distinct impression that if I just let her handle things, she would get us out of any crisis. It was a very comforting thought.



For the next ten minutes, we ran.

I didn't recognize any of the scenery that flashed past. Brick buildings lined both sides of the narrow, twisting roads. I couldn't claim to know Cururunelvia like the back of my hand, and I wasn't certain exactly where we were, but the outline of the cathedral towering in the distance gave me a general idea.

One thing was for sure: We were getting farther and farther away from Riviere Antiques. Actually, there was a second thing: We definitely hadn't succeeded in shaking off the wolves.

"Aaooooooooo!"

I heard countless howling voices, an avalanche of sound pressing in from behind and even above. They jostled along the flagstones, relentless in their chase. I discovered that, when in full pursuit, the wolves transformed entirely into smoke except for their leering visages, which floated along after us. It only served to highlight how weird the wolves were—not cute at all. Not even a little bit. And I say that as someone who likes dogs!

But, well...that was okay, too.

"Heh. I thought this might happen," Riviere said, sounding very pleased with herself as she indicated an unadorned silver bracelet hugging her right wrist. She told me it was imbued with a prayer that enhanced the wearer's physical abilities. Meaning the fact that we could outrun the wolves was thanks to her foresight in wearing the bracelet in the first place.

Seriously, though, it's okay.

We startled everyone we passed:

"Goodness, what are those?"

"Eek! Ghost wolves! Wait... What's that?"

“Well, now I’ve seen everything...”

“Hoh! Look at them go!”

What onlookers saw was a woman running so fast that even the ghost wolves couldn’t keep up with her—but I mean it: That was okay.

“Are you all right, MacMillia? You’re not hurt?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Are you sure? You don’t look quite well...”

“I’m fine.”

“If you’re sure...”

Riviere still didn’t look very convinced. Me, I was hiding my face—my bright red face—in her arm. I don’t mean that figuratively; I mean literally. She had me in her arms and was carrying me as we raced along.

“The bridal carry...”

That was, in a word, what was happening to me at that moment. The young woman being carted along by another young woman was getting almost as much attention as the pack of ghost wolves coming up behind us. I heard more than a few people whisper as we went past, “Two young ladies... How wonderful...,” as if they were witnessing something beautiful.

Don’t look at me...

“I keep thinking, Miss Riviere... You really move to a different beat, don’t you?”

“You think? Hee-hee!”

“Why are you blushing?”

I hadn’t meant it as a compliment...

I’d firmly believed that my antiques dealer, Riviere, could handle any situation if I just left everything to her—and so ten minutes later, I found myself caught up in a very particular kind of “play.” And *still* chased by ghost wolves who just wouldn’t leave us alone.

“Oh, for—! They don’t know when to give up, do they?” Riviere looked more and more annoyed at having to race all through town, even if she wasn’t so much as breathing hard. What else could we do, though? Nothing seemed to work against them. She’d given the wolves several swipes of her umbrella during the chase, but it hadn’t done anything. They just passed right through it.

The real problem was that the wolves passed through solid objects, but not through people—Riviere and I both had some grazes and scratches from wolf attacks we hadn’t quite been able to dodge. In other words, we definitely weren’t going to get to stop and collect ourselves. That was why Riviere just kept running and running.

“Urgh... Somebody help us!” I said. I just kept writing complaints on my notepad.

“What’s that you’re doing?” Riviere asked, glancing down at me.

“Just a little complaining...”

I held my notepad up so she could see. It was covered in cries for help. *It’s hopeless!* said one. *Somebody save us!* said another. *Pleeease!* *Being carried like this is embarrassing!* and so on and so forth, all laid bare there on the page.

“Argh... Please save us!”

Each time I filled a page, I tore it off and threw it away, my pleas and embarrassment vanishing into the pack of howling wolves. People were still looking, and we were still running.

Running away, however, was proving difficult.

“I think I should apologize, MacMillia,” Riviere said, her words calm between even breaths. “This might get unpleasant.”



Ahead of us was a dead end. The wolves had chased us into a cul-de-sac. When Riviere finally stopped and turned around, there seemed to be wolves everywhere I looked.

Yikes!

“Why are they so fixated on us?” I asked.

“The bag, most likely.” Riviere put me down gently and sighed.

I didn’t understand. Her gaze as she looked at the object in my hands was cold.

“My guess is that the sweet cotton puffs who used to live in this bag grew up to be ghost wolves. The bag is empty now because they all changed themselves into these wolves. If we can deal with all the wolves in the city, I have a feeling the cotton puffs will reappear in the bag eventually.”

I didn’t say anything, but experimentally, I moved the bag from side to side.

Equally silent, the wolves turned their heads this way and that to watch it.

Wow! She was right.

There was just one problem.

“Wouldn’t that mean we’ve been running away with the wolves’ kids?”

“Why do you *think* they’ve been chasing us?”

“I wonder if the professor knew about this,” I said. Like, did he realize he was making his money manufacturing tools that hurt his pets?

“I’m not sure,” Riviere said with another sigh.

While we were chatting, the wolves got closer and closer. I took a few more scratches from claws I couldn’t avoid, and they stung. But it was going to do a lot more than sting if this whole pack jumped on us...

I didn’t want to go like this!

Why was I constantly being attacked by monsters these days anyway?

Would this earn me workers’ comp?!

The thoughts flooded my mind, questions coming and going—but even with

all the confusion, I never let go of the bag. I'd finally gotten real work—was I going to run away after only a week on the job?

"You're very brave, aren't you?" Riviere giggled.

"If I were brave, I don't think I'd be complaining to my notepad," I muttered. I was thrilled she thought that about me, but unfortunately, bravery was not really my thing. I definitely wasn't strong enough to face down an entire pack of wolves all by myself. I couldn't even really use any sancta yet. I wasn't tough enough to fight, and I wasn't fast enough to flee—all I could do was let Riviere cart me around.

But it wasn't true that there was *nothing* I could do.

"There they are! Get them, everyone!" cried a voice.

A voice from the other side of the wolves closing in on us.

I looked up as I heard a distinct *bssshh* and saw smoke rising. In fact, it was almost being sucked into the sky, first one cloud of it, then another. Finally, the pack began to notice. One of the wolves turned, then a second, and no sooner had they looked back than they fled in panic. Even as they went, though, they were pulled into the air and disappeared.

"Sheesh. Lot of trouble they've caused us," I heard someone grumble. As the smoke cleared, letting me see what was beyond the pack of wolves, I discovered a crowd of people in dark uniforms and looking very serious. They each held a wand topped with a steel ball made of a special material—the one weapon that could deal with the ghost wolves. They'd bought them from Professor Levin two years before.

We found ourselves face-to-face with the only people in the land who could defeat those creatures: the Cururunelvia police.

"O-Officerrrrrs!" I cried. We were saved!

The poor victim of this terrible situation, namely myself, rushed up to the officers, heart swelling with emotion. I felt like someone being reunited with their oldest friend.

At the head of the group was an officer with green hair, a young man maybe

in his thirties. He held up a scrap of notebook paper. “Did you write this?” he asked. Then he gave me a bracing smile. “You showed us exactly where to go. Thanks for the help.”

“Oh, hee-hee,” I said. Look at me, getting a compliment.

“If you’d be so kind as to hold out your hands,” he said.

“Huh? You mean like this?” I asked, obediently reaching out. Maybe they were going to give me a reward?

“Perfect, thanks. You’re under arrest.” *Click*. He snapped a cold pair of handcuffs around my wrists.

“What?! But whyyyy?” I wailed. Totally *not* what I expected!

This had to be some kind of joke, right? I looked at the man, but his smile had vanished. Now he looked like an officer of the law, and he meant business.

Why would he get rid of such a lovely smile?!

“Don’t expect to get off with a slap on the wrist after causing this much commotion,” he said. I had no idea what he was even talking about! One of the officers with him strode past me and cuffed Riviere as well.

What?

Why?!

“Um, I...I don’t think we *did* anything,” I said.

“Oh, you don’t, huh? Ha! Big talk from someone who disturbed the peace this bad.” The green-haired officer shrugged as if to say he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Then he turned away. “The girl says she didn’t do it. You sure this is them?” He pointed at me as he spoke.

“What?” I asked. When I saw who was standing with the officer, words failed me.

It was a middle-aged man with golden hair. The very one who’d entrusted us with his sancta.

Professor Levin, in the flesh.

“Yes, Officer. There’s no doubt. It was these two.” He nodded, looking every

bit as self-assured as he had in his house.



The man had encountered Antiques Carredura two and a half years before. He'd been failing in his research and despairing of life when the woman from the antiques dealership showed up at his house.

She'd recommended he get a pet. She told him the cotton puffs inside the bag would live forever so long as they stayed in there.

"Please... Do what you can for me," he muttered as he petted the things in the bag. He sat in his laboratory, surrounded by his legacy of failure.

He'd bought the bag, not because the creatures were adorable, nor because they felt nice to pet.

No, he'd known that these creatures who lived forever would make very good business.

"If I can get these things to reproduce, I'll be raking in the cash..."

How to make them do that? That was the question. He tried everything. He gave them water, plucked some fur off one, even put a mouse in with them at one point.

It was true that no matter what he did, the creatures didn't die. They even, strangely, seemed to get along with the mouse. After many days of research, he found himself struck by an idea: "What would happen if I let them out?"

They wouldn't die—the woman had told him so. And he seemed to be reaching the limits of what his research could tell him while the cotton puffs remained in the bag. Well, if they would survive the experience, why not let them out into the wider world?

And so, one day about a month after he'd purchased the bag, the professor took one of the cotton balls out of it.

The cotton puff immediately expanded, right there in his hand, changing form into a semitranslucent wolf.

"Well, now!" The professor was so shocked that he fell back on his bottom,

but it didn't bother the wolf, who eagerly bounded around the laboratory, appearing to enjoy itself. Its leaps and jumps knocked over his various failed experiments.

The professor's research progressed quickly after that. The translucent wolf was extremely intelligent and would do anything it was told. It learned simple tricks like "sit" and "paw" almost immediately. If he ordered it to go back in the bag, it turned into smoke and became a cotton puff in the bag; when he told it to come out again, it obediently emerged as a wolf.

When he told it to become two wolves, it did so, and when he said he wanted it to become a hundred, he soon found his laboratory overflowing with the creatures.

And when he told the wolves that only those struck with his wand should go back in the bag, they did so, exactly as if they had been dispelled by a special tool.

Everything was going just as he wanted.

When he ordered the wolves to attack people, they went into town and did so, striking day and night. The wolves couldn't be hurt and would never die a natural death, so once they went out into the city, no one could stop them. People walking the streets trembled in terror, and the police were beside themselves, with no way to protect the populace.

So it was that one day, Professor Levin appeared at the police station with his wand.

Just a little over two years ago now.

"My, but things have worked out very well for you, my good man." Today, after the pair from Riviere Antiques had gone home, the woman from Antiques Carredura had appeared at his door. "Making money off one of my sancta? I sense big things ahead for you!" All he could see under her black hood was the slightest hint of a smile.

Professor Levin couldn't help smiling in return. "Oh, I didn't do anything special. It's all thanks to you—you let me have those wolves. I wouldn't be in this sumptuous mansion otherwise."

“And have you, in your gratitude, done what my shop asked you to three days ago?”

Indeed, three days prior, “Antiques Carredura” had appeared at the professor’s door, just as she had two and a half years before that: very suddenly, a woman dressed all in black, an inscrutable smile on her face. She had made a request of the professor: She wanted him to give his sancta to Riviere Antiques. She wanted the wolves to attack Riviere.

“Yes, I did. My wolves must be chasing them all over town right about now. If they haven’t already eaten them.”

“Well, well. You have them well trained.” She chuckled, as she had before.

The professor was silent for a long moment, glowering at her. “And now you’ll keep my secret, won’t you?”

“Oh yes. I should think I would *probably* keep it to myself.”

Three days before, when he’d first heard what Antiques Carredura wanted, the professor had refused, shocked and angry. Of course he had—why would he help destroy an antiques shop he’d never even heard of? The last thing he wanted was to be involved in anything criminal, he’d insisted.

The owner of Antiques Carredura had continued to smile her unnerving smile. “Are you not already a criminal?” she’d asked.

Then she had calmly, methodically recounted what this man had done to make his money those two and a half years ago. She was precise, detailed, as if she had seen the entire thing.

She knew the affair with the wolves was a farce the professor had put on to make himself rich, and she wasn’t shy about saying that if he didn’t do what she asked, she would let everyone know about it.

He’d had no say in the matter from the moment she knocked on his door.

“I daresay it’s not such a bad deal for you, my good man,” the woman said from under her hood, the relaxed smile never wavering. “After all, if you can pin this on Riviere Antiques, then it will be as if *you* never did anything at all.”

He had been left with no choice, no choice. The woman from Antiques

Carredura was the only one who knew that *he'd* made the wolves attack people and then had sold a bunch of useless junk he'd fashioned into pretend wands.

"You understand, don't you, Eve?" he said, using the woman's name. He gazed at her black hood, at her hidden face. As long as she remained silent, no one would ever question his innocence. He could stop worrying that the crime in his past would be dug up.

"Ha-ha!" laughed Eve. "You needn't worry. This is just between us."



Riviere and I stood surrounded by police officers, the cold cuffs pinching our wrists. The officers pressed in on us, firing questions and accusations: "I can't believe you two! Do you know how many people you hurt?"

"How could you *do* this?"

"Don't just stand there! Say something!"

I was about ready to burst into tears, but Riviere only sighed and said, "How the Cururunelvia police force has fallen! You think *we're* behind this? Maybe you should try doing an actual investigation."

Yes. Great. Antagonize them. *That* would help.

"Huh, listen to you! Big talk. But you're only gonna make this worse for yourself."

"Hm? I'm sorry—did you say something? I can't seem to hear you."

She tapped her ear expressively. Seriously, why was she doing this?!

While Riviere was busy being defiant, I decided to try to get them to listen to me by appealing to their sympathies.

"Urrrgh," I sobbed. "Please hear me out!" I clasped my hands together like I was praying at the cathedral (easy to do since my hands were already cuffed next to each other) and fell to my knees in front of the kindest-looking female officer I saw at that moment.

"Oh! What's wrong? Are you all right? Do you feel unwell?" she asked, crouching in front of me. She was a saint! I could see her face glow with

compassion.

Someone who would listen to me!

“*Sob...* I swear I only met her a week ago. I wasn’t part of any crime!”

“Really? Goodness. Tell me, what *were* you doing two and a half years ago?”

“Looking for a job!”

“So, dissatisfaction with the social system was your motive, is that right?”

“What?! No, you’re not listening!”

I hate police officers!

“That’s enough, MacMillia. Try to explain all you like; you won’t find anyone who bothers to understand you in this place,” Riviere said with another disgruntled sigh.

“Fair enough. You can tell your story at headquarters,” said the green-haired officer, nodding, a smile on his face.

Look, no! There was a more fundamental problem here.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Officers! That man over there is the real criminal! The professor! He gave us the bag! He knows the bag creates the wolves!” I shouted, truly desperate now.

I pointed at the professor, who only snorted “Heh!” What was that old guy smiling about?

“Don’t let her mislead you, Officers,” the professor said. “Those two stole the plans for my exorcism wand from my office.” As he spoke, he reached into Riviere’s pouch, which the police had confiscated, and took out an envelope. But wait. Didn’t that envelope have the information about Antiques Carredura in it? “Just look. These are my blueprints; I’d know them anywhere. I can only assume they took them in order to figure out a way to counter my wand. They’ve been nursing these ambitions for two and a half years, I’m sure.”

He grinned and added that it was too bad for us—our plans had come to nothing.

I really, really didn’t like this guy.

At least now it all made sense. The thing with the ghost wolves two years before must have been the professor's doing. He'd used his pets to make him money! How low could you go?

"You sit in that cell and think about what you've done. And how foolish it was," Professor Levin said. I wished I could fling those words right back in his smug face.

I didn't have anything, any way, to prove my innocence. The only thing I could do at that moment was howl "Ooooh!" sounding a lot like a wolf myself.

"Hmm? What was that? I couldn't hear you at all," my shopkeeper said, tapping her ear with an exaggerated motion.

There was a long pause. "*Why* are you set on insulting everyone, Miss Riviere?" I asked, glaring at her.

She finally turned and looked at me. She tilted her head to one side and brought her thumb and pointer finger to her ear. "I'm sorry. I seem to have had my earplug in this entire time."

She pulled out an earplug shaped like a very small mushroom.

It was the one from this morning. The one whose prayer was...

"My, but things have worked out very well for you, my good man."

...to absorb all sound in the immediate area.

I heard an unfamiliar voice from the earplug Riviere had just removed. The next person who spoke, though, I recognized.

"My wolves must be chasing them all over town right about now. If they haven't already eaten them."

Everyone, including me and the officers around us, fell absolutely silent. But one of us was also growing increasingly pale.

"Wh-what *is* this? This is a charade! She manufactured that! That's not my voice!" The professor stalked over to us, as confused as he was enraged. Wow! He really did sound exactly like the voice from the earplug.

"Pardon me, Professor. If you'd kindly keep your voice down?" The professor

was about to grab Riviere, but the green-haired officer stopped him—he was still smiling, but he wasn't about to argue.

With quiet restored, what we then heard was a negotiation between Professor Levin and the woman from Antiques Carredura.

"You understand, don't you, Eve?"

"Ha-ha! You needn't worry. This is just between us."

Well, it sure wasn't anymore. Me and Riviere and the police officers were all hearing it.

"Eve," murmured Riviere.

Obviously, neither of the voices on the recording belonged to the staff of Riviere Antiques, since we had nothing to do with any of this.

Our names were clear.

"It would seem we've made quite a mistake," the green-haired officer said, removing the chilly handcuffs from me and Riviere and snapping a pair on Professor Levin's wrists instead. "It looks like *you're* the one we're going to want to talk to."

Almost as one, the officers who had surrounded us went over to the professor. Popular guy.

The professor shouted himself hoarse—*"This is all a misunderstanding," "This is a miscarriage of justice," "I was framed,"* and so on and so forth. But the police weren't interested in a criminal's excuses. One of the male officers dragged him away.

Meanwhile, the female officer came over to us. She put her hands together apologetically and winked at me. "Sorry about that. Guess I had it all wrong."

Gee, don't sound too guilty or anything.

"That was close! Your next job would've been in prison!" she said.

"I don't think getting taken to prison counts as job hunting," I muttered.

Still, I was glad the truth had come out before they'd carted us off. I felt relief flood my chest—it was all thanks to her. Riviere.

“Oh, just a moment, please,” she called to the officers as they were about to drag away the professor, who was still shouting like a child who didn’t know when to give up his temper tantrum.

They turned toward her, and she held up her hand, in which was the earplug with the dirt on Antiques Carredura. Then she gave the professor a slow wave, smiled at him, and in a voice dripping with sarcasm said: “Thanks for the info, Professor!”



Riviere told me later that she’d suspected all along that Professor Levin was behind the ghost wolves.

“Why would he go out of his way to sell us a sancta that no longer had any use? Once the prayer’s power wears off, it’s just an ordinary object.”

She said it was this morning’s meeting at the café, her first time seeing him face-to-face, that had made her sure.

Professor Levin had come in late and given Riviere a quick rundown of his situation. Pretty much the same thing he’d told us in the reception room. That, said Riviere, was what had tipped her off.

“After all, you could bring a bag to a café, couldn’t you?”

Now that she mentioned it...

“Plus, when I heard the story, I realized that what he had was a Spirit Bag.”

“Spirit Bag?”

“The proper term for that bag you were carrying,” she said, going into her exposition mode. “The bag’s effect is to summon spirits that follow any order they’re given. In principle, they can take any form. They probably assumed canine form because the man wanted a pet.”

Riviere’s knowledge of the properties of the Spirit Bag meant she already had a pretty good idea of what had happened with the ghost wolves two years earlier, and how Professor Levin had been involved. Meaning that at their very first meeting, she’d realized he’d probably staged the whole thing to make

money—but she had pretended not to know anything. That was where she'd been when we went to get the bag.

“Hee-hee-hee! When he made us go all the way to his house to get it, I knew it had to be a trap,” she said.

“I don't like the look on your face, ma'am.”

“Lucky for us, I'm not dumb enough to fall for such an obvious trick.”

“Um, if you say so.” I wasn't sure I believed it from someone who had tried to give real meat to ghost wolves.

“Instead, I set a trap of my own! With the earplug, you see.”

“Gosh...” Wait, so did that mean...? “When you were messing around with all the inventions in the reception room, was that...?”

“Heh-heh-heh! Don't ask silly questions. It was on purpose, of course.”

“Wow! So when you dropped that one invention and were crying over it...”

..... “That, um, that wasn't on purpose.”

Ah, I see.

So it was that after spending the day running flat out, she and I finished it by sitting across from each other on the sofa, sipping tea.

“I'm beat. How about we close up shop for today?” Riviere said. Her store hours went something like this: If she felt like selling, the store was open. If she was a bit tired, then she took the day off. It was a nice, slow life.

I looked at her as I sipped my tea, feeling the warmth fill my mouth. I felt as relaxed as if I were in my own home, and I wondered idly about what we would do tomorrow.

Then tomorrow came.

Riviere had let me go home early the day before, so I showed up full of vim and vigor. As I opened the door, I bellowed “Good morning!” at the top of my lungs. What a goofball. I was very much in the *let's work hard and have another great day* mode.

I found myself greeted by a silent shop. Hmm? Where was Riviere?

I cocked my head, curious—and almost immediately, I heard a tremendous crash.

“Whoa! Wha—? What was that?” I peered into the shop, my dukes up, afraid that we might have burglars or a violent customer on our hands. I slowly scanned the cramped interior, then started working my way around the shop.

“Hrk... Hngh...”

It was Riviere! I found her collapsed smack in the middle of the gloomy space.

“Hey! Miss Riviere! What happened?!”

I went rushing over. I cradled her in my arms, and she gave me a pained look.

“Ah... MacMillia, you’re here...” She reached toward me with one quavering hand. Something terrible must have happened before I got here. Whatever it was, it didn’t seem to have disturbed anything in the shop, though. What in the world could have—?

“Mac...Milli...a...”

She stretched out that shivering hand again. She was trying to tell me something; I was sure of it. I listened hard, waiting for her to say something, anything!

Her fingertips brushed my cheek, and then without another word, her hand dropped away, limp, like a blossom tumbling from the branch of a tree.

“Miss...Miss Riviere? Miss Riviere! Stay with me! Miss Riviere!”

I shook her shoulders and shouted her name desperately. My employer couldn’t die now! It had only been a few days since I got this job!

Argh! Why would this happen?

“Don’t do this to me, Miss Riviere! At least give me my first paycheck before you go!”

My desperate cries didn’t reach her. She only lay there in my arms, an expression of agony on her face, and then without another word, her eyes fluttered shut.

“No! Miss Rivieeeeere!”

Confronted with the cold, hard reality, all I could do was howl out my despair.
“Miss Rivieeeeeerre!”

“I’m sorry, but could you keep it down?”

Oh. She came to.

“Good morning, ma’am.”

“Is that all you have to say?” Riviere rested in my arms, looking very annoyed. Um, there wasn’t much I could do for her if she was going to get angry...

“What’s going on, Miss Riviere? What happened to work?”

“Oh... Work... Think I could take off today?”

“What? Why?” I mean, not that it mattered to me. Except that fewer working days meant a smaller paycheck, which was the last thing I needed. She could at least *tell* me why we weren’t working.

When I pressed her about what was going on, Riviere gave me a look as if she were fighting intense pain, but she responded: “It’s because...because I used the Bracelet of Power yesterday. This is the kickback.”

The Bracelet of Power? As I recalled, it was a bracelet that made you much stronger than the average person. It was the sancta Riviere had been using when she’d carried me.

And this was...the kickback?

“Could you describe your symptoms to me?” I asked.

“Anytime I try to put any strength into my muscles, especially my legs, they hurt. It’s like they’re screaming, ‘Please! Don’t make us move anymore!’”

“Aching muscles, got it.”

There was a pause.

“Aching muscles.”

She still didn’t say anything.

“Miss Riviere?”

She’d gone completely silent. Finally, she said, “MacMillia, do you remember?”

I told you at the store yesterday—using a sancta means you’re entrusting your prayer to someone else, and you have to be prepared to pay any price.”

“And that price is...your muscles feel overworked?”

“I can’t move!” Riviere looked at me, but she didn’t seem to see anything.

Fair enough. She wouldn’t be getting much work done in this condition.

“For that matter, you’re not even going to be able to take care of yourself, are you?” I said.

“To be perfectly frank, at the moment, I can’t move from this spot.”

“I might have guessed.”

“Say, MacMillia, you don’t happen to be an excellent cook, do you?”

“About average, I’d say.”

“I see.” Riviere sighed and nodded slowly. Then, hesitantly, with acute embarrassment, she said, “I...haven’t had...anything to eat today.”

Ah, I see, I see.

“Want me to make something?” I asked.

She lit up at that. “I knew it was fate that led you to me!”

“I’m not sure this is the time to be seeing fate in everything,” I said with a bit of a sigh, but nonetheless, I relaxed a little. Riviere had really gone to bat for us yesterday, from carrying me all over town to clearing our names with the police almost before I knew what was happening.

Not to mention that she had taken me in at all.

“You’ll whip something up for me, won’t you?” Riviere said.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, nodding easily. I put my hand against her shoulder and got a good grip. It was bad manners to eat breakfast on the floor. “Grab on to me, ma’am,” I said. “I’ll carry you to the table.”

“What?” she said, her eyes going wide with genuine surprise.

I didn’t wait for her to say anything else, but started lifting. “Here we go!”

I might not have been able to support her just yet, but I wanted to repay her

in what small measure I could. Even if I would never be able to fully reward everything she had done for me.

“Yikes. You’re heavy.”

“I’ll get you for that.”



The Perfect Couple

The perfect couple: That's what people often called Macias and Mylène as they walked down the street. It always filled Macias with happiness to hear that, for between him and her was an unbridgeable gulf of social distance.

The woman beside him, Mylène, was from one of the richest families in Cururunelvia. She lived in a mansion. *He* lived in a cheap apartment near the cathedral. She was incredibly beautiful, and expensive accessories seemed right at home on her. Meanwhile, Macias was just an unassuming man with spectacles.

Suffice to say, they ran in different circles. Yet they had met about a year ago.

"My name is Mylène. A pleasure to make your acquaintance," she'd said as she walked into the flower shop where he worked. She was there to try her hand at the job—interestingly, although they came from starkly different backgrounds, the two of them shared a hobby.

It was the work that got them talking, but soon they were dating. Their days had been bliss since they started seeing each other.

"Macias... Once I'm done with school, I think I'd like to work at that flower shop. And if...if you approve, perhaps the two of us could live together?" she'd asked, her face flushed. His answer had been to hug her for joy.

Mylène had been sheltered for much of her life, so everything was new to

her, every day full of surprises.

“My! I never knew so many *things* could fit in such a small space! Men living alone truly do have it difficult...,” she’d said. Macias’s apartment could not be called clean even by the most generous standard, but nonetheless Mylène was overjoyed.

“Is this...a present for me? Oh, that makes me so happy! Thank you, Macias!” When he bought her some clothes out of his meager wages, she was thrilled; she immediately put them on.

Every night before they went to sleep, she gave him a kiss. “Good night, my dear Macias,” she would say, smiling with happiness.

All their friends and acquaintances remarked on how deeply in love they were. “The perfect couple,” they would say. Every time, it made Macias’s heart swell.

He couldn’t have been happier. All he wanted was for his days with Mylène to go on forever.

But in fact, they didn’t last very long at all.

Shortly after they started living together, men dressed in black appeared at their house. One of them, a man who seemed particularly intense, was her father. It was only then that Macias discovered that Mylène had left home without a word to her parents, and that her mother and father were under the impression that Macias was a kidnapper.

So when Mylène’s father appeared suddenly to reclaim his daughter, he berated Macias as a criminal and beat the helpless man, hitting him repeatedly in the face. The pain was horrendous—but not the pain of the beating.

“Macias! No, don’t! Macias...!”

He could only lie on the bloodstained floor and watch as they dragged her away. That was the most terrible pain of all.

He had to save her. He vowed in his heart to do whatever he had to.

One month passed, then two. Then he started to lose track of how long it had been. His days were empty without her.

He could no longer see Mylène now that her father had taken her away. He would walk by her mansion on occasion, but she never so much as showed her face. A few times, he even knocked on the door and asked to see her, but the servants' response was always the same, as if they had been coached: "Lady Mylène has informed us she does not wish to see you."

He knew that couldn't be true. He knew the days they had spent together, the love they had shared, had been no lie. He was certain Mylène shared his feelings. Her father must have been keeping her locked away.

He began to go to her house regularly, but there was no sign of his beloved Mylène.

He'd saved up money for their marriage, enough that he could give her a better life than he had now, but the chance to use it had been taken from him.

"What am I supposed to do now?" he mumbled. He sat in the cramped room he had shared with her and thought. He wondered what he was to do with this room, now rife with memories of her.

And then, three months or so after he'd lost her, he made up his mind.

The perfect couple.

He was the only one who could rescue her. So once it was dark, Macias set out.

Deep in the night, he snuck into her mansion to help Mylène escape.

"I've come to rescue you!" he said.

"Macias! How? Why?"

He didn't have time to tell her the story, though. They had to get out of there right away. He took her hand and nearly dragged her out of the house.

He knew how happy she would be. Yes, his rescue was a little rough, but at last they could live together again.

He was so sure.

"Let go! Let go of me, Macias!"

So why—?

Now cradled in his arms, Mylène thrashed. “I can’t see you anymore!”

They’d just escaped the mansion proper. There was still every chance a guard might spot them, so why was she shouting?

“Just go home already! Forget about me, please!” she said.

“What? But...why? How could I ever do that?”

How could this be, when they had loved each other so much? Had she somehow forgotten the days they’d spent together? The days they had spent working away to save money, planning their future, imagining what life would be—had all that somehow abandoned her?

Or perhaps her father had threatened her.

For the first time, Macias began to feel that he didn’t know what Mylène truly wanted, and that realization brought with it an awful, inescapable anxiety. For Mylène was everything to him.

“I’m begging you! Go and live your own life!” Mylène cried, large tears rolling down her cheeks. She shoved ineffectually against his chest.

He didn’t understand. What was he supposed to do? He just didn’t know!

Soon he saw the light of several lanterns racing from the mansion, accompanied by the shouts of the servants. They were coming this way. There was no time!

“I’m sorry... I’ll be back,” he said, vowing to come and rescue her. With that, he put Mylène down and dashed away from the house.

There would be another chance. He would return to save her. Macias stole a glance back and saw Mylène curled up by the gate of the house, crying at the top of her lungs.

What those tears meant, he didn’t know.

“Mylène... I can’t believe... *Why?*”

Their hearts had always been as one, yet now, somehow, they had gotten out of step.

He wanted to bring Mylène home—but not this Mylène. Not the Mylène who

wept and fought him as they went.

“My, my! What a way for your girlfriend to treat you!” chortled a voice from the shadows near the mansion. It came from a hooded woman who identified herself as Eve. She said she had an antiques shop, which she apparently ran right from the street.

“Let me guess, my friend. Or should I say, *valued customer*? You want love. That’s what’s on your mind.”

He caught glimpses of golden eyes and hair under the hood, and a leering smile that seemed to see straight through him. The woman picked something up off the canvas that served as her shop floor.

“I have just the thing for you, my good sir. It’s perfect for when you and your beloved no longer quite see eye to eye, or to get you out of that rut you’re stuck in. Just use this, and she’ll become everything you ever hoped for—like a different person.”

Macias didn’t say anything. It sounded ridiculous. That couldn’t happen.

Or could it? This was, after all, Cururunelvia, the land of prayer. And Macias was so very, very tired in body and soul. How could he be sure?

“Well? Interested?”

Macias didn’t say anything at first.

Eve looked at him curiously.

Macias asked how much it cost.

Luckily for him, he had plenty of money on hand.



I was at Riviere Antiques one day when who should walk in but an unassuming man in glasses and a very beautiful young woman. A bit of a mismatched couple, if you asked me.

“I’m told this shop deals in sancta. Is that right?” asked the man, who said his name was Macias. We were sitting in the reception area, them on one side of the table, us on the other, and Macias was vowing to Riviere in a way that made

things look very serious. “I’m looking for a weapon to help us defend ourselves. Would you happen to have anything like that?”

“A weapon to help you defend yourselves?” Riviere repeated. She didn’t sound as confident as he did. “I certainly do stock items like that, but I won’t sell them to just anyone.”

“I’ll pay whatever you ask.”

“Sorry, let me phrase that better. I can’t sell it to you without knowing why you want it.”

Long pause from Macias.

“Perhaps you could tell me what’s going on?” Riviere ventured.

After another moment of hesitation, Macias began, “She and I are on the run, so we can’t talk for very long...” As he spoke, he put a protective hand around the woman’s quaking shoulders. The woman, who he said was named Mylène, hadn’t said a word since they entered. When he touched her, she almost seemed surprised; her expression stiffened just for a second. But then she looked at him with moist eyes. A little smile came over her face. I guess the sight of him made her feel safe again. She nestled against him.

They were the picture of two people deeply in love.

The story Macias told us was one of two lovers, whom grim reality threatened to tear apart because of the difference in their social classes. I gathered that Macias had rescued Mylène from her house with a certain amount of force.

“Her family was abusing her,” he explained. “Ever since she was young, they would forcibly restrain her. Her father in particular never hesitated to raise a hand to her whenever he was angry. It was my duty to rescue her from that living hell. Because I love her.”

Riviere and I were very, very silent. Apparently, Mylène had been so psychologically cornered that she hadn’t even been able to make her own decision to escape from the prison of her home.

“We need some way to fight back!” Macias said. “Please let us buy some kind of weapon from you! I have money! Please, just...”

He dug in his pockets and put some grimy, crumpled bills on the table. It looked like he'd struggled to save them while working. He tried to neaten them a bit, pressing on them to flatten them out. They actually came to a fairly respectable sum. More than enough to buy just about any items that might be on our shelves at that moment.

Except Riviere said, "We keep sancta that might do people harm in a room in the back of the store, and we have a policy of not selling them to anyone."

That was the same back room where we'd put the bag we'd recovered from the professor the other day. So long as this store was under Riviere's supervision, those ghost wolves wouldn't be appearing again. I was sure she had plenty of other, far more dangerous sancta back there, although she hadn't told me about them. Probably including things that could directly take a life. Her refusal to sell them was the difference between her and Antiques Carredura.

"Please put your money away. You won't be paying me," Riviere said, glancing pointedly away from the bills. Was it just me, or was she overplaying the cold indifference thing? These two were obviously in dire straits. If they didn't get out of here, Mylène's scary father would drag her back home!

"No!" Macias gasped. "Please, I'm begging you! I'll take anything! I just need some way to protect her!" He was desperate.

Riviere stood up as if to indicate the conversation was over, but she sighed. "I refuse to be a party to murder," she said, still sounding cold. "If I gave you a weapon now, it seems very likely that it would be used to hurt this young woman's father. Therefore, I refuse to sell you anything."

In spite of this declaration, she started walking toward the back room. She unlocked the door, then disappeared inside for half a minute. When she came back out, she was holding two locket pendants.

"What I *will* do is lend you these."

She held them out to the couple. These sancta, I'd been told, effectively served as a "body double" for the wearer. For example, if someone shot you with a gun, the pendant would conveniently catch the bullet and shatter instead. Or say someone threw you from a high place; your life would be saved

by some convenient contrivance, and the pendant would break. Or even say someone was beating you up. Up to a point, you wouldn't feel any pain; instead, a crack would appear in the pendant. In short, this sancta took pain in place of the person wearing it.

"It does come with one little caveat. It can only protect you from attacks by your enemies. It won't work on accidents or illnesses. But it should allow you to survive one attack from your pursuers."

For a long moment, Macias didn't say anything; he looked at the pendant in his hand with a conflicted expression. I would almost have said he seemed a little disappointed. He must have been hoping for some more powerful offensive weapon.

"I don't blame you for wanting to defend yourselves, but you should sit down and talk with this young woman's parents. I'm lending you these pendants to buy you the time to do that."

"I'm sorry, but...we're long past the point where talking will do any good."

"Still, you must try to convince them. As you are now, I have trouble believing you'll ever attain the happiness you desire."

Macias fell silent. He opened the locket and found there was nothing inside. He closed it, but then he opened it again, closed it again. Then he did it several more times, thinking hard, clutching the pendant in one hand and clasping Mylène's hand with the other. Finally, he stood up. "Thank you very much. I'll do what I can..."

Then he led her out of the store, his steps quick, urgent—or maybe angry and panicked.

"Oh!" said Mylène as he led her away—the first sound she had uttered in front of us. Macias's face was a mask of anger, but she was watching him with pure joy.

They went through the door, and soon they were lost in the crowd.

"Such boisterous customers for so early in the morning," Riviere remarked. The pair had left only a clinging gloom behind them. I really didn't like this feeling...

Somehow I felt pretty spent, even though the day had only just started. And so...

“Let’s make some tea!” I said as cheerfully as I could, clapping my hands and grinning.

Riviere looked at me. “Yes, please do,” she said with a slight smile.

We still had a long day ahead of us.

I was surprised, then, when not a few minutes later a group of adults piled into the shop, looking every bit as worried as Macias had.

So began my long day, which was so busy that I never did have time to make tea.



Macias, pendants in hand, went in the direction of the cathedral—toward the apartment where he lived. His pursuers already knew about it, so he wouldn’t be able to stay there long, but he had to go back. There was something he needed, badly enough to risk the danger.

“We made it!”

Thankfully, there was no sign of an ambush. He unlocked the door. Inside was the cramped single room where they had made so many memories together. It was suffused with the smell of flowers.

Ahh, the room where they had lived together. Today they came home, hand in hand. If only the circumstances had been different, how happy he would have been at this moment!

“Okay, Mylène. Right now, we just have to think about getting away. Your clothes are still in the closet. For starters, you need to get changed...”

Macias kept prattling, giving a litany of instructions as he changed into a fresh outfit and put everything they would need in a bag. A few other sets of clothes, provisions, money, a knife, and a photo of the two of them...

“I guess I should throw in these pendants, too.”

He’d expected better from Riviere Antiques. The shopkeeper had proved

uncooperative and hadn't sold him any weapons, but at least these pendants would give them some small measure of protection. It wasn't such a bad deal, when he thought about it.

"Put this around your neck," he said, turning toward Mylène. He took her in his arms and secured the pendant around her neck. She simply looked up at him, watching, her eyes moist.

He felt so sorry for her. She couldn't accept the harsh reality yet.

"It's all right, Mylène. I'll protect you." He hugged her close, to make her feel better.

It reminded him of when they'd first started living together. Many things that most townsfolk took for granted, as common sense, the sheltered young lady simply didn't know, and it had been a source of much anxiety. She'd wondered if it wasn't wrong to live together. If people weren't giving them strange looks as they walked around town together. If her outfit didn't look funny. She peppered Macias with these questions constantly.

In fact, he loved the questions. He adored her for thinking so seriously about matters in their life together.

Now Mylène stood there in his arms and cried silently into his chest. So he hugged her tighter.

"It's not your fault," he whispered, stroking her soft hair. "It's this sick, twisted world! The way it makes you suffer! It's those bastards who won't stop chasing you! It's not your fault. Not your fault."

If they could just get out of this house, then freedom was waiting for them—he knew it.

Mylène and Macias. The pair all their friends and acquaintances had called "the perfect couple." Yet in the end, they hadn't been able to make her father understand.

There was only one path left to them.

"Come on, let's go."

Macias took Mylène's hand and started walking again. He had everything he

needed in his arms. As he opened the door, he threw away the key, knowing he would never come back here.

They burst out the door, birds scattering from the weathered old cathedral, as if in celebration of the start of their new journey, their new life. The birds were flying toward the sea.

Cururunelvia was an island nation, surrounded by ocean on every side. So long as they were within its borders, they would never have their freedom. Only one ship each year left the port for the outside world, and the most recent one had departed a scant three months before. That meant there would be no escaping the island for another nine months.

Even so, Macias's eyes were filled with hope.

"Let's run away together. Somewhere, anywhere," he said. He took Mylène's hand and walked.

They could overcome any trial, he was sure, as long as they were together.



"I'm sorry. Could we go over that again?"

Riviere had made the adults who came charging in sit on the sofas, while she perched on the windowsill (not very ladylike) beside me, looking at them curiously. They all wore black uniforms—they were police officers.

Police officers...!

One of them looked through a notebook and said, "All right, let me take it from the top." He had dark green hair, and after studying his face for a few seconds, I felt a very unpleasant memory burble up in the back of my mind. I could almost feel the clammy chill of cuffs on my wrists.

"The incident occurred at midnight last night. A man abducted the daughter of a wealthy family and is still on the run. The household servants reported the matter to us, and we've been on a manhunt since this morning, but we haven't found them."

"Grr," somebody grumbled. The green-haired officer looked up. Oops. Sorry,

Officer. Don't mind me.

"The suspect is a man, twenty-six years old, by the name of Macias. He worked at a flower shop until last month but was let go due to unauthorized absences."

"Grrrrr..."

The officer glanced my way again. Seriously, don't mind me.

"Eyewitness accounts place Macias at Riviere Antiques earlier today—was he here?"

"Grrrrrr..."

"I'm sorry, but has someone been growling throughout this conversation?" The officer looked at me, his brow furrowed. The moment our eyes met, I growled again. Oh! Heavens. Was that noise coming from me?

"I remember her from the other day. Is she your new hire?" the officer asked.

"Yes. That's MacMillia," Riviere said, nodding.

The green-haired officer nodded back, a placid look on his face. "Miss MacMillia. Pleasure to meet you. I'm Henri, an officer of the peace. You might recall we met when dealing with that bag recently."

"Grrrrrrrrrrrr..."

Mr. Officer-of-the-Peace, Henri, offered me his hand the way someone in a nature documentary might reach out to a wild animal holed up in its nest and afraid of human society. As well he might, since I was hiding behind Riviere and growling at him.

"She's normally a very pleasant girl," Riviere said.

"Why does she seem so wary of me?"

"Perhaps you might wish to ask your conscience." My shopkeeper patted me on the head and regarded Henri with a cold stare. Did this make her my guardian?

"Ha-ha... Well, anyway, I hope we can be friends from now on," he said, although he gave up on that venerable sign of friendship, a handshake, and

backed off a little. “I’ll take it under advisement,” he said. Considering I was still traumatized by my brush with being pinned with a criminal history, I thought they ought to consider themselves lucky if all I did was ignore some social niceties!

In any case, the police officers had come piling into the shop just moments after Macias had left it. His flight, we learned, was being treated as a kidnapping case—and chasing kidnappers was, of course, a job for the police.

“I have to ask you ladies: Did you give them any sancta? Anything that might serve as a weapon, say?”

“He was clearly agitated, so the only thing I gave him was something that might aid in defending him,” said Riviere, adding that giving him a weapon had seemed like a recipe for disaster.

“Do you have any idea where they might be now?” Henri asked.

“No, none at all.”

“I see... I don’t suppose you gave them a sancta that would allow us to track their location?”

“And violate their personal privacy? By no means.”

“In most cases, I’d respect that kind of professionalism. Today I wish you’d chosen differently...”

“What a thing for a police officer to say.”

Henri was writing industriously in his notebook, but the facts could be summed up very simply: There was nothing to learn at Riviere Antiques.

At last Henri sighed, defeated. “Well, so much for that. It looks like the trail’s gone cold.”

“If you know who he is, then you must know where he lives. Wouldn’t you try going there?”

“We’re assuming the house is empty. Another unit went to his address at the same time we came here, but we haven’t heard anything.”

“You don’t have any other leads on where he might’ve gone?”

“Not to speak of. We’d hoped you might have held him up...”

“I’m afraid that assisting manhunts is not my job.”

Hrm?

Was it just me, or did she sound *familiar* with this officer?

“Do you two know each other?” I asked, peering at her.

“More or less,” Riviere said. “This shop has helped the police in the past. A word of advice here on cases involving sancta. Storing or dispelling curses on sancta there, when they’re too dangerous for the police to handle themselves. At the moment, I’m the only person in this nation who can break curses on sancta.”

“Miss Riviere... Are you kind of a big deal?”

“Heh-heh-heh!” She puffed out her chest. Adorable.

“Not to mention, Miss Riviere has been looking after me ever since I was a rookie on the force,” Henri added. Well, that explained a lot.

“So, you’re a regular veteran when it comes to cooperating with investigations,” I said.

“Heh-heh-heh!” The chest puffed out further. Wow.

I offered an appreciative little clap. What I was learning was that Riviere had been running this shop for at least the last ten years. That was a pretty good tenure. Okay, so there were said to be elves around who still looked young at a hundred, so it wasn’t like it was all that unusual. But still, how old *was* this person?

“Heh-heh-heh!”

Her insistent display of self-satisfaction made me think the answer was “not very old,” but...

Hmm. My shopkeeper grew more and more mysterious the more I learned about her.

Shortly thereafter, we returned to more serious matters.

“If you’ve come to this shop, may I assume this case involves sancta?” Riviere

asked.

“Yes, that would be a safe assumption,” Henri said with a nod.

“What sancta does the suspect possess?”

“I’m afraid we don’t know, but witnesses report that when he broke into the house, Macias didn’t look like a man in his right mind. Others in the vicinity reported a suspicious hooded woman.”

“So there’s a good chance he bought something from Carredura...” Riviere’s head drooped, and she sighed.

Antiques Carredura sold things that inevitably made life worse for their buyers. If Macias had been bitten by that shop’s venomous fangs, then it suggested something might have snapped in him and driven him to commit a crime.

“I’d like the two of you to accompany me to the next scene, Macias’s home, if you’d be so kind. Maybe you could use some kind of sancta to find out where he and his victim are now.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

The two of them were moving right along, but I could still hardly believe Macias was really a kidnapper.

We’re so happy just to be together, he’d announced to Riviere, clasping the woman’s hand. Was that what a kidnapping looked like? When he’d claimed to be rescuing her from her father, it hadn’t seemed to me like he was lying. I just couldn’t bring myself to think that, deep down, he was really an evil person.

“All right, let’s get going,” Henri said, starting to pack up his things.

“Um!” I said, my mouth moving before I knew what it was doing.

Henri gave me a funny look. “Yes?”

“Well, um...” I was feeling something I found really hard to describe, but I thought as hard as I could and slowly, carefully transformed that feeling into words. “Do you think...? I mean, before you arrest this criminal...could you maybe, you know, talk to him for a minute first? Mr. Macias, when he came in here... I really think he didn’t *seem* like a bad person...”

“MacMillia,” Riviere said coldly, interrupting me. “Sancta have the power to take someone who wouldn’t hurt a fly and change them completely. You should know that.”

“Yeah... I mean I do, but...”

I couldn’t stop picturing how Macias and Mylène had looked as they left our shop. He pulling her along, she gazing lovingly at him. There was something more going on there than just a kidnapper and his victim. The relationship was something more complex than that, harder to articulate.

“They’ll have plenty of time to get his story after he’s behind bars,” Riviere said, adding that the priority now was to bring them in. There was nothing I could say to that. I knew she was right. Yet somehow, I couldn’t let go of the ugly feeling that swirled in my heart.

Henri looked at me with something close to pity. “We’re not trying to erase him from the world, here. I promise we’ll talk to him when we book him. If there’s a chance, I wouldn’t even mind you speaking with him.” But then he dropped his voice to a whisper and added: “When you learn more about him, you might find out you’re not so eager to talk to him anymore.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked, puzzled.

Henri glanced at me again and, almost indifferently, remarked, “It’s not just kidnapping. He’s already committed murder.”



He’d had a bad feeling since the first time he met Mylène’s father.

The man had charged into the space that belonged to just Macias and Mylène, and he had punched him in the face, again and again and again. Macias had been powerless to resist, in part because Mylène’s father was so much bigger than he was, but most of all because he was a man accustomed to violence. He knew where to place his blows to make them hurt the most, how to use his body weight to keep his victim from fighting back. It was all second nature to him. He had brutally beaten Macias, and there had been nothing Macias could do.

It wasn't hard to imagine the treatment Mylène must have endured at home. Her father must have heaped the same kind of abuse on her since she was a child.

"I've got to save her..."

That was why Macias snuck into her house. Mylène's father proved just the sort of man Macias had imagined. The day of his break-in, Macias had been sneaking through the halls of Mylène's house when he heard shouting. He could tell immediately that the voice was Mylène's, and she was in agony.

He raced to the voice. When he cracked open the door, he saw Mylène lying on the floor, her father standing over her holding a whip...

"Father! Please don't do this anymore!" Mylène pleaded, tears in her eyes. She looked up at her father fearfully, but Macias couldn't see her father's expression; the door blocked his view.

"I never taught my daughter to talk back to me like that! That *man* you've been seeing is a bad influence on you— isn't he?!"

There was a heavy *thump* as a leather boot kicked Mylène in the stomach. She curled into herself, the pain so great that she couldn't even cry out. A man jumped on top of her.

"Still can't forget him? Then let me *help* you a little more!"

Macias learned several things that day.

For one, he never knew you could hit someone so hard from behind with a club and not have them lose consciousness. There wasn't even any blood. The most he succeeded in doing was getting the man to shift his weight off Mylène.

"The hell?"

For another, he was surprised the man didn't immediately strike back after being hit in the head. There was no sign of the careful calculation behind the beating he'd given Macias before. Instead, he turned slowly, no doubt having no idea why he'd been hit or who was behind him.

Another thing Macias learned was that once a man's shackles had come off, he could summon a strength he himself would scarcely have believed.

No sooner had the two men's eyes met than Macias buried his club in the other man's face. The man collapsed on the floor, and Macias beat him again and again. There wasn't much blood. The man only put his hands to his face, making noises that didn't rise to the level of words, and Macias kept beating and beating him.

If he didn't do this here and now, he was sure, Mylène would die. The thought made him stronger still.

About the time a patina of crimson covered Macias's club, the man's hands fell limply to his sides. He'd been able to free her at last—Macias dropped his club on the ground and gulped in breath.

There was just a trace of blood on his overcoat. He pulled on the spare coat he'd had ready, then reached out to Mylène. "I'm here to rescue you," he said.

Trembling, she looked up at him. She was still confused. "Macias? Why...?"

He wished he could take her in his arms, tell her it was all okay now. He wished he could smile at her and tell her there was nothing to worry about anymore. But there was no time for such things. They had to get out of this house, right away.

Macias took Mylène's hand and almost dragged the girl, still uncomprehending, with him out of the mansion.

Once they were outside, Mylène finally pushed him away—but after a moment, to his joy, *she came back to him*.

"Mylène! I promise to take your hand and never let it go again!"

In that space where their hands clasped was true love. He didn't care if no one else understood. As long as he had her, that was enough.

Macias set off running through town. Even he didn't know where he was going. He just wanted to be somewhere nobody else was, nobody who would interfere with their love.

"Macias..." He felt Mylène squeeze his hand. When he looked back, he saw tears brimming in her eyes.

She was there, past his spectacles. Really there.

The one he had to protect, right there.

Where should they go now?

“That’s it! I’ve got it!” As he ran, Macias looked up at the sky. He remembered a dream they had shared, one they had always talked about.



“Ugh. Look at this place.”

Riviere, who stood in the room with a pronounced frown on her face, was right. The apartment Macias had been living in was a terrible sight. There was a ratty old bed in one corner, half-eaten bread on the table, canned food, a delivery pizza—and a whole swarm of flies that hovered above it all like discriminating diners, trying to decide which dish best suited their taste.

Rumpled clothing lay listless, seemingly crushed by pressure from every direction.

Just one thing in the room looked well cared for—a vase that sat in the corner, looking a bit out of place.

“Who could ever believe it was appropriate to bring a young woman into a room like *this*?” Riviere ranted. Poor Macias wasn’t even there to defend himself.

“It’s possible the place used to look nicer,” said Henri, standing beside Riviere and reading from his notes. “Macias and Mylène first met a year ago. Her school curriculum placed her for some work experience at a flower shop where he happened to be working. He fell head over heels for her, and for a while after they met, he was following her around. Then, three months later, he kidnapped her. They spent the next six months living in this room.”

Henri added that he believed it had been a perfectly clean place while Mylène was here.

His notes appeared to summarize the reports from people at Macias’s former workplace and the servants at Mylène’s mansion into a single complete story.

After her abduction by Macias, Mylène had been seen with him for a while.

Macias's friends and acquaintances were surprised, to say the least, that the unassuming and frankly not very charismatic young man had found a girlfriend not just younger than he was but so beautiful as well. When they asked him about it, though, they said he always simply replied, "Aren't we perfect together?"

Finally, Henri told us, Mylène's father found and rescued her from this place.

"He kept Mylène shut up at home after that. Over the following three months, Macias was driven to despair by their separation, to the point that he was fired from his job. I suspect the state of this room is a reaction to losing the person he loved—and I think that also explains what he did last night."

Riviere summed the matter up: "He sounds like a positively terrible man."

Henri nodded, looking grim. "Maybe, although it sounds like Mylène's father wasn't much better. The servants report he routinely beat Mylène. I think it's even possible she went with Macias voluntarily to escape that life." It was, he added with a sigh, her misfortune that the place she landed in was itself a hell.

Riviere stood beside Henri, looking as troubled as he did. "She tried to escape from a terrible father only to wind up with a stalker. What a sad destiny that poor girl carried."

"That's why we need to help her!" Henri said. "We think whatever sancta Macias obtained from Antiques Carredura will make it impossible to control him. And we don't know what he might do." Henri looked around the messy room, muttering that there wasn't time to waste.

He almost seemed to be searching for something.

"Will you help us look, MacMillia?" Riviere said, peering at me. "There must be a clue in this room. Something that can lead us to Macias." As she spoke, she reached into her bag and took out a hair ornament shaped like a butterfly.

Generally, Riviere was kind enough to explain the workings of various sancta to me before I even had a chance to ask what they were. The ideal boss.

"This is called the 'Butterfly Hair Ornament of Guidance,'" she said. "If you place it on top of something a person has dropped or lost, it will show you the way to the item's owner—flapping its wings like a butterfly all the while."

In other words, if we put the butterfly on something in this room, it could show us to where the two of them were. Very interesting!

“Sounds helpful,” I commented.

“Oh yes, very,” said Riviere.

“But I’m assuming there’s some sort of catch.”

“Ah, I see you’re catching on!”

“If it were that easy, we could just put it on some of the clothing around here, and our problems would be solved,” I said.

“Yes, you’d think,” Riviere said, nodding. “As it turns out, there are a lot of drawbacks to using this butterfly. First of all, the object must be of a size the butterfly can carry. Second, the butterfly follows the owner’s trail, which goes cold if too much time has passed—usually about half a day at most. And third, the moment someone else picks up a dropped or lost item, the butterfly considers them to be the owner.”

“Meaning that if I touch anything I find...”

“Yes. The butterfly will treat it as yours, and it will be useless for trailing our suspect.”

In other words, I had to be very careful. I took a fresh look around the room. It was, well, messy. Other than the immediate area around one wall that was covered in photographs, everything looked very...lived-in. I was starting to despair of our chances of finding a clue in this trash heap without touching anything.

“I’m not sure I can do this,” I said, squatting beside the table and heaving a sigh. We didn’t even really know if the two of them had come back after visiting Riviere Antiques; that was only a hypothesis. It was entirely possible the room had been vacant for well over half a day, and we’d wasted our trip out here.

For several seconds I crouched there, sinking deeper and deeper into my dark ruminations—but then I had a flash of genius insight. Couldn’t we just set the butterfly on *everything* in this room, one thing at a time?

“By the way, you should be aware that if this butterfly works too hard, it gets

tired, so it can deliver only up to three lost objects a day,” Riviere said.

So much for that idea.

My genius-idea-crushing shopkeeper crouched down beside me. In short, there was nothing for us to do but try to find the last thing the two of them had touched—with our own hands, so to speak.

“I’m curious,” Riviere said as we gazed around the filthy room. “Do you still think Macias isn’t a bad person at heart?”

“I guess it’s weird, huh? To defend a bad person.” I forced myself to laugh, but beside me, I saw a ripple pass through Riviere’s hair.

She was shaking her head.

“If we judge only on the information available to us, then he’s obviously a kidnapper and a killer. There’s no room for sympathy with someone like that.”

There was nothing I could say to that.

But then she went on, “Me, though... I agree with you. I think we should talk to him.”

I was supposed to be looking for clues, but instead I looked at her. I found her ultramarine eyes gazing back at me. From up close like this, I could see how beautiful her eyes really were, and how full of determination.

“Maybe more precisely, I think we should talk to Mylène. There are so many people of so many kinds in this country that ‘common sense’ hardly has any meaning. If the two of them are truly in love, then we need to accept what they say. If we do, then I think we’ll discover at least some measure of sympathy for their circumstances.”

So, she told me with a smile, she wasn’t prepared to say I was wrong just yet.

Could it be...?

“Are you trying to make me feel better?”

“Is that what it seems like?”

“Depending on how you look at it, I guess...”

“Maybe I am, then.” She stood up and tapped me on the shoulder. “We’d

better hurry up and find our clue if we want to have that conversation with them. That's how a neutral antiques store can do its job."

Would we suspect Macias of being a kidnapper? Or would we go after them as two people who were forced by circumstances to do what they did?

The choice was ours.

I felt a gentle heat in the shoulder Riviere had touched. The tension there began to relax just a little, and soon I found the tightness of my frown relaxing a little, too.

It might have been the first time in my life I'd met someone who didn't dismiss me even though I had a different opinion from everyone around me. No one else I'd met had had it in them to accept something like that. When I'd been unable to bear the corrupt behavior I saw at one of my companies and finally turned whistleblower, all the other employees had treated me like a traitor. When I tried to help a girl who was being bullied at the office, people started whispering that I was just trying to look like a do-gooder. When I offered suggestions for improving the efficiency of our work, I was swatted down and told to mind my own business.

My adult life these past three years had been a succession of such experiences. Maybe I was just unlucky. But I think the biggest problem was that I was a bit of a weirdo who stood out from the crowd. I just couldn't find other people who understood me.

I was silent for a long moment. When we'd talked to Macias and Mylène at the shop, they'd looked genuinely in love to me. Macias was concerned for Mylène, and Mylène was letting Macias handle things. Maybe, just maybe, they found themselves isolated, in an environment where no one understood them.

If that was true, then I wanted to offer what help I could. When everyone else refused to look at them, I thought maybe I, at least, could offer a hand.

So I was searching for proof that they loved each other.

"There," I said a few minutes later, getting slowly to my feet. "Miss Riviere, I found it." I thought I was managing to look calm as I spoke to her, but maybe my feelings showed on my face just a little bit.

“I thought you might.” Riviere nodded, but she looked disturbed. I probably did, too.

“I’m sorry, Miss Riviere. It looks like I was wrong.” I pointed to something under the table. It was one of the lockets they’d gotten from our shop. Lying on the floor, with Macias’s picture inside.

“He must have given it to her...and she must have thrown it away,” Riviere said. Then she set the Butterfly of Guidance on the pendant.

I finally had my proof, and it showed that Mylène didn’t love Macias at all.



I feel sick.

The words welled up from deep within Mylène’s heart as she spat them out with copious disgust.

So long as she couldn’t actually see the man Macias, she was able to maintain her own will. But the moment he came within her sight, her heart was his captive. Her heart felt in a way completely contrary to her own thoughts. It didn’t take her long to realize this was the work of a sancta.

Once she had figured that out, she sought every opportunity not to look at Macias. As long as he had a tight grip on her hand, though, she had no hope of escape. Neither could she imagine what might happen if she shouted for help.

For Mylène, being with Macias was nothing but agony.

“We’ll be there soon, my dear Mylène,” Macias said. Mylène looked at the sky, trying to keep him out of her line of sight. She saw flowers by the windows of the houses they passed, bobbing in the breeze. The window glass reflected the water and the golden twilight.

They were nearly at the sea.

She thought back to when she had first met Macias, at the flower shop. Though she’d been only a sheltered girl, Macias had spoken eagerly to her from her very first day, not hiding his interest. How could she think ill of him?

Eventually, Macias told Mylène that he loved her, but Mylène refused him,

knowing she could never get away from her father. It seemed not to have occurred to Macias that she might reject him, and he responded by kidnapping her.

He was not a man who could be reasoned with. At first he kept her locked up in his room, never letting her outside. She spent day after day in the claustrophobic apartment.

Soon realizing that she would have no chance to escape under her own power, Mylène resolved to win her freedom by catering to Macias's mood. She felt not the scantest hint of affection for Macias, who had kidnapped and imprisoned her even as he claimed to be madly in love with her—but nonetheless, she endeavored to appear the ideal partner in Macias's eyes.

Macias, contented with Mylène's feigned affection, began to crow that he wanted everyone to see them. They started going on walks through town together, where Macias would introduce Mylène to all and sundry as his girlfriend of whom he was so proud. And though it made the bile rise in her throat, Mylène played the part of a doting lover. Macias's friends and acquaintances all seemed surprised that this unassuming young man and this lovely young woman had gotten together, but Macias seemed to take their amazement as a way of saying he and Mylène were "the perfect couple." Mylène found his idea of perfection nauseating, but she continued the charade.

A turning point came some six months after Macias had abducted her. One of her family's servants saw Macias bragging to his friends. Mylène's father lost no time in finding Macias's house and bursting in. There, he administered a savage beating to the awful kidnapper and took his beloved daughter back home.

Where he said: "You are *mine*!"

That, she learned, was what he could not endure: the idea of someone stealing his property. Once they were home, he beat Mylène more harshly than he ever had before. The servants could only watch and worry from a distance, full of pity and sorrow; they treated her injuries in secret.

She was right back where she had been before the kidnapping.

Until, three months later, Macias broke into their mansion and killed her father.

When Macias grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the house, she found herself at a loss for what to do. In spite of the confusion, however, she rejected him more firmly than ever. During all the time he'd held her hostage, all the time they'd spent together, she'd worn a mask for him—but not anymore.

Confronted with her rejection, Macias gave her an apocalyptic look, but he disappeared just the same.

A short while later, however, the sancta from Antiques Carredura brought them together again.

“I feel sick...”

The murder of Mylène's father had made Macias a wanted man. He had dragged her all over town, trying to escape the police. Meanwhile, her disgust toward him only grew.

She had never once wanted the love of Macias and only Macias. She knew she deserved the love of more people than that. And yet each time she looked at him, the sancta made her heart captive. How she hated it and what it did to her.

They spent the night fleeing through town, and as dawn broke, the first place Macias took Mylène was Riviere Antiques, a little shop not far from his apartment, where he said there were many helpful sancta. He was bent on getting a weapon, she was sure.

When they went to Riviere Antiques, Mylène, still very much in thrall to the sancta, looked at Macias as if he were the only thing that mattered to her in the world, even nuzzled her head into his shoulder. Nothing could have turned her stomach more.

The shop owner, Riviere, seemed to notice immediately that something was strange about Macias. She refused to give him a weapon but instead provided him with two battered old lockets.

Macias decided it was better than nothing and took them back to his apartment, where he put a picture of himself in one of the lockets and a picture of her in the other, then put the lockets around each of their necks. For him, the one with Mylène's picture in it; for her, the one with Macias's. Even now, he seemed to believe she really loved him.

“It’s all right, Mylène. I’ll protect you,” he’d whispered, hugging her close. She began to weep from sheer disgust, and she couldn’t stop the tears.

The last thing she wanted was a gift from a man she didn’t love hanging around her neck. So when Macias wasn’t looking, she cast the locket away. Her small act of resistance became the clue that allowed her to be found.

It happened not long after they had reached the sea.

“It’s all right, Mylène,” Macias said. “As long as we’re together, we’ll manage somehow.”

Somehow? How was that? Words were cheap, and he kept spitting them out.

He pulled her toward the shore, where the waves lapped quietly in the dusk. Mylène stared at the water as Macias tugged on her hand.

Then a voice from behind shouted, “Don’t move!”

Mylène turned around—and knew that her time in hell would soon be over.

A man stood there wearing the black uniform of a police officer, his gun drawn and ready. He was with the antiques dealer, Riviere. A crowd of townspeople looked on from a safe distance, worried about what would happen.

This was what Mylène had hoped for, dreamed of, since the moment she found out about the sancta’s effect.



“The rest of the force is on the way. You’re not getting away this time,” Henri said, his gun aimed right at Macias’s head.

“I’m not trying to get away. I never was,” Macias replied, eerily calm. The moment he’d turned around, he’d realized the situation he was in. He’d immediately grabbed Mylène by the neck and held a knife to her throat. I thought she was the one he loved more than anything in the world, but he hadn’t hesitated to use her as a hostage.

“We just want to live quietly and be left alone. We’ll leave this land soon—you won’t even have to worry about us. So just leave us be, please.”

“I don’t know where you think you’re going to go, but in *this* country, when you murder someone, you go to jail. I’m not going to let you escape.” Henri kept his weapon up, but Macias stared him down. At his neck, the locket—the one he’d gotten from our shop—glimmered.

“This doesn’t look good,” Riviere whispered to me, so that only I could hear her over the gentle lapping of the waves. “I should never have given him that locket.”

I didn’t have to check my notepad to remember what this sancta did. “‘Cause it’ll protect him from one attack, right?” I whispered back, never taking my eyes off Macias.

I could feel Riviere nod. “If I’d realized what kind of person he was, I would never have given it to him. Shows what a judge of character I am.”

“But if you hadn’t given him those pendants, we never would have found them,” I said.

“Are you trying to make me feel better?”

“I’m just telling the truth.”

Maybe it was a good thing we’d gotten here first.

I glanced at Henri and Riviere. They immediately understood what I was thinking. It was worth a try—shooting him with a gun wasn’t going to help anyway. We needed to at least buy time until Henri’s fellow officers arrived. How appropriate that I, who’d said I wanted a chance to talk with Macias before he was arrested, should fill that role.

“Hey, um... Excuse me,” I said. “Just...calm down, please, Mr. Macias. We’re not here to keep the two of you apart.”

He turned his glare on me and kept the knife at Mylène’s throat. Behind his spectacles, his eyes made him look like a different person from the one I’d met at the store this morning.

“Shut your mouth! Go away and leave us alone!” he cried. He looked like a wild animal.

So I tried to sound placating as I talked to him. “I’m just... I want to know

about you two. Like, how you met, and how you were attracted to each other, and why you're together now. Do you think you could tell me?" I held his eyes as I spoke. "Is this what you and Mylène wanted?"

"Yes... Yes, it is. We would be happy if only we could always be together!"

"Does she look happy to you right now?" I asked.

"Does she...does she what?"

"The woman in your arms right now. Is that the face of a happy person?"

For the briefest moment, his eyes flitted to Mylène. This was the question I'd wanted to ask since we had found them on this beach.

"Mylène..." The name dropped from Macias's lips. Mylène stared into space. She didn't nuzzle up to him; she wasn't holding his hand.

Her eyes were not those of the woman I'd met at the store. They held none of the love she'd appeared to feel for Macias that morning. Instead, she was staring at nothing.

"Mr. Macias, please try to see...", I said.

Try to see that what you want is not what Mylène wants.

That was all I said to him.

"Mylène," he murmured again, and his hand was shaking. He gazed at her face, but she refused to look at him. He seemed confused. He didn't know, couldn't understand, what she was thinking, and the anxiety of that realization showed in his expression.

Now Mylène was looking at the ground, and he whispered in her ear—knife still at her throat—"Are we not lovers? Aren't we in love?"

At that, Mylène's fingers twitched. She looked up, slowly, until she was looking at us. Then her fingers brushed the arm wrapped around her neck. As Macias looked on with a mixture of confusion and joy, her fingers moved down his arm and took his hand. Clapsed it, as if to affirm everything.

"Oh, Mylène!" Macias cried, overwhelmed with happiness.

Until the next instant, when Mylène said, "No." There was a dull *thump*. "We

aren't lovers."

She spoke so calmly. Beside her, Macias's eyes bulged.

The knife was plunged into his chest.

As we watched, Mylène had taken the knife from him and, without ever turning around, stabbed him with it.

"Mylène... But why...?" Macias stared at the knife in his chest, uncomprehending.

Still calm and cold, she replied, "Because you killed my father. And now you've paid for it."

The sancta from Riviere Antiques protected the wearer from one attack by their enemies—but Macias didn't see Mylène as an enemy, so it didn't save him from the knife.

The arm around Mylène's neck went limp and slipped away, and in an instant she was out of his grasp. Once she was at a safe distance, she turned around. As the waves beat at the shore, Macias wove back and forth a few times, then collapsed on his back, as if being sucked to the ground. The waves washed over his face, then his torso. His mouth worked as if he were drowning. He seemed to be saying something, but his voice was so quiet that the waves stole it away.

Each time the waves receded, Macias's fingers and toes twitched. I rushed over in a daze, thinking he might still be breathing, but I quickly discovered I was mistaken. It was just the action of the waves on the dead body.

Mylène gazed down at him, watching until he was covered by the water.

I was close enough that when she finally spoke, I heard her.

"Farewell."

Her voice was as cold as that dark night sea.



I barely remembered how we got back to the shop after that. I sat on the couch, staring into space, the events of that twilit beach replaying in my mind.

A sea of officers appeared after Macias collapsed, and they cordoned off the area. It was too late, though; he'd already stopped breathing. The knife had gone straight through his heart.

Mylène simply stood there beside the corpse. A female officer came up to her and placed a blanket gently around her shoulders and offered words of comfort. Finally, some kind of expression returned to her seemingly frozen face, and she wept at the top of her lungs, howling into the night. The officers led her from the scene; they knew she was the victim and were worried about her.

Riviere and I had no more part to play in this drama. Henri holstered his gun and gave his thanks. I had a hazy recollection of him putting his hand on my shoulder and saying, "It's not your fault."

"Are you all right?"

I looked up to discover Riviere sitting right next to me. She'd made two cups of tea, which now sat on the table in front of us. The aroma soothed my anxious heart.

I found I couldn't say anything, though. The words I'd heard at the beach kept running through my mind, things Henri had said. *He was headed for an end like that sooner or later. There were only two choices left to him: Either I was going to shoot him, or Mylène was going to deal with him herself. It was too late for him anyway. Don't let it bother you.*

I'm sure he was trying to make me feel better, upset as I was. I'm sure he didn't mean for what he said to make me feel cornered.

"Miss Riviere..." Henri's offhanded kindness felt like a rope around my neck. "If you step off that straight and narrow path...is there any meaning in going on living?"

Riviere didn't say anything.

"If you do something bad, does it mean you *have* to die?"

Still, she was silent as she sat beside me.

I turned to look at her, and there she was, an expression of grief on her face. No, no. I hadn't meant to make her feel that way.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “That was a terrible thing to say...”

“No,” she replied after a moment, shaking her head. “It’s all right.” She wrapped her arms around me in an embrace.

I knew that Henri and Riviere were just trying to comfort me. Yet still I felt an ache in my heart that wouldn’t go away. I couldn’t stop the tears from spilling over. Why? It must have been because I had seen a life lost before my very eyes, a life that might still have been saved.

Each time someone tried to make me feel better, I only felt worse, because it was like they were telling me I should give up on him, and that made me so sad. I know—it was clear as day that what he’d done was wrong. Kidnapping and even murder. But when I had looked around his room, amid all the filth and mess, there had been that vase, neat and clean. He had been capable, at least, of cherishing a flower.

When he and Mylène had come to Riviere Antiques, he’d been genuinely worried about her. He’d chosen the wrong way to show it, but nonetheless, he was capable of loving someone.

Was it possible he might even have had a chance to do things over again?

I would think those things, but I would never, ever say them.

Instead I said, “I’m sorry, Miss Riviere. I’m sorry...”

I buried my face in her chest and wept quietly, wishing and hoping that the anguish that had come to occupy my heart would go away.



I decided Riviere Antiques would be closed the next day—as the shop’s owner, that was my prerogative. MacMillia obviously needed some rest, and I had a few things of my own to take care of. I assumed this was the first time she’d seen someone die before her eyes.

If I’m being completely honest, I was almost jealous of her. Live long enough, and you learn that people dying is nothing unusual. And you see your share of deaths far crueler than Macias’s. I knew MacMillia was right to grieve as she did, but for me, the tears wouldn’t come. I was even more saddened to realize

that, in my own mind, I could easily have gone on with work as usual the next day.

I raised my hand. “Did the body have any personal effects on it?” I was at the police bureau, meeting with Henri. My own voice sounded cold in my ears.

“Ah, Miss Riviere. Thank you again for your help.” Henri saluted smartly, then passed me a bag. “This was everything.” He sounded as detached as I did.

With a word of thanks, I opened the bag and looked inside. It contained bloodstained clothes, spectacles, a knife, a wallet, and some money. I gazed at the motley collection, everything Macias had had in the world at the moment of his death.

If Antiques Carredura had been lurking in the background of his final days, there was a good chance they had put a sancta in his hands. I needed to find it and either disenchant or sequester it before it found its way to anyone else.



To me, sancta looked different from ordinary objects—they were cloaked in a sort of glow. A bluish-white light emanated from them. It was the same for every sancta, and I could see that light—it would be stronger the more powerful the sancta's effect was, and while the sancta was in use, it would extend, if faintly, to the user's entire body.

When the two of them had come to the shop two days before, I'd seen that light around them. Based on what Henri and his officers said when they showed up later, I was sure the fugitives had been given a sancta from Antiques Carredura. That was why I was here today, because I had to find it.

"So which one is the sancta? Maybe the glasses?" Henri asked, cocking his head.

I held up the spectacles and squinted at them, but just as quickly I dropped them back in the bag and shook my head. "It's not here."

"What?" said Henri, baffled. Had he not heard me?

I looked him right in the eye and said as clearly as I could, "There is no sancta among these objects."

Not the glasses, not the clothes, not the knife, not any of it. There was, unquestionably, no sancta among this man's personal effects.

"But I don't understand. We know Macias was—"

I shoved the bag back at Henri, interrupting him.

I could think of two possibilities. The first was that the sancta had lost its power. Like the perfume that had afflicted MacMillia, sometimes an effect wore off over time, in which case I would no longer be able to see it.

The other possibility... The other possibility was too terrible to contemplate.

Every headline in every newspaper that day was devoted to what had happened to Mylène.

"The Tragic Fate of Mylène," proclaimed one. "Girl's Courage Defeats Kidnapper," said another. "Girl's Courageous Actions Acclaimed by All," said still a third.

The stories were usually accompanied by a photograph of Macias dragging Mylène through the city streets and a story describing the young woman's pitiful life and all that had happened to her. How she had been abducted by this stalker, how her father had viciously abused her, and how yesterday, after all these travails, she'd finally put an end to it by stabbing Macias, the source of all her troubles, with her own hand.

What she did was taken to be a clear case of self-defense, and people throughout the city praised her actions.

Mylène herself was currently recovering in the same place all of this had started: her mansion. The gate was swarmed by gawkers, along with people who wanted to give her flowers, or gifts, or vacuous words of encouragement that might not harm her but wouldn't heal her.

The enormous crowd meant it took me a few minutes to work my way to the gate, where I explained the situation to one of the servants and asked to be let in.

I gained an audience with the recuperating young woman. I opened the door to find her propped up on her bed, reading a newspaper. "Oh, hello there," she said politely.

Mylène. The victim of yesterday's events. This was the first time I'd had a chance to actually talk to her.

"Hello," I said, with equal politeness. "You might not remember me, but I'm the owner of Riviere Antiques." It was an act—I was pretty sure she remembered me.

As soon as the name Riviere came out of my mouth, I saw her smile. "Yes, of course I remember you. You were such a tremendous help yesterday."

Her gentle expression made her look like a completely different person from the day before, when her face had appeared as blank as a doll's. Perhaps I was finally seeing the real Mylène.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" she asked.

"I just came to check on you. I was worried," I replied.

“Did you see the crowd outside? So many people have proved so kind as to be worried about me... Hee-hee! It makes a girl quite happy.”

She grinned with pleasure, but I was silent. At length, she gave me a puzzled look and said, “So is there anything I can do to help you?”

I didn’t have the slightest intention of staying here any longer than I had to, so I cut right to the chase. “I couldn’t help wondering—are you in possession of any sancta?”

This was the other possibility, the terrible one. That it hadn’t been Macias, but Mylène to whom Antiques Carredura had given the sancta. That it had been with Mylène all along as Macias gradually unraveled beside her. That *she*, in fact, had been the cause of *his* undoing.

For a second, Mylène didn’t say anything. Then she smiled again. “You do say the strangest things. Of course I don’t possess anything like that..”

She added that she had no need of them. She looked completely composed as she said it. She didn’t so much as blink.



Mylène talked to herself, seeming enraptured, as the moon floated overhead. “Is pain not the proof that you’re in love?” she asked. “I loved my dear father more than anyone in the world. He was my ideal person. Yes, he beat me. Yes, it hurt. But I endured it, because I believed it was his way of showing his love.”

The city was silent. Mylène looked down at the woman: Antiques Carredura. From under her hood, the shopkeeper, Eve, listened gleefully to Mylène’s story.

“At first, when Macias took me away, I wondered if perhaps he might love me, too. But the longer we were together, the more boring he seemed. He shut me away so that he could have me all to himself, like one of his cherished flowers. He had no imagination. Father was kind enough to save me from his clutches.”

And then the father who had rescued her was killed by the hand of none other than that unimaginative florist. He even had the gall to announce that he had saved her from her father!

That was when she had first thought she might kill him. It was then that she had met Eve.

“And how did they work? The eye drops?” Eve said.

Eve had given her eye medicine that caused the world to appear ideal. Mylène was quite tired of her uninventive companion—she simply gave herself some help seeing the world just the way she wanted it.

The eye drops had worked very well. Too well, in fact.

“From the moment I put in the drops, Macias took on the appearance of my father. My dead father. My father, who was killed by a worm like Macias. Who was so violent but loved me. Those damnable drops made me completely infatuated with Macias.”

The medicine, however, worked only on what was in front of one’s eyes. Macias might appear as her father, but inside he was the same uninspired man who simply wanted to keep her to himself. Once she had woken from her dream, Mylène endeavored to keep him out of her sight.

“It was only then, though, that I realized: What I had loved most of all was something else.”

“Oh? Whatever do you mean?” Eve asked, as if she wasn’t particularly interested in the answer.

Mylène, however, was more than happy to keep talking. “When my father viciously beat me, the servants always responded to me with unconditional love. As Macias dragged me through the streets, everyone we passed looked on with pure concern for me. And when he took me hostage, I could see all those worried townspeople gathering. They were overflowing with unconditional love. I realized then that what I had truly loved was not my father, but the people who gave me their unconditional love because of his cruelty toward me.”

Eve was silent for a long moment, so Mylène continued. “I must thank you for enabling me to understand such an important thing. Here—a token of my appreciation.” She pressed some bills into Eve’s hand. Pocket change, for a girl from wealth like hers. “Take this, too.” On top of the bills she placed the eye

drops. The thing Eve had given her yesterday night, after Macias had run away.

Eve looked at her, questioning. "Oh? I sold these to you, my dear customer. Aren't you going to use them anymore?" No need to return them. She looked at Mylène.

Mylène, in return, smiled at her, bright as a clear day. "I no longer need them," she said, adding that, after all, there were so many people around her who loved her. She had no need to artificially change the world into something ideal. For in the house she would return to, only what was ideal was left.

"Indeed? Is that so?"

Mylène turned and disappeared into the house, leaving Eve alone. The antiques dealer watched her go. She remembered when she had seen Macias and Mylène walking together through town, and she chuckled to herself. They were so much alike.

"They made the perfect couple," she said, and she laughed.



The Mage of Antiques Carredura

The eastern avenue of Cururunelvia was packed with people. Walk along this street at dusk, and the panoply of open-air stalls, cafés, and restaurants standing cheek to jowl along the road each beckon you in with delicious aromas.

Following those inviting smells were wage workers off work for the day, lovers out on dates, parents and their children all a-bubble over which place they should choose. People of every kind crowded the shops, giving a visceral picture of not just population density, but, I guess, its variety, too. Metaphorically, it's like a hamburger, so perfectly cooked and tender that you need to stick a toothpick in it or it'll fall clean apart. What? That doesn't make any sense? Well, doesn't matter to me—but suddenly I'm sort of hungry...

"Oops! Don't do that!" I admonished myself. I'd gotten so distracted by the customers eating delicious-looking dinners that I was about to start salivating. Pathetic, self! Just pathetic.

I composed myself and turned my gaze to the people on the road. A steady stream of happy faces. And there I was, peeking out at them from the shadows. You might well wonder what exactly I was doing there.

"They say that where there's people, there's business!" I said to myself with a shady little *heh-heh-heh!* as I pulled a memo pad out of my trench coat. I looked about as suspicious as they come, but I was doing serious work.

Antiques Carredura. That's the name of another antiques shop—they deal in sancta just like we do at Riviere Antiques, but only ones that make people unhappy. We're not big fans of them, let me tell you. We haven't been able to find or stop them, though, so they go on selling their wares.

Me, I decided I really wanted to catch Antiques Carredura or, failing that, at least help out Riviere, who hardly seemed to have anything on them to work with. Why? Because I couldn't stand how Antiques Carredura seemed to enjoy making people suffer.

"There's got to be something I can learn on a crowded street like this!" I exhorted myself. I turned my attention back to the people coming down the street, then walked out among them.

Who would be first? I guess it didn't really matter.

"Um, excuse me!" I said, raising my hand and trying to give my least-threatening smile as I called out to all the passersby from the side of the road. The first people to turn at my call were a couple of young women walking together. Okay, we would start with them. "May I ask you a few questions?"

I walked over, trying to look confident, like I'd meant to talk specifically to them all along. I opened my notepad. "I'm looking for this one shop somewhere here in town. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it, would you?" I looked down at my notepad, pretending to need the reminder as I said, "It's called Antiques Carredura..."

What was really written in my notes was the info about the woman who ran the place. Riviere had told me what she knew, although I'd almost had to drag it out of her.

Thank you. I'm here at Riviere Antiques with the owner, Riviere. Do you have a moment to talk?

It had happened just after lunch today. I pointed a pen straight at Riviere's mouth and started peppering her with questions.

Think you could answer a few questions for me?

"Why do you sound like a news reporter?"

I used to work at a newspaper. I'd like to treat this as a formal interview today.

"I'm not sure that explains anything, but all right. What did you want to, ahem, interview me about?"

Antiques Carredura. What can you tell me about them?

"What brings this on?" Riviere asked, giving me a questioning look.

Don't you want to bring them in? Carredura, I mean.

Riviere was silent. We knew that Antiques Carredura enjoyed trapping people in misfortune and unhappiness. Ever since I'd almost been attacked by my company president on account of their "Perfume of Destiny," I'd had a thought.

Can Antiques Carredura really be allowed to remain at large? What's your opinion?

"Of course nothing good can come of it. The police are actively looking for Carredura right now, as am I. They've hurt so many people."

I see, I see. That sounds terrible.

"It is."

Have you ever thought about turning to a helper?

"What?"

Riviere looked at me, baffled, as if to ask what in the world I was talking about, and also maybe what in the world I was doing. In short, she was very confused.

Maybe in part because the tip of the pen, which had been pointed at her, was now pointing toward me.

Shall I search for them?

Ahem!

The interviewer, namely myself, puffed out her chest.

For a moment Riviere didn't say anything, greeting the interviewer's suggestion with an astonished look. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry—when did you

become my helper?”

Ah, ah! Don't underestimate the power of the interviewer!

“Not really what I meant.”

The fact that you and the police never see Antiques Carredura, Miss Riviere, is evidence that they know you and I are watching out for you.

She waited for me to go on.

Perhaps I can help with that. Being an interviewer.

“But you were an employee of this shop before you were an interviewer, right?”

Yes, but I'm still relatively new. They won't be on the lookout for me, not the same way they are for you.

What was the harm in trying? The interviewer, namely myself, was champing at the bit to give it a shot.

Again Riviere was silent. I saw a hint of hesitation in her eyes, but then she sighed and said, “We're dealing with a dangerous adversary. I didn't want to get you sucked into this if I could help it. But all right. I'll tell you what I've learned. Maybe it will help in your search.” Then she nodded at me.

Maybe she saw I had no intention of backing down. All she'd needed was a little push. I, the reporter, took down the most important info on my notepad.

Then Riviere opened a locked drawer of her desk, took out a notebook, and set it on top of the desk. “This book records all the cases and incidents involving Carredura that we know of.”

She picked it up and opened it. It was full of newspaper clippings and handwritten notes, so many that it visibly bulged.

The clippings started about three years back. There seemed to be about one a month, at least until roughly six months ago.

There seems to be a bit more data in this last six-month stretch.

At that point, in fact, the clippings and notes increased exponentially. What had happened?

“Six months ago is when they seem to have started selling random sancta on the roadside. Before that, they appeared to specific people in trouble and gave them the hard sell.”

When she said that, I realized: Professor Levin, he of the ghost wolf bag, had said the owner of Carredura had shown up at his door to sell him the sancta. But Curly Hair had bought the perfume by the road. Certainly two very different ways of drumming up business.

“I guess it’s a bit like when a band that had been selling their own tickets makes their big debut,” Riviere said.

I’m not entirely sure I follow that metaphor.

“The one silver lining is that it means we learned more about Carredura personnel than we knew before.”

As she spoke, Riviere flipped to the end of the notebook, not a modest achievement, considering she had to go past page after page of clippings. On the last page was what appeared to be a portrait, a sketch of a woman. Presumably the one going by the name ‘Carredura’ on the side of the road.

Did you draw this, Miss Riviere?

“Yes.”

You have a very distinctive style...

“Y-you think? Hee-hee, please do go on...”

I didn’t mean that as a compliment.

She puffed out her cheeks but said nothing. She seemed to have a certain amount of confidence in her drawing ability. I felt bad. Silently apologizing to her, I copied over every important characteristic I could glean from the sketch. After a few moments of writing in my notepad, I closed the book and handed it back to her.

Well, that at least gives me something to work with. Thank you very much.

“Does it? Good.”

It’s not much, but I’ll start looking based on what we have.

“What’d you write down? Tell me, tell me!”

She’s confident in herself but doesn’t take much of a push; can be awfully sweet, even cute, but as she pursued me with a cleaver on our first meeting, there’s some question as to her basic grasp of common sense.

“I’m sorry?”

Oh! No, I’m sorry. My mistake. Those were my notes about you, Miss Riviere.

“I’m going to send you flying right out that door...”

I beat her to the punch and showed myself out of the shop.

So it was that I set about investigating Antiques Carredura based on what minimal information I had. These were the fruits of my labors, the questions I’d asked on the eastern avenue:

“A mysterious woman in a black robe who sits on the side of the street? I’m sorry, but that’s not really enough to go on.”

“Golden hair and golden eyes? That could be lots of people.”

“How old is she? You said her voice makes her sound like she’s in her late teens, right? You know, I think I saw someone like that around here a while back... But now that I think about it, I’m not sure she was wearing a robe. Maybe it was someone else.”

“How does she talk? Hmm, polite-ish-ly? Hmm... I think I might have seen... Ahh, but then again, maybe not...”

“What did you say her name was? Eve? Hrm... Can’t say it rings a bell.”

And so on and so forth.

This former newspaper employee was tapping the limits of her investigatory abilities.

“Oh. Okay. Thank you anyway...”

After half a day of hard work, my shoulders were slumping. To my extreme frustration, “Antiques Carredura” seemed to have left hardly any trace of what she actually looked like. After all those questions, I was no closer to knowing anything definitive than I had been before.

Hrrmmm... Grrr!

I guess she had already spent three years not being found. It was always going to be a big job to track her down. I'd been wandering around town every chance I got the last several days, asking questions, but I was having no more luck than Riviere had. Information about Carredura seemed as insubstantial as a passing cloud. She left no shadow, no trace.

"Maybe it's time to give up," I mumbled, my shoulders slumping so low on the way home that it looked like they might fall off. Argh! I was desperate to meet Carredura, so why couldn't I?

"This weird impatience... Is this love?" I muttered to myself.

Even I didn't know what that meant, but someone said, "What are you talking about?"

Who could that be? Maybe Miss Eve from Carredura?

I turned expectantly, but it wasn't Eve. Ripply Wave was standing there behind me. Er, I mean, Linabelle.

"Oh! Hey, Miss Ripply Wave."

"Hey... Who?" Linabelle said, but she giggled. What was she doing here? I didn't even need to ask; she said, "I'm on my way home from practicing with my band." As ever, she gave off a kind of ripply, sort of wavy vibe. "What are you doing dressed like that, MacMillia?"

"You think it looks good on me?"

"Like I said... What are you doing?"

I decided to tell her honestly about everything that was happening. Every detail. All and sundry.

"So you're looking for the person who gave Curly Hair the perfume?" Even before I was done explaining my target's distinctive physical characteristics, she'd caught on to what I was after.

"Yes, exactly! Hey, you haven't seen her, have you?" I had my notebook out, just in case, but to be perfectly honest, my hopes were low. None of my other interview subjects had yielded anything useful, after all.

Linabelle immediately said, “Yeah, sure I have.”

See?

“Wait, really?!” I exclaimed, so surprised that I dropped my pen, then scrambled to pick it up.

“Oh, it’s not that exciting,” Linabelle said with a chuckle.

Maybe luck was finally turning my way. “Wh-when was this?!” I asked, hurriedly flipping to a blank page. I was ready and eager to take down some fresh info. (If you must know, that blank page was the same one I’d been using all along, because there hadn’t been any information worth writing down.)

“Just a minute ago,” Linabelle said, and she pointed down the street.



The woman just *looked* suspicious from the moment you saw her. From the black robe to the black hood. I couldn’t see her face or hair, or even her eyes, but the way she stood made it clear she was a young woman. Everything about her matched the info I had on Carredura’s employee.

I thanked Linabelle for her help, then made a beeline for the spot she indicated. There, I promptly found my quarry.

Yet I stood there looking perplexed, brought up short.

“What’s she doing *there*?” I muttered.

Riviere Antiques.

She was standing in front of the antiques shop where I worked!

I thought she was keeping a low profile because she was afraid of the police and even Riviere—so why was she right here?

I watched her press her back to the wall and slide up to the shop door. Very suspicious...

Suddenly, the Carredura woman seemed to be acting very differently than she had before. However, it also presented a rich opportunity. I snuck up behind her, careful not to make a sound. I carried a bag I’d brought from home, one so

big it took both hands to manage. It wasn't a sancta or anything, but if I shoved it over Carredura's head, I figured I could at least keep her from going anywhere. Incidentally, if you're curious, I'd used it to store futon mattresses. When I opened it and took a sniff, the smell reminded me of home. It was wonderful.

"Nobody's watching," I heard the hooded woman mutter. Then she stuffed a thick envelope through Riviere's mail slot.

She was wrong, though—I was watching, from immediately behind her. Ha-ha! Fool!

I had no real idea what might be in the envelope. The one thing I was sure of was that she didn't mean Riviere Antiques well. She had nothing but hate for our store. So whatever was in there, it couldn't be good.

So obviously...

"Hiiiyah!"

I raised my hands, bag and all, up into the twilight, then brought them down.

"Wha—?" she said as she turned around, only to find herself engulfed by a big, thick paper bag. "What? What's this? I can't seem to see anything." Pale, thin legs stuck out of the bottom of the bag, stomping in place. "Wait just a second. What's going on here?!"

"Heh-heh-heh!" I laughed. I couldn't help myself; she seemed pitiful in a way I couldn't imagine of somebody who'd spent all their time doing nasty things in shadowy places.

"Eep! That laugh sounded awfully villainous," said the very confused woman from Carredura.

"How do you like being stuffed into a bag? Hmm?" I asked.

"It smells like...the countryside."

"Wait, what's that supposed to mean? Well, enjoy the chance to make your calm, composed observations while you can. It won't last!"

"I was just saying! You don't have to be a jerk about it." The woman sighed, and then the bag rustled. She was probably shaking her head in a *well, gosh*

gesture.

I quickly dragged her into the store. I wanted to give Riviere a chance to see who her nemesis was before we turned her over to the police. What a good employee I am.

“Miss Riviere!” I called out. “Hello!” A very energetic greeting if I may say so myself.

I scanned the store, working toward her usual spot—behind her desk—but she wasn’t there.

“Oh, welcome back,” said a voice from right beside me. I turned and found Riviere, who was picking up the envelope that had just been pushed through the mail slot.

In that moment, several things rushed through my head. A thick envelope. A mystery delivery from the woman from Antiques Carredura. Antiques Carredura, our enemy. It almost had to be something dangerous...

“D-don’t touch that, Miss Riviere!” I exclaimed, and I grabbed it from her almost before I knew what I was doing. In the next instant, the possibility crossed my mind that it could be some sort of explosive. “Rraah!” I cried and, once again acting on instinct, threw the envelope at the mystery person with a bag over her head.

Thwack! went the envelope, a perfect hit at point-blank range. “Owwie!” cried our captive. The envelope dropped to the floor, the flap coming open and spilling the contents everywhere. It was full of papers that now covered our floor.

“*Phew...* So it wasn’t an explosive,” I said. I patted Riviere on the shoulder, chuckling and congratulating her on surviving. She didn’t have to thank me.

Riviere regarded today’s MVP, namely myself, with a cold gaze. “I don’t have the faintest idea what you think you’re doing.” Excuse me, but was that any way to treat a hero?

“Carredura delivered that envelope. You need to be a little more careful, my dear,” I said with an exaggeratedly exasperated shrug.

“Huh? Carredura?” Riviere was completely flummoxed. How adorable. “What’s from Carredura?”

I saw she didn’t yet realize what was going on, but I could hardly blame her. After all, our suspect currently had a bag over her head, from under which she was jabbering, “What did you just hit me with? Hello? I know I’m easygoing, but even I’ve got my limits!”

I gave her a push in the vicinity of her back.

“Could you please keep your hands off my stomach?”

Oops. Guess that was her front.

I spun her 180 degrees around and said proudly to Riviere, “Heh-heh-heh! I have captured Eve, of Antiques Carredura.” Yes, very proud.

So how about that? Pretty awesome, right? You wouldn’t expect any less from a former newspaper employee. To be able to bring skills from your earlier jobs to solve problems at your new place of employment—that was the mark of a true professional.

“This girl...is Eve?” Riviere asked, studying the woman in the bag. Finally, she went, “*Sigh...*”

Wait...sigh?

“Tell me, MacMillia. Did you get a good look at this girl’s hair? Her face?”

“Huh? Well, no. She was wearing a hood...”

“I figured as much.” Riviere shook her head. “I’m sorry. This is partly my fault for not mentioning to you...”

She walked slowly over to the bag containing “Eve,” grabbed one edge, and whipped it off my captive.

“What?” I stood there open-mouthed. The golden-haired Eve...was not who I saw emerge.

Instead, I saw someone with ashen hair and azure eyes, rubbing her head and giving me a resentful look. *Sigh*, she sighed. It was plain to see that she didn’t match any of the descriptions I’d been given of my target.

“Uh... Who are you?” I asked, puzzled.

“I could ask you the very same question,” the mystery woman said, looking puzzled right back.

It was Riviere who answered us both, giving her a quick rundown on who I was and then introducing her to me.

“I suppose I should have told you what was happening. This young lady doesn’t work for me as such, but at my request, she’s been helping me look for Carredura for a while now.” She placed her hand on the ashen-haired girl’s shoulder.

“This is some way to introduce yourself,” the girl grumbled, but then she gave me a quick dip of the head in greeting. “My name is Elaina. Pleasure to meet you.” She was surprisingly polite. Then she said, “People call me the Ashen Witch.”

Witch? Did she say *witch*? But those weren’t supposed to exist in this country...



Witches. Mages.

Both general terms for all those who could use magic, a mysterious power few people possessed. In this country, where there was no magic at all, they might as well have been pure fiction. Sure, they’d always been said to exist outside Cururunelvia’s borders, but all my life, I’d only ever seen or heard of them in fairy tales.

Magic was so not a thing here that I’d started to figure that maybe it was a delusion old people had, or something used to shut up children.

“Oh, mages exist, all right. But only outside this land,” said Riviere, setting tea in front of each of us where we sat on the sofas.

So this was about the difference between Cururunelvia and other countries.

“When you take a broader view of things, it’s really *our* land that seems strange. There’s magic everywhere you look in the natural world. Mages simply

take that power into themselves and unleash it as spells. It only makes sense.”

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“Sure it does... I guess?” I said. Common sense or not, I was having trouble picturing it. After all, this was the first time in my life I’d ever even seen one of these magic-using people. Namely Elaina, sitting across from me. She didn’t have a robe like I’d always seen in my picture books, or even a pointy hat. For that matter, the wand and broom were missing, too. And yet she said she was a witch.

“If you don’t mind my asking, Miss Elaina, what kind of magic can you use?” I asked, genuinely curious. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, though, I started having questions. Like, if she could use magic, why hadn’t she fought back when I flung a bag over her head?

“Oh, different kinds,” she said. Then she gave a slow shake of her head. “But not right now, I’m afraid.”

Not right now?

“What does that mean?”

She could use magic, but not now? Huh?

“The moment I entered this country, I found myself completely unable to use my magic! I waved my wand—nothing. I sat on my broom and tried to fly—couldn’t even float. This land doesn’t seem to have magical energy, which is why I couldn’t do anything about your little ambush.”

“That makes sense...”

“Huh, and I daresay you were lucky. If I could have used my spells, you’d be a little pile of ashes right now.” For some reason, she looked very proud of that.

I probably should have been quaking in my boots at a threat from a real mage, but Elaina was just a girl my own age. It was hard to be scared of her.

Something else she’d said bothered me, though.

“Why doesn’t this land have...magical energy? Is that what you called it?”

“You certainly have a lot of questions.”

“Because none of this makes any sense to me!”

I just wanted someone to actually explain it all!

I *hrrmed* and busily put on my most serious expression. Elaina, meanwhile, said, “Fair enough,” and then thought for a moment. Finally, she tugged on the sleeve of my shopkeeper, who was placidly savoring her tea beside us, and said, “May I tell her, Miss Riviere?”

Everyone in this country knew there were no mages here. But as for *why* there weren’t—why they wouldn’t be able to use this power they called magical energy—that, I didn’t know. Knowing nothing about the world outside my island, I had just never questioned it. I suspected most inhabitants of this nation never had.

Riviere, though—she’d probably known for a long time.

“Go ahead,” she said with a nod. “If she’s going to work in this shop, she’ll find out sooner or later.”

Well, there you have it. The limpid, ultramarine eyes watched me closely. She was obviously saying: *Tell no one what you’re about to hear.*

“All right. Allow me to explain, then. I only just learned about it myself around three months ago,” Elaina said, adding with a glance at the papers on the table—the ones she had been stuffing through our mail slot—that it was just one of many things she’d learned that she had to keep to herself.

Then she looked at me again. “You said your name was MacMillia, yeah?” she asked, just to make sure. I nodded, at which she smiled ever so slightly and said, “Very well, Miss MacMillia. I must ask that what I’m about to say not leave this room. All right?”

She placed a finger to her lips. Then she started what turned out to be quite a long story.



One day, she’d set course for an island, a land surrounded on all four sides by the sea. A place called Cururunelvia, the land of prayer. A country with no mages, visited by only one ship each year—and tickets for that ship were almost impossible to come by.

By sheer happenstance, she came into possession of two such tickets just

days before the ship was to leave. Apparently, she'd purchased them at a deep discount from a couple who'd seen a stage play about a ship that hits an iceberg and sinks. "Wasn't it just awful, how after one of them pretended to be the captain, they were separated by death? I wouldn't want that for *me*!" the woman had cried. "I'm getting rid of these lousy tickets!" the husband had said. I guess some people don't know the difference between fiction and reality.

Well, any port in a storm for her, I guess. She took the tickets and got on board.

When she boarded, one of the crewmembers read off a long list of precautions, provisos, and general warnings, but she was only half paying attention; she simply said "Yes, of course" or "That's all right" when it seemed appropriate. She knew from long experience of travel that these lists could usually be safely ignored.

"And if I really get into any trouble, I can just fly away on my broom," she said, humming a little tune as she watched the dock grow smaller behind her.

Then she turned her attention to the ship and the other travelers with whom she would be sharing this journey. There weren't many of them. She learned that the majority of them were returnees—people originally from Cururunelvia who were going back.

Maybe the place wasn't a very popular tourist destination? This was when the first seeds of doubt were planted in her mind, but she told herself, "That can't be right. It's just that it's so hard to get tickets—of course there aren't many tourists." Yes, that made sense to her. She even decided she should count herself lucky—she had the rare opportunity to go where few other people had.

Incidentally, you might recall that she had *two* tickets at first. During the trip, she threw the other one into the ocean. It gave her a thrill to take something so rare and valuable and fling it into the water. Kind of a strange hobby, maybe, but she had the time to kill on board. She still didn't know—she had no idea there was no magic in the land of prayer.

"Uh...I can't seem to use my magic."

It was about three days after entering Cururunelvia that she first started to think she might be in trouble. She'd decided she'd like to get a bird's-eye view

of the whole island, but when she tried to magically summon her broom, it didn't appear.

Hmm? What's this? Perplexed, she waved her wand. Nothing happened.

Come to think of it, the magical energy she usually felt coursing through her body seemed to have completely drained away. What in the world was going on?

That was when the pieces fell into place. This island was a country with no mages. Meaning, maybe, it was a country that caused mages to cease to *be* mages.

"I should have known..."

Suddenly, she had a serious problem on her hands.

She tried asking around the port: Were there any mages at all in this land? But the fishermen only gave her confused looks and said, "Why're you dressed up like a witch?" and "Is there some kinda carnival going on?"

Shoot. Shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot.

The girl stood at the dock and looked longingly out to sea. That lovely young lady's name was Elaina...

"Hold on, please."

A young woman interrupted Elaina's story, and her name was Riviere...

"Aww! I was just getting to the good part."

"How far back is this explanation going?" Riviere asked.

"I figured the more detail, the better," Elaina said without missing a beat. Her expression made it clear that she thought it was obviously best to explain starting with how she got to the island. It was equally clear that she thought she was extremely considerate for doing so. In short, she was bursting with self-confidence.

"You can constrain your explanation to Carredura, if you please," Riviere said, coldly shaking her head and indicating that nobody cared how Elaina wound up here.

“What?” Elaina asked, making no effort to hide her displeasure. “You mean you’re not interested in hearing how I earned small change as a fortune-teller on this island, or how I spent languid days going from one bakery to another trying the bread, or how I secretly had a ranking of every bakery in town, or how every time I told someone’s fortune, I would pump them for information about the best bakeries they knew?”

“I think we can safely pass over all of that.”

“*What?!* You sure are demanding.”

“If you aren’t careful, MacMillia might start to think that everyone from beyond the island is like you.”

“You’re right—we wouldn’t want that. Not everyone from beyond the island is as perfect as I am.”

Riviere shot me a glance, but I kept my mouth shut. “*Sigh!* It might already be too late,” she mumbled. I wasn’t sure what kind of face I was making, but I suspect my expression was pretty cold.

Hold on a second—a wandering fortune-teller who wanted info on bakeries? So that fortune-teller I met while I was riding high on the Perfume of Destiny—was that Elaina?

Suddenly, it felt like a very small world after all.

“So how did you meet Miss Riviere, Miss Elaina?” I asked.

“Ah!” she said with a quick nod, as if she almost hadn’t thought of it. “She started talking to me while I was walking around town dressed as a witch. ‘Heh-heh-heh,’ she said. ‘Don’t worry. This’ll be over soon...’ And then she dragged me into her shop.”

“Yikes!”

These did not sound like the actions of a trustworthy person.

I looked to Riviere, who suddenly seemed uncomfortable. “I...I didn’t say it like *that*,” she said, but she wouldn’t meet my eyes. Probably because of the profoundly contemptuous look on my face.

“B-besides, she didn’t exactly look unhappy when I dragged her off,” she

offered weakly.

“Yikes again!”

Was it just me, or was my shop owner starting to sound downright dangerous?

“I think it’s only fair for you to know, Miss MacMillia, what kind of shop you work at,” Elaina said—words of comfort that I didn’t find comforting in the least. “We’ve gotten off topic again—Miss Riviere’s fault—but anyway, that’s how I ended up at this shop getting badgered about this antiques store she’s after.”

In my opinion, we hadn’t gotten off topic—we had never been *on* topic to begin with. But I kept that to myself.

According to Elaina, once Riviere had dragged her into the shop, she’d interrogated Elaina about every detail, from how she had gotten to the island up to that moment. Like a possessive girlfriend, if there ever was one.

“I’m not *obsessed*,” Riviere said, frowning openly. Well, no one had said she was. In so many words.

“Then Miss Riviere asked me to keep dressing as a witch for a while, and to investigate this Carredura. And she paid me decently for it.”

I cocked my head, puzzled. What was the connection between dressing up as a witch and investigating Carredura?

“I thought if Carredura found out about a witch from outside the island, they would try to draw her into their fold,” Riviere said coolly. “I was glad I made contact with Elaina before they did.”

“I don’t get it,” I said.

Riviere responded, calmly and evenly: “Carredura is descended from a clan of witches.”



“Whoa! You’ll give me *this* much to—? Sure, I’ll be happy to do it!”

So it was that Elaina, moved by Riviere’s heartfelt wish, agreed to help her

antiques shop apprehend Carredura.

It wasn't for the money. No, it was because Riviere's desire to protect the peace of her island home touched Elaina so deeply.

"Oooh! This country's money smells so good when you fan yourself with it!"

Elaina started, as Riviere had asked, by wandering around town dressed as a witch. Three days later, she first made contact with Eve, the woman from Antiques Carredura.

"Goodness gracious me. Say, miss! That outfit. That brooch... You wouldn't happen to be a witch, would you?"

I learned that *witch* was a title, the highest rank among mages. It would mean Elaina had achieved considerable power at a very young age. In Cururunelvia, the land of prayer, the chances of meeting a witch were next to nil, hence why Eve was so interested in Elaina.

The young mage chuckled and puffed out her chest. "Well, you're not wrong... Although I admit, I don't bear the esteemed title of *witch*."

Not exactly the sort of confession you would expect from someone who looked quite so proud of herself. Eve, however, invited Elaina to have a chat with her, to which Elaina readily agreed. "As long as you'll treat me to a delicious meal while we talk," she said.

Not that it mattered, but I was starting to think Elaina had a greedy streak. In fact, her story left me with the impression that she could be sort of...frivolous.

But back to our tale. Eve took Elaina to a nearby café, where they sat down across from each other at one of the tables, and Eve, her face hidden by her hood this whole time, ordered a coffee. Elaina ordered bread, along with one of the more expensive entrées on the menu. She also didn't hesitate to ask for more bread. Several times. That's a witch for you, I guess.

"Don't you remove your hood even when you eat?" Elaina asked with a look at Eve, who was indeed still hooded.

The other woman chuckled and replied, "No, I don't. I'd rather people not see me, you understand."

“Why? Are you involved in some kind of shady business?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Perish the thought.”

Uh-huh. Actually, that was exactly what she was involved in.

Eve, however, shook her head easily and said, “I am fighting for freedom—but my activities have made me a target for certain people.” So, she said, she had to keep her face hidden.

Elaina gave her a puzzled look. “Freedom?” Riviere had described Eve as someone who used *sancta* to make people’s lives worse. This new information seemed very much at odds with that description.

“Yes, indeed, freedom. Your freedom has likewise been constrained since you arrived in this country, Miss Witch. Surely you’ve noticed? You must have sensed that no magical energy flows in this land.”

“Yeah, I have...” Elaina nodded. Then she told Eve how she’d tried to use her magic, but there hadn’t been any response.

Eve gave her a profound, sympathetic nod and said, “A most cruel place, isn’t it?” Then she leaned closer. “Would you like me to tell you *why* it’s like this?” She told Elaina that what she was about to say would reveal this country’s dark side, and that few people knew about it. “It should stay that way, you understand? What I’m about to tell you, you must keep to yourself.” Then she laughed, loudly, and put a finger to her lips.

Elaina nodded and listened—but not very closely. For this dark tale that so few people knew, she had already heard from Riviere.

Eve continued to laugh, but her story was straightforward. Elaina could hear Riviere’s voice in her mind.

“In this country, magical energy has turned into *this*,” Riviere had said. She’d been sitting across from Elaina in Riviere Antiques, holding up a black sun umbrella. She claimed it was a particularly fine item that would repel anything that touched it. Like a knife, for example. Or a wild animal’s teeth. Or the blows of an attacker. It would always send them backward and never break. Truly, a mysterious power. One might almost say magical.

She continued, “We call objects imbued with such special powers sancta. They’re what we have in lieu of magic, which is absent in this land.”

“But what is their power source, then?” Elaina asked, although she already had a pretty good idea. It might not be magic in this country, but there was some kind of special power. And what could give forth special power? The same source as magic—magical energy.

“As I think you’ve guessed, the power source that makes sancta work is magical energy,” Riviere said, setting the umbrella aside. “Magical energy as such *does* exist here, as it does where you live beyond the sea. The way it works is just a little...different in our country. Here, magical energy doesn’t float freely.”

As she spoke, Riviere put a map on the table. She pointed directly at the center of Cururunelvia, the land of prayer. At the cathedral.

“The people who founded this land wished for a country where all could be equal. A place where everyone could use a power like magic equally. That desire led them to the country we have today—they built the cathedral, which absorbs all the magical energy in our land.”

And standing in the center of the cathedral was the statue of Cururunelvia.

If you offered the statue some money and made your wish, one of your belongings might gain a special power. For example, if you prayed to be able to run fast, your shoes might become capable of granting you tremendous speed. If you wished to be invisible, you might gain a blanket that could cause your body to disappear.

“When a wish is granted, an object is imbued with magical energy and becomes a sancta. It was the best solution the founders could think of to allow everyone equal access to the powers granted by magic.”

It wasn’t the case that anyone could have any wish granted at any time—wishes only came true a small percentage of the time. But even so, it meant that more people here got the benefits of magic than in the world at large, where only mages could channel magical energy.

Two hundred and fifty years had now passed since the nation’s founding, and

not a single mage had ever lived here.

“Those mages who were present at the start agreed to the sancta system, of course...”

But their descendants hadn't. For Eve, who operated under the banner of Antiques Carredura, this land overflowing with sancta was unacceptable.

Eve's grin never slipped as she explained all of this to Elaina, yet her frustration was unmistakable. “Since my fool ancestors went and threw away their magic, none of us have been able to use the power. The people of this land have led rich, abundant lives, while mages have suffered! No one even knows that we've been sacrificed in the shadows. We don't receive a word of thanks; everyone just goes about their lives. The moment they've gotten whatever they want from their object, they sell it to an 'antiques' store, never knowing where that special power really comes from.”

Elaina didn't say anything.

“In truth, only mages understand how to properly use the power of magic. Sancta are only a poor substitute for true spells.” Elaina continued to be silent, so Eve went on; she was getting more and more worked up, although she still didn't stop smiling. “That's why we must make the people of this town understand that sancta are not to be trifled with!”

That, she explained, was why she dealt only in sancta that ultimately made people unhappy. And she would continue to vend her dire wares under the sign of Antiques Carredura until the ridiculous toys people got by praying at the cathedral disappeared.

All to achieve the freedom she craved.

“How about it, Elaina, my friend? Won't you join me in the fight for freedom?” She reached out. “As a fellow mage, surely you can understand?” Eve's eyes said: *Surely she must sympathize with Carredura, agree with Carredura?*

For Elaina, it was the perfect opportunity to do just what Riviere had asked and insinuate herself with the rival shop. All she had to do now was pretend to be their collaborator. She would be able to find out about them from right up

close, and they wouldn't suspect a thing. Piece of cake.

Elaina gave Eve a questioning look. "Is that really all you're after?"

"How do you mean?"

"I certainly see your devotion to freeing mages," Elaina said calmly. "However, it's equally obvious that you hate the idea of those who *aren't* mages having access to the power of magic, and I think your desire to trap them all in a living hell is even stronger than your desire for freedom."

How about it? Was she right? She looked Eve square in the eye.

"Ha-ha-ha! Heavens, no," Eve said, maintaining her smile. "I'm simply fighting for my own freedom."

Elaina told us she wasn't sure whether Eve was bluffing or if she really believed that—because from the first moment to the last, Eve's smile had been thin and unconvincing, like she had to force herself to wear it.

After that, Eve and Elaina began meeting regularly. Elaina pretended to support Antiques Carredura's activities from the shadows, while in fact she tried to find out the truth of what they were doing.

Eve, though, would only meet with Elaina in public. Maybe she was still a little suspicious of this witch who had come from beyond the country's borders. Even when Elaina put on her best ditzy look and tried an experimental "Aww, lemme see your room!" Eve simply chuckled in response.

Days passed in a blur as she tried to trail Antiques Carredura. Elaina patiently kept up the act of being a collaborator and waited for Eve to slip up.

Eve always appeared on the weekends. She would show up suddenly while Elaina was out eating. Elaina even started to think, *Is she stalking me?* But then she thought, *No, maybe she has some sort of sancta that allows her to ascertain my location...*

If that was the case, then it would be best not to make contact with Riviere unless absolutely necessary. She would have to assume she was being watched at all times.

Just as Elaina felt the paranoia mounting, though, Eve said, "You're so easy to

find, Elaina. I can always count on you to be at a bakery somewhere!"

Oof. Talk about needless anxiety.

Elaina stopped munching on the bread in her hand. So it was the hand's fault! She gave it a smack. Bad hand.

"It's just as well. It saves me the trouble of looking for you."

Elaina was as happy as Eve to be meeting often. It gave her a nice, logical excuse to investigate Carredura—because each time they met, they talked.

"We have all kinds of sancta," Eve explained. "Lots of useful things. Like this fan, or this perfume."

All Elaina saw on the table was a couple of totally unremarkable items. "And if someone uses these, it will make them unhappy?" she asked.

"If you know the right way to use them, there's no danger at all."

"But you won't tell them the right way, will you?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Eve laughed, but she didn't deny it.

"If you don't mind telling me, what's the most dangerous sancta in your collection?" Elaina asked.

"The most dangerous? Hmm..." They were just having a friendly conversation, and Eve answered the question as casually as it had cropped up, placing something beside the fan—a knife in a scabbard. "This is probably the nastiest one of all."

"May I ask what it does?"

"So much as a scratch from this, and you'll die on the spot."

Elaina went quiet. Eve was right. Nasty indeed. "I daresay there's no right way to use that," she murmured.

"Maybe not," Eve agreed with a nod, slipping the knife back into her bag. "It's not for sale anyway. I keep it for my personal protection."

"How did you come across a sancta like that?"

"Ha-ha-ha! That's my little secret."

Apparently, she wasn't telling. Finally, Elaina said, "If you like...do you want me to help you?"

Riviere's request had been for Elaina to investigate Carredura and recover as many of their sancta as possible. If she could pretend to sell the items while secretly smuggling them to Riviere, that would be perfect. At least, it seemed like it...

"Ha-ha-ha, thank you, but that won't be necessary. No, there's something else I'd like to ask you to handle."

"Such as?"

"It's awfully tiring for me to scour this town high and low, searching for people who look like they might be in some kind of trouble. Would you be so kind as to be on the lookout for people who could use some help? Especially since you and I are seeing a lot of each other now."

"I see," Elaina said, adding that that was fine by her.

"Another thing—you don't happen to own a black robe like mine, do you? I'd appreciate if you would go around town wearing it."

"I don't understand why."

"The police have been keeping an eye on me lately. It would help throw them off the trail."

"Ah..." Elaina nodded. "Sure, I can do that."

After that, Elaina made it her priority to gain Eve's trust. She spent her days sitting by the roadside wearing a black hood while studying the people who went by. Was there anyone who looked like they were carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders? The funny thing was, just by sitting and staring into the distance, she discovered any number of such people.

Elaina didn't know whether this was really of any help to Eve, but each time she passed along what she had learned, Eve would grin and say, "I see, I see..."

So the days passed, until one day about two weeks ago.

"An antiques shop called Riviere Antiques recently took on a new employee," Eve informed Elaina, and she asked if Elaina would be so kind as to investigate

the newcomer.

It was the first time Elaina had heard Eve speak the name of Riviere Antiques.

“What makes that place so special?” she asked nonchalantly.

“Riviere Antiques is the oldest antiques shop in Cururunelvia,” said Eve.

“Huh!”

“It’s also home to the most dangerous sancta of all. They keep them squirreled away in that little shop.”

Elaina paused. “What do you mean by that?”

She hadn’t heard anything about this from Riviere. Struggling not to let anything show in her face, Elaina leaned forward ever so slightly.

Eve, as always, smiled. “Riviere Antiques is the one and only antiques shop in this country that has a working relationship with the police bureau. And they trust her with storing or disposing of any sancta used in the crimes they investigate.”

“Hmm...”

“Which makes me all the more curious what kind of person they would bring in to work there. Think you could look into it?”

Elaina had no special reason to refuse, and so she ended up keeping me under surveillance for a while...

Surveillance...

Wait—I was being surveilled?

This was the first I was hearing of it!

“That’s a bit of a shock,” I said. So much of one, in fact, that I found myself interrupting the flashback to say so.

“Finding out about you didn’t even take an entire day,” Elaina said, her nonchalance completely undercutting my amazement. “Twenty-one years of age. Female. Resides in an apartment near the cathedral. No unique abilities of note. In short, a completely ordinary person. That’s the gist of what I came up with.”

“It kind of stings to hear you say it to my face.”

“In any case, I told Eve what I’d found out.”

“And what did she think?”

“I believe her words were ‘She sounds boring as hell.’”

“Ouch!”

“It was great.”

“Double ouch!”

“Sorry, I don’t mean about you being boring as hell.” Elaina gave a dismissive wave of her hand. “I mean because after I told her about you, there were a few developments.”

For one thing, after writing me off as boring, Eve had snorted, “At least we don’t have to worry about *her*.” Maybe her opinion of me caused her to let her guard down, because she soon told Elaina about her impending plans. “As a matter of fact, my supply of sancta has started to run low. I thought I might go *borrow* some from Riviere Antiques.”

She’d been wary because of this new employee at the shop, but when she decided the new girl, namely me, MacMillia, was a boring-ass person not worth worrying about, she set about making her next move.

“It’ll be next Friday,” Eve said with a look at Elaina. Friday of the next week—that was to say, five days from today. “Next Friday, I thought I’d take a little visit to Riviere Antiques and stock up on sancta.” Then she asked: Once they had more sancta on hand, maybe Elaina could help sell them? Eve seemed to have taken quite a liking to Elaina, maybe because they had spent the past three months chatting frequently.

Elaina, unsure how to respond, asked, “Do you really think you can do it?” Eve certainly seemed confident—unless that was just her usual smile.

“Of course I do,” she said smoothly, and then she flipped back her robe so Elaina could see her bag—and a knife. The one she kept for “personal protection.” The one that could administer a fatal wound with just a scratch.

Then she said, “The fight for freedom will always involve a few sacrifices.”



Eve was making it clear: She was invested enough in mages that she wouldn't hesitate to kill those who stood in her way.

"Sounds like it's finally time to confront each other," said Riviere, who sounded awfully blasé, considering she had just, in essence, received a death threat. "Heh-heh! I can't wait."

Once Elaina had finished her winding story, the two of them started talking as Riviere flipped through the papers on the table—the ones Elaina had put in our mail slot.

"This is a list of the sancta Eve has."

"Thanks."

"It's not just a knife—she seems to keep that fan close, too, but I never found out exactly what it does. She wouldn't tell me."

"It's fine. This list is a great start."

"Yeah? How about my reward, then?"

"It's still early for that."

(Pregnant pause.)

So the trouble would come to us five days hence. I can't say most people would have been so calm at a moment like this, but I guess the two of them were sort of used to it.

"MacMillia, help us get ready for what's coming on Friday," Riviere said, looking up from the papers. Her expression was grim. "Elaina and I will deal with things. Maybe you can help set traps in the store."

I guess that was okay? But... "Are you sure about this?" I asked. They knew our enemy had a deadly weapon, right? Deadly as in it might kill us?

I couldn't shake the anxiety.

Riviere's expression softened. "I won't be defeated by the likes of her," she said, adding that surely I had learned by now that she could handle herself in a fight.

“Oh! Maybe I can just cheer from the sidelines, too, then?” Elaina said, raising her hand.

“I’m afraid not,” Riviere replied without even looking at her.

(Annoyed pause.)

So we threw ourselves into getting ready for Eve, who was going to attack us in five days’ time. After three months together, Elaina had even learned something about what Eve was hiding under her hood.

“I’ve only seen her face, but what I can tell you is that she has golden hair and golden eyes. I’d say she’s about eighteen—awfully young. And awfully pretty, at that. Maybe not as pretty as me, though.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that last part, but I would have to take her word on it.

As we worked to get ready, an understanding—a rule, if you will—formed among us. Although it didn’t have much relevance for Riviere, who hardly left the shop, or Elaina, who knew Eve personally. It was more for me.

“If Carredura makes contact with you before Friday, do *not* speak to her. Absolutely do not purchase any sancta from her. Understood?”

The point was simple enough: There was always the chance she would try to ambush us. We didn’t know when or where she might lay a trap. It was better just to avoid her entirely. At least, I figured that was the idea.

“MacMillia, you have to be especially careful,” Riviere said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I know she’s not worried about you, but there’s no telling what might happen if she makes contact with you.”

Yes. Agreed completely.

So I spent my time wishing fervently, from the bottom of my heart, that Carredura wouldn’t talk to me for the foreseeable future.

Then it was the day before Eve was supposed to come to our shop. I was on my way home. And as I so often observed about myself, I was unlucky.

Why couldn’t she have shown up when I was actually looking for her instead?

“Say, young lady, you look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. Have a look at my wares before you go?”

I could see the golden hair and eyes glinting under the hood—it was Eve.

There was no way she knew I was on the alert for her, so as casually as I could, I said, “Who, me? Nah, there’s nothing in particular on my mind!”

Well, there was *now*. But I tried to pretend I wasn’t worried.

“My, is that so?” The eyes gazed at me from under the hood. “I’m so terribly sorry to hear that.” She waved at me and said to drop by anytime.

I guess she really was just trying to hawk something to me. Feeling my chest flood with relief, I said, “Real sorry!” and gave her a wave back as I tried to get some distance.

I didn’t completely relax for a while, but in the end, nothing seemed to happen. It was just *hi* and *bye*. In the light of the moon, her golden eyes had seemed to flicker.

If our preparations paid off, then come tomorrow, she would never work her villainy again.

“Gotta keep going,” I said to myself. I felt a twinge of something—anticipation? Anxiety? I wasn’t sure. I let a small sigh escape into the moonlit night.



A Story like a Fairy Tale

There was one story the girl had especially loved when she was a child. A story of a kidnapped girl rescued by a witch.

The story was no more than that, yet she found herself irresistibly drawn to it. Why in the world should that be?

Surely, it was because that girl was descended from witches. From a young age, the girl's parents had told her that her ancestors had possessed special powers.

It was a wonderful thought, and she was proud of it. Although she couldn't use magic when she was young, she went around dressed like a witch and often bragged of her heritage.

She would pick up stray sticks and pretend they were wands. Always her mother would entertain the spirited girl. The child would shout "Yah!" and flourish her stick, and her mother would cry "Argh! You got me!" and tumble backward. Even when she was swamped with work, she always had a cheerful smile for the child. And so the child always smiled, too, the way the moon gleams in the reflection of the sun.

The girl's mother often read to her before bed. Always from her favorite storybook.

"If a time should ever come when you're in trouble," her mother would say,

“I’ll appear like that witch and rescue you.” So, she would add, if the girl were ever to meet someone in trouble, she must help them, too—because she was, after all, the descendent of witches herself. And then her mother would pat her head fondly.

For the girl, just the thought that she and her mother had power like the witch in the story was invigorating; it had a strange and wonderful way of making her feel better no matter what was happening.

So she and her mother lived together happily. But one day when she was five years old, as she watched, her mother suddenly flew through the sky. But because there was no magic in this land, she fell right back down and died.

After her mother’s passing, scary people began to visit her and her father. People who had loaned money to her mother and were now afraid they wouldn’t get it back.

She remembered something her mother had said: “We descendants of witches should be able to use magic, but instead we lend that magic to the townspeople.” She and her mother were lending their magic, yet these people wanted money as well? What greedy creatures, she thought.

From that time on, her father was rarely home. He claimed to be busy at work. Things began to disappear from their house. Well, that made it roomier; she had plenty of space to run and play. Yet she had nothing to play with.

When he did come home, her father always looked haggard and exhausted, and she couldn’t bring herself to ask him to play with her. Without quite meaning to, she stopped pretending to be a witch. She saw her friends less and less. Instead, she lived a quiet, lonely life with her father. There was less to eat; there was less furniture; there was less conversation. And the girl ceased to smile, for the sun whose light she once reflected was gone.

Her days came to be filled with such grief and sadness that she could no longer look away from it. Such pain that, even at her tender age, she understood the situation she was in.

And yet, not once, not even once, did she complain that it was unfair, or that she was dissatisfied.

For there was one story she had especially loved when she was a child. A story of a kidnapped girl rescued by a witch.

Somewhere in her heart she clung to the belief that if she just stayed silent and endured, the witch would come for her.

Even though she lived in a country with no witches.



In my shop, Riviere Antiques, I thought back. How long had I been waiting for this day to come? It had to be three years now, since the day I first learned of the existence of Carredura. How different my days were now!

“House-call sancta sales?” I’d asked. Three years earlier, Carredura had still been visiting individuals in their homes to press their wares upon them. That particular day, a customer came to me with a sad story. She’d been induced to buy a cleaver that could cut anything and would never lose its edge. Sounds amazing, right? This customer thought so, too, and snapped it up. That very day, she cleaved her kitchen in two. Turned out the claim that it could cut anything was very literal.

“I can’t believe this! What a terrible thing to sell someone! Are all antiques shops like this these days?” the frustrated customer had demanded. She said she couldn’t seem to get in touch with the person who had sold her the knife. She didn’t even really remember who had visited her. She only had a faint recollection that it had been a woman, and that she had referred to herself as Antiques Carredura.

With no way to reach this mysterious vendor, the woman couldn’t return the knife, but she was loath to simply eat the price, so she came to sell it to me.

“I paid a hundred thousand lain for this knife—I hope you’ll buy it for the same!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, that’s asking quite a lot...”

This sancta was much too dangerous to actually use; I already knew it would have to go right into storage and stay there. I didn’t see how I could pay more than a thousand lain for it.

“What? A thousand? What do you think this is, a joke?”

As I suspected, the woman was not impressed by my offer. Then she treated me to a detailed list of her many grievances regarding antiques dealers—but in the end, she took her thousand lain and went home.

After that, I began to hear more and more about Antiques Carredura. Sometimes from customers who brought sancta to my store. Sometimes while I was helping the police on a case. One thing became increasingly clear to me: Carredura was not a good person.

It’s an unfortunate reality of the world that one shop doing bad business can undermine trust in an entire industry. True to form, from that time onward I began to see a shift in the way people viewed antiques sellers. And not a good one, naturally.

There was a common refrain among those who came through my door: “Hey, you! One of your *colleagues* sold me this thing, and it’s completely worthless!”

Among those I met while helping the police, it was common to hear “Is it an antiques seller’s job to make people’s lives harder?”

Or sometimes, when people learned I was in antiques, they would say, “Antiques? Do you *know* how much trouble that other antiques seller is causing people?” As if Carredura and I were peas in a pod. It was like I was a pincushion, and I got a fresh pin jabbed in me everywhere I went. I don’t mind saying, it was exhausting.

“*Sigh...* Is this ever going to end?” I would mutter to myself. Back then, I seemed to ask that question every single day.

“*Phew!* So my three months of hard work are finally almost over,” Elaina said, yawning in a way that conveyed her utter boredom.

It was just before noon. There was still no sign of Eve.

“I wish I had your confidence, acting like we’ve already won this,” I said—although in reality I had to suppress a yawn myself.

“What? You don’t think we’re going to win?”

“Now, now, I didn’t say that.”

“Then we’ll be fine!” Elaina said, pointing out all the preparation we’d done. She gazed around the store, which was replete with traps we had set for our visitor. A lot of them were powered by sancta from the shop—like the net you couldn’t get out of once you were caught in it, or the pit that looked like a regular carpet. And then there was the sancta we were each using at that moment, cloths that caused you to disappear.

We had it all set up so that no matter how Eve came in, one of the traps would get her.

“Which way do you think she’ll come from?” I wondered aloud. Elaina and I were watching the store closely and waiting. Although since we were both already invisible, I couldn’t be exactly sure where Elaina was.

“If you don’t mind me changing the subject, Miss Riviere...”

“Yes?”

“Once this is over, do you think I could have this cloth?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you would get sticky fingers.”

“It’s all right! No one would see me!”

“That’s exactly why it’s *not* all right! And getting worse every moment...” I sighed. “Besides, these belong in storage. I was planning to disenchant them one of these days. So, no, you can’t have it.”

These particular sancta had just happened to find their moment in the sun on this particular day, so I’d brushed the dust off, and we’d put them over our heads—but no sancta that came out of the back room was really good to have around.

“How about this oar, then? Can I have that? It was in storage, too, right?”

A pale arm appeared in midair, holding a simple wooden oar...which, just like Elaina said, was supposed to be in storage.

“When did you steal that?”

"I *borrowed* it. I need a weapon to defend myself, don't I?"

"You and your sticky fingers..."

"What's this thing do anyway?"

"If you hit someone with it, they feel twice the normal amount of pain. That's what I'm told anyway. I've never used it."

"What if someone just tried to, you know, row a boat with it?" Elaina asked, adding that it sure didn't look like a weapon to her.

"That's why it was in storage," I said with a sigh. If people couldn't guess how a sancta was supposed to be used, I didn't want it sitting out in my store. And I especially didn't want it falling into the wrong hands.

I took another look around the shop. "Now, where *will* she come from?" The window, the ceiling, the door—she could even come bursting through the wall, and she would find something waiting for her. We were ready for anything. I made sure I had a firm grip on the handle of my umbrella, and then I waited, silent.

"*Achoo!* Phew, it's kind of chilly, isn't it...?"

I didn't respond. Notwithstanding the equally invisible Elaina's seemingly total unconcern, I waited silent and ready.

How long had I been waiting for this day to come? After three long years of searching, I was about to come face-to-face with Antiques Carredura.

Then she was there, a young woman with her face hidden by a hood.

"Hello! I've come to get what you have in your storage room," she called. The woman who claimed to be descended from witches came boldly through the front door, never mind all the traps we'd set up.

I caught my breath, shocked. One of our traps was right inside the door—the pit that looked like a carpet—but she sidestepped it neatly, as if she knew it was there. Then, whistling a tune, she took the fan out of her bag and waved it at the store. Immediately, a gale sprang up, scattering all the sancta off the shelves, sending our traps flying, and worst of all, blowing away the cloths we were hiding under.

So, yes, I was surprised.

“Let’s try that again. *Hello*,” she said. The wind had blown her hood back, revealing a young woman with longish golden hair and golden eyes. She snapped the fan shut with a snort, as if she had seen it all coming, and then she said, “The stuff in your storage area. Mind if I take it off your hands?”



“I must say, you really are naive.”

I’d thought our traps covered all the bases. I’d thought we were ready no matter where she came from.

I’d obviously thought wrong.

I never imagined all our work would come to nothing so quickly.

“You realize I’ve had this shop in my sights for a very long time now, don’t you? How could I not know what cases you’ve solved, Miss Riviere—or what sancta you keep in this place?”

Naturally, she knew which sancta we would use, what traps we would try to set. She’d anticipated everything.

“I have to admit, you’re more clever than I gave you credit for,” I said.

“Or maybe you’re *less* clever than you thought,” Eve said with a laugh. Then she turned to Elaina, who was standing beside me. “I confess I’m surprised. I never thought *you* would join her side. I thought you were a witch,” she spat. It was the one flash of genuine emotion we saw from a woman who otherwise seemed painfully cheerful at all times.

Ever since Elaina had told me Eve’s story, I found myself thinking: *This girl really overestimates mages.*

“Nothing says a witch has to ally herself with someone just because she’s another witch,” I said. I started forward slowly, umbrella in hand. I wanted to be out of the reception area. If things turned violent there, my poor tea set might be the next victim.

“Your entire livelihood exists at the expense of witches, so I’ll thank you to be

quiet.”

“That’s rather pot-and-kettle, wouldn’t you say?”

“I only do what I must in order to change this world. I’m nothing like you.”

Eve walked through the store like she owned the place, sauntering over toward the storage room. She held out her arms to either side like a tightrope walker trying to keep her balance. Almost like this was a game to her. But true to her warning that she knew every sancta in the place, she never came close to tripping any of our traps.

I sighed and brought my umbrella up for a fight. It would repel anything that touched the fabric. That was its entire effect.

If Eve knew about the incidents and police cases I’d been involved in, then she might also know how I fought with this umbrella—meaning any attempt to surprise her with it here and now might well be useless.

I stood silent for a moment. I knew. I knew all too well that standing around sighing wouldn’t change anything.

“All right. Let’s go.”

And so I charged.

At almost the same moment, Elaina said, “And what am I, chopped liver?” Suddenly, she was there: Eve with her fan ready to strike, me brandishing my umbrella, and Elaina between the two of us. She stood between two armed combatants, calm as anything—weaponless herself.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Eve laughed and pointed. “Elaina, you silly girl. Have you forgotten that no one can use magic in this country? Do you really think you can defeat me empty-handed, when—?”

Before the words were out of her mouth, there was a dull *thump*, and she flew backward.

“Huh?!”

She crashed into the door behind her.

I’d thought Elaina was barehanded, too—so how? “What did—”

—*you just do?* I was going to ask, but I didn't get the question out before I saw what she was holding. She wasn't unarmed after all—an oar had appeared in her grasp, almost like magic.

“Who cares if she knows what it can do? If she can't see it, that doesn't help her.” Elaina looked down at Eve, who grimaced with pain. Elaina's hand was transparent. So that was it—she'd placed the invisibility cloth over the oar.

“Not bad. Not bad at all,” I said.

“Nah. I just have sticky fingers.” She sounded supremely calm as she hid the oar once more under the cloth.

The various owners of the invisibility cloth had always used it for shady purposes—spying and following people, eavesdropping—but Elaina had found another way.

“Oww... Why would you...*do* that?” Eve grumbled, heaving herself to her feet with a *hup!* She'd been slammed against a door—it wouldn't have been surprising if she'd broken a bone or two, but she looked awfully composed. In fact, she was grinning, just like she had been when she'd first walked through that door.

“That's an excellent demonstration, though, of the wonderful sancta you keep in your little room. That oar and the cloth that turns things invisible both deserve better than to gather dust on a shelf.”

“You can't have them,” I said.

“I'm not asking for them. I'm simply going to *take* them.” Eve advanced again, slowly, like before. “Those sancta should be out there among the people, not sitting in this shop. That oar, for example—imagine what it could do in the hands of someone who likes to start fights. And we could give the cloth to a stalker—that might be a good idea. We can give these toys to the worst people we can find and make everyone in this country miserable! Then they'll see that sancta are worthless, that they're trash! Even the stupid, ignorant masses will have to realize they're better off with mages leading them!”

She took another step. I remembered what had happened three years ago—the disappointment, the almost daily recriminations from people who'd been

left unhappy by their sancta.

Here was Antiques Carredura, who put sancta to foul purposes in order to revive the mages. Something about it bothered me on a very deep level.

“You know... I’ve always wanted to ask you,” I said. “Why don’t *you* take on that role?”

“What?” Eve cocked her head, though her expression never changed, like a puppet.

I continued calmly, “If you want to use magic, why not leave this island? If you want to change how this country works, why don’t you stand up and make the case to people yourself? You have something you want, so why do you leave the course of events in other people’s hands?”

Eve was silent, but I saw her flinch. Just for an instant, I thought her smile twisted.

“There’s something you want, but you won’t do anything about it yourself. Instead, you just wait for someone else to change your circumstances.” I gave a very deliberate snort and looked at Eve as I said, “That’s pathetic.”

She caught her breath. Her eyes darted around, and she went pale. It was a face full of sadness. It was the face of someone who had spent their life enduring tremendous pain.

It looked like the face of a different person.

No sooner had I had the thought, however, than Eve laughed and drew her knife. “Ha! Think you can talk your way out of this one?” The look on her face was gone almost as soon as it had come, buried somewhere deep under the relentless, deranged smile. “If you’re going to stand in my way, then I’ll have to ask you to disappear!”

She closed in on me, still smiling. If what Elaina had told me was true, then that knife could take a life merely by grazing someone.

“But that’s only if it can touch them, isn’t it?” I had her where I wanted her now. Exactly close enough. I opened my umbrella. The slightest touch, and I could feel the knife deflect.

I immediately took a step forward, folded the umbrella, and swung it.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

To my surprise, Eve was still laughing. My umbrella had hit her right on the cheek!

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Was she impervious to pain? No sooner had I struck her than she was bringing the knife to bear on me again.

Second verse, same as the first, I figured. I opened my umbrella to defend—

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

But the laughing voice was suddenly over my head.

I gasped. She’d tricked me. I’d been so focused on the knife that I had given myself tunnel vision—but that deadly blade wasn’t the only sancta she had. Eve leaped clean over Elaina’s head and mine, the knife in one hand, the fan in the other. The same fan that had rendered all our work laying traps useless when she’d first entered the store.

Eve had never needed to actually fight us. If she could steal my sancta, she would have what she wanted.

She landed in front of the back room.

“This fan? A sancta once possessed by some silly children who prayed to be able to fly! Wave it at an object, and it blows it away, but wave it at the ground, and it blows you into the air. Just like a real mage!” She turned back to us, still grinning.

“Funny. I wouldn’t have expected Carredura to have such a genuinely useful artifact,” I said.

“In that case, it might interest you to know that the kids who first owned this fan fell from up high and died.”

That left me lost for words.

“The fan can fling you around, but it doesn’t make you strong enough to survive the landing. Those kids didn’t understand that, so they didn’t know the

right way to use this thing. Sad story, isn't it?" Just for a moment, her expression clouded again. "And to think, if there had been real magic, they might have been all right."

A beat later, though, that crazed grin came back, wiping any grief from her face. "Ha-ha! I suppose I won't be needing this little thing anymore, though!"

For there were so many other, better things just beyond the door.

She tossed the fan aside, but the movement was awkward. Almost hesitant.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Looks like I win."

Her smile, too, seemed distinctly forced.

Then, in a flowing motion, she brought the knife around and jabbed it against the lock.

"I'll be sure to get *good* use out of everything in here, don't you worry!"

I guess the touch-it-and-kill-it property of the knife held even for inanimate objects, because the lock on the storage room door clattered to the ground.

"This has to stop!" I said, but Eve just continued to grin.

"Ha-ha-ha! I've come this far. You think I'm going to let anyone stop me?"

Eve had learned everything there was to know about my shop, and she knew what kinds of sancta I had, as well as how I was likely to use them. I suspected everything so far had gone more or less the way she'd envisioned.

Except for one thing.

"You don't know what's on the other side of that door, do you?" I said.

I knew my words wouldn't reach her. She was already opening the door.

"Yaaah!"

Something—or rather, someone—that had been hiding in the back room this entire time came leaping out. My new hire, the one Eve had never thought was worth worrying about.

"Wha—?" Eve grunted.

How long had I been waiting for this day to come?

I reached out toward Antiques Carredura. Descendent of witches. Descendent of evil mages who had threatened our city.

At last, I had her.



The girl and her father supported each other as best they could. He did nothing but work, and she did nothing but wait for him to come home.

By the time the girl was five years old, she had misplaced her smile. She became like an empty shell, her days passing as quietly as waves lapping upon the shore. Even when she was old enough to go to school, she never smiled. Her face was as expressionless as a mask. People found it unsettling, and it was hard for her to make friends.

She was, however, still a very beautiful young woman, and more than a few men professed their love for her.

This, when they had never even spoken to her!

She was always so confused that she never knew what to say, and so she didn't say anything.

Her female classmates seemed to take her reticence for arrogance, and the girl found herself subjected to daily harassment. Even still, she never spoke up.

At fifteen, the girl got a part-time job to help support her father. It was at a small café on a street corner in town, a family-run place that just happened to be hiring. She applied and was immediately accepted.

The owner was a kind man who taught her all about how to brew and steep coffee—but the girl was uncomfortable with the very close quarters. The way he looked at her wasn't like the way the boys at school did. It was something rawer and more troubling. He was her boss, though, so she tried to live with it.

Maybe the man took her silence for consent, because in time he moved on to touching her. At first, he would brush her hand. Then it was her arm. Then her shoulder. Finally, his hands found their way to her waist, which upset her so much that she quit.

The day she quit, the owner came to her house. He'd taught her everything she knew, he said. How could she be so ungrateful? Who had raised such a girl?

All these things he shouted at her father. Her father, already exhausted, apologized profusely, and somehow things blew over that day.

That night, heaving a sigh, her father said to her: "*You're* overreacting. It sounds like he just brushed your shoulder while you were at work. If you raise a stink over every little nudge, you'll never hold down a job. Believe me, work doesn't get easier when you grow up."

When he had had his say, her father shut himself in his room and went to sleep.

She knew he had to get up early and go to work the next day, so she started making a packed lunch for him. As she worked, the tears began to fall, and there was no one to wipe them away.

She sobbed in the kitchen, forcing herself to do it silently. She still believed that if only she stayed strong and endured, the witch would come for her one day.

The next day, her life changed.

"What's this?"

She had taken out her mother's bequest to her, a small effort to remember days of happiness as she drowned in days of sorrow. When she did so, she found a robe she didn't remember having been there before. It was an old black thing with a hood. She didn't recall her mother ever wearing it. So what could it be? The girl stood in front of the mirror and held it up to herself.

The size was perfect.

As the girl stood there perplexed, a piece of paper slipped from the sleeve of the robe and drifted to the floor. She could see it was a handwritten note, so she opened it and read it.

"'This is a robe that makes your wishes come true'?"

Had this really belonged to her mother? Well, it was among her mother's belongings. And it did indeed look like the robe a witch would wear.

“If a time should ever come when you’re in trouble, I’ll appear like that witch to rescue you.”

The girl remembered the story her mother had told her when she was little, patting her head. It was a memory full of smiles and good cheer. She was surprised to find she could almost see those warm moments in front of her eyes, as if they were happening all over again.

She knew what she wished for—she had known for a long time.

Please let the witch rescue me.

With that thought in her heart, she slipped on the robe that granted wishes.

“Huh?”

To her surprise, when she had shrugged it on and looked up again, she felt a clenching sensation, and she discovered she couldn’t move. Her vision grew hazy, and then, still dressed like a witch, she fell asleep.

When she came to, she was walking around town.

She felt like she was in a dream. She wasn’t willing her arms and legs to move, and yet they were. She didn’t mean to smile, yet when she caught her reflection in a window, she saw an almost deranged grin on her face.

She called herself Eve. Even though that wasn’t her name.

For some reason, Eve had many sancta. The girl didn’t remember any of them.

Eve spread the sancta by the street and opened up shop.

Eve spoke of Antiques Carredura, another name the girl had never heard. She called out to passersby, and to every customer she gave something that would soon make their lives miserable. To one, a “Perfume of Destiny.” To another, eye drops that created fantasies. Everything she had, everything she sold, would make people unhappy.

“Come, come and see my wares! Will no one buy?” Eve called, grinning. Nothing about her—the tone of her voice, the look on her face, any of it—was remotely like the way the girl had been. And yet, the girl couldn’t think of her as a complete stranger. Why not? Perhaps because they shared the same face.

A middle-aged man appeared at her shop one day. “If you need money so badly, why not give up selling that junk and let *me* support you?” he drawled. Ugh! The feeling of his gaze traveling across her body gave her goose bumps. He crouched down and put a hand on her shoulder. “How much do you need? Granted, I’ll expect payment in *kind*...”

He leered hideously—until the shoulder escaped his grasp.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Drop dead, you old bastard.”

Eve, still smiling, held a knife to the man’s throat.

Startled by the abrupt threat, the man yelped and scuttled away. It was then that the girl learned who she was when she was at her “shop” with her hood up. And she was repulsed.

She was repulsed by the boys who claimed to love her when they had hardly spoken to her. By the girls who made no effort to hide their jealousy in all its ugliness. By the man who thought an ignorant young girl could be swayed to his side so easily. By her father, who acted like he was the only one who ever had work to do. By the people of this city, who lived plummy, easier lives, thanks to sancta that existed because of magic—and they hardly even knew how to use them properly.

By this country where there were no witches.

By her own self, who had been unable to prevent her mother’s death.

It was a great bulging ball of disgust, built up in her deepest place over long months and years of being unable to say what she felt.

That was the true face of Eve and her shop. A personality, she now saw, that had been birthed from within herself.

“Come, have a look! Anything you want?”

And yet, it was far from her truest heart. Yes, she had felt keenly the unfairness of her situation. But what was within her had been not anger, but grief.

This person Eve, who had come forth from inside her, had as her final objective the restoration of mages.

Please let the witch save me. Yes, that had been her prayer. But she hadn't wanted to alter the very foundations of this land so that she could use magic. She had wanted to laugh from the heart once again, not to be trapped with this insistent, inane smile on her face. She didn't want to laugh when there was nothing fun or funny. It was true she resented the townspeople who couldn't use sancta properly. But that didn't mean she wanted everyone who walked by on the street to be unhappy.

"Welcome, welcome!"

She'd only, always, wanted someone to reach out to her. That had been the true wish in her heart of hearts.

"Try our sancta! They'll make your life bigger and better!"

She continued to smile. Eventually, a man trotted up to her where she sat on the street corner. He perused her wares with interest, looking down at the sancta.

The girl called to him from the bottom of her heart:

Help me!

Please help me!

When she opened her mouth to cry for help, though, something far different came out. "What do you say, good sir? Buy a little something?"

Her body belonged to Eve.

She was trapped within her own mind. Her words and her wishes had no way out.

The customer considered for a few moments, then bought a sancta. Eve diligently informed him about how to use it—in such a way that a few days later, he would find himself unhappy.

Help me!

Please, please, help me!

So she called out from within, but there was no one who could hear her. Still, she kept shouting with her voiceless voice.

Finally, one day, she saw a young woman in town dressed like a witch.

I'm begging you—help me! she cried in her heart.

“Say, miss! That outfit. That brooch... You wouldn't happen to be a witch, would you?”

The words came out so smoothly, but they were nothing like what she meant to say. So the girl made the acquaintance of the witch, Elaina—but even a witch was unable to detect what was truly happening.

For magic didn't exist in this country. Witches were no different from ordinary people. The girl talked to the witch, veritably clung to her, but in the end, even the witch never saw how she was trapped in her own heart.

Three months passed after that. All that time she continued to make people unhappy, until the girl was no longer sure if what she was witnessing was reality or a dream. She could only watch as her body spoke words far removed from what she truly felt.

Her heart had died long, long ago.

Then came one moonlit night.

“Good evening!” Eve called to a passerby, with the same smile she gave every customer.

Another young woman stopped by her shop. Three or four years older than the girl, perhaps. Eve issued the same invitation to unhappiness that she did to every would-be customer: “Have a look at my wares before you go?”

But this young woman shook her head. “Who, me? Nah, there's nothing in particular on my mind!”

It was a fact of life as a street hawker that one was going to be turned down on a regular basis, so such a refusal was nothing special. Eve simply said, “Drop by anytime,” and waved.

In her heart, the girl could put another wish, a different wish, into that wave, but it would never reach that customer. The girl could only watch her walk away. Just like always. She'd seen this before.

Until something happened that she hadn't seen before.

“Haah...” There was a short sigh. Not within herself—she realized that the almost-customer, who should have been out of sight by then, had turned around somewhere down the street and was coming back toward her. She crouched in front of Eve, looking conflicted. “Look, I know I’m not supposed to do this, but...”

She took a loaf of bread out of her bag and placed it in front of the girl.

Why? What was this about?

“What’s this for?” Eve asked, looking up at her, confused. It was the first time the girl and Eve had felt the same way.

The other young woman smiled a little and said, “It was supposed to be my dinner tonight.” That wasn’t really an answer. Eve must’ve given her a very skeptical look indeed, for the young woman said, “For the longest time, I never had enough money, ’cause I was always losing my job. So I had to get my bread at this cheap place that would cut me a good deal. It tasted awful, but at least it filled my stomach.”



Suddenly, she was telling her life story or something. Even Eve had never encountered someone who just started talking like that. So Eve simply sat and looked at the young woman and waited for what she would say next.

She obligingly continued. “On my worst days, when I was eating this bread, I would think, *One day I’m going to get better bread, delicious bread!* So now this is what I buy whenever I want to inspire myself to push harder. Sometimes you have to eat something bitter today in order to make tomorrow taste better.”

Eve was silent.

“So I want you to have this.”

Finally, she asked, “Why?”

“Because I see your eyes. They look the way mine used to.”

This young woman saw herself, her own time of trials, in Eve.

Then the strange young woman said, “I hope tomorrow’s better for you.” She smiled, and then she left.

“That girl...,” Eve muttered as the almost-customer walked away, leaving only a piece of cold, not-very-good bread. She finally remembered who the young woman was. “Isn’t that the new hire at Riviere Antiques?”

Riviere Antiques: Eve had been quietly trying to find a way into their storage room for quite a long time. She was already well aware that they had recently taken on new help.

This new help was nothing special. She had no particular powers, wasn’t descended from a family of mages, and possessed not a single unique ability. She was completely ordinary, nothing special at all. Such, at least, was Eve’s assessment of the young woman who had brought her bread.

“Huh! Very suspicious.” Eve’s assault on Riviere Antiques to steal their sancta was planned for the next day. It was only natural to be suspicious of bread that arrived with timing like that. “Who would eat food like *this*?”

With a derisive snort, Eve made to throw the bread away—but her hand wouldn’t move. In fact, it began creeping toward her mouth. What was going on?

That day, the girl, who had been unable to control her own body from the moment she put on the robe, fought back against Eve for the first time.

For this was the first time someone had spoken words of kindness to her. The first time someone had sympathized with her. The first time someone had said the things she had always wished from her heart of hearts for someone to say. So even if the other woman's gift was just some cheap, unpleasant bread, to this girl it was a precious gift, and she wasn't about to throw it away.

"Hey! C-come on, damn you..."

In spite of Eve's resistance, the bread came closer and closer to her mouth, and then her mouth forced itself wide open, and she took a big bite.

The taste of the bread, which was hard and cold and not at all good, filled the girl's mouth.

"Ugh!"

It was awful enough to make a person cry.

And the young woman, the *true* young woman locked away in her own heart, vowed to make the next day a good day.

Eve opened the door of Riviere Antiques, intent on stealing their sancta. She gave a wave of her fan, revealing the owner and the witch, who had apparently been in cahoots. They both came at Eve with their weapons.

The girl inside her heart watched all this silently. The women struck out; Eve dodged; she tried to strike back with the knife. The battle raged on. Every time Eve offered one of her smiling taunts, the girl sent out her voiceless plea to the other two women: *Help me. Help me. Please help me.*

She prayed this prayer when she was struck with the umbrella, when she was hit with the oar, and even when the knife was deflected. She kept wishing.

But her wishes had never reached anyone before in all this time. Eve used her fan and her knife to excellent effect, and she was soon on the threshold of the storage room. Even at that moment, the girl looked at the owner, Riviere, hoping for salvation.

"You have to stop this!" Riviere said. The piercing tone in her words made it

sound like she hadn't given up yet. It almost felt as if her ultramarine eyes could see straight through the awful Eve to perceive the young woman trapped within.

"Ha-ha-ha! I've come this far. You think I'm going to let anyone stop me?" Eve crowed. She opened the door.

And then both she and the girl received an object lesson in how a painful yesterday could produce a better today.

"Yaah!"

Had she been hiding in there the whole time? It was the young woman they'd met yesterday—and she jumped at them.

The hand the girl inside had always been hoping for reached out and grabbed the robe. The one who could help her was finally here.

And then the young woman, whom she didn't know, took the robe, so soaked through with contempt and hatred, and...*tried* to pull it off.

"You little fool."

"Wha—? What?"

Slowly but surely, the hand grasping the robe was peeled away. The would-be rescuer made a choked noise, then looked at her hand and down at her stomach. She seemed almost mystified by the knife buried in her abdomen.

"No way..."

Her hand moved and tried to take hold of the robe again, but she collapsed to the floor. The hand of salvation, the one the girl had wished and prayed for for so long, had been stopped by her *own* hand.

"Ahh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

It had all been for nothing. Eve, brimming with hatred, filled the room with her crazed laughter.



"MacMillia!" I cried, but she didn't respond. She just lay limply on the ground.

Elaina and I stared vacantly as Eve's laughter rang around the shop.

"Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Never have I known such hopeless idiots! Did you truly believe that little stunt would stop me? Ha-ha-ha! Ahh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The door of the storage room hung open, giving a clear view of the inside. Hiding MacMillia in there for an ambush had been our strategy of last resort. We had no more plans. Eve, now assured of her victory, continued laughing, so hard that she started to cry.

"Ha-ha-ha! You stuck this worthless whelp in there! Ha-ha-ha! Like morons! Well, there's another victim on your consciences! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

We couldn't get close; we couldn't bring our weapons to bear. We could only stand there while she laughed at us.

It had been MacMillia's own suggestion that she should hide behind the door, just in case. "I'm not much of a fighter, but I can hide," she'd said. "Eve won't be expecting an attack once she opens the door, so that's when I can get her. I can tear that robe right off!"

She'd brought up the idea this morning, rather last-minute, but she had seemed full of confidence. She'd even declared, "If I can do that, then we can capture Eve for sure!"

I can't say I was on board with it—putting her behind that door was dangerous. I shook my head and told her it would be better not to, but she insisted she would do it.

"Look who's Miss Stubborn," I said with another shake of my head, this time of acquiescent exasperation. We would station MacMillia inside the storage room, and it would be my and Elaina's job to wear Eve down before she got there.

Look where it had gotten us.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Eve's laughter seemed to go on forever.

She thought it was all over.

She was full of pride.

Her guard was down.

“Truly, you are idiots beyond saving!” Flush with victory, she was full of these banal insults.

Finally, I heaved a sigh. This wasn’t getting us anywhere. “Beyond saving is right,” I said.

“Eh?” Eve snorted, but I just gave her a cool look.

“You finally let go of your knife.”

That knife was by far the most dangerous thing among Eve’s sancta. It could cause death, and so long as she was holding it, engaging her was genuinely dangerous. Relieving her of that knife had been our top priority. Unfortunately, Eve wasn’t stupid enough to just drop her most important weapon—at least until, convinced the battle was over, she let her pride get the better of her.

“How does the knife feel, MacMillia?” I asked, directing my question at the young woman who had just been stabbed.

“Man, it really hurt!” said MacMillia...who was standing calmly behind Eve.

“Wha—?” Eve turned, confused. At exactly the same moment, MacMillia grabbed her robe. The deadly wound that should have marked her abdomen was nowhere to be seen, as if she had never been stabbed.

Instead, something dropped from her neck: a broken pendant that fell to the floor and cracked into pieces.

Elaina and I raced up to help pull Eve’s robe off.

This had been MacMillia’s idea. When she’d suggested hiding in the back room, she’d also said something rather strange. “I just can’t help thinking—maybe deep down inside, Eve really isn’t a bad person.”

Eve, who had spent all these years deceiving one target after another. MacMillia had been one of her victims!

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

“I don’t have any proof,” she said, “but last night, I saw Eve for the first time, and something in her eyes... It was like she wanted help. I mean, it was just a

feeling I had...”

But, she suggested, maybe the robe Eve was wearing was controlling her and making her do bad things. It was, she repeated, purely her intuition. She didn’t have any proof at all. But she thought that if we could get that robe off Eve, maybe we wouldn’t have to fight her or hurt her. That she might go back to being a normal girl.

I have to admit, it sounded crazy on the face of it. Hardly worth considering. The fact that I decided to go along with her idea anyway showed how much I had come to trust MacMillia.

Besides, I could tell that if I said no, she would go ahead and try to pull that robe off by herself anyway. I knew very well what kind of person she was—after all, I’d been keeping a close eye on her for quite a long time.

Three years ago.

I was exhausted from trying to take care of all Carredura’s victims. It seemed like every day I found myself sitting on a bench in the plaza near the cathedral, sighing to myself. I could never seem to get any actual information on Carredura. The victims simply came to me as someone in the same profession, someone who might be able to give them somewhere to put their aimless anger.

It was painful for me, having to deal with these people and their foolishness day in and day out. What could you do but sigh?

When you find yourself in the same place every day, you start to see the patterns in the life of the town. On an average day in the plaza, I would see elderly people on their walks, the baker standing in their shop, looking bored.

And then there was the black-haired young woman who sat on a nearby bench and sighed just like me.

“*Siiigh...*” She munched on some bread, looking positively exhausted. “Ugh... That’s awful,” she muttered. I guess she didn’t love the cheap stuff.

She was always there.

She seemed to talk to herself a lot, and by virtue of sitting right near her, I

often heard what she had to say, whether I wanted to or not. From what I gathered, her biggest problem was that she couldn't hold down a job. No matter what gig she took, some stroke of ill luck would drive her out of it before long. It sounded so bad that I got depressed just listening to her.

She was there for months. Each time she got a job and stopped coming, it was never long before she was back again.

"Argh!" I heard her grumble. "I can't stand it anymore!"

I really felt bad for her...

But then she would get back on her feet, still eating her dubious bread. When I saw that, I would go back to my shop.

So the days passed as I listened indifferently to the complaints of Carredura's victims, until one day when I was meeting with the president of a newspaper company. Like all the others, he'd been taken in by Carredura and had suffered badly for it.

"*Sob...* How did I end up in this situation?" He despondently put a group photo of his employees on the table and told me how deeply unhappy he was. He said his company had already been on a downward trajectory before Carredura got involved with him. The trouble started when the previous president had been arrested for tax evasion.

The man pointed to the former president, who sat smack in the middle of the photograph, and spoke of what a great man his predecessor had been. Frankly, I couldn't have cared less and was ignoring most of what he said, as was my habit, but then one girl in the photograph caught my eye.

"Who's this?" I said. She was in the front row, standing and looking anxiously at the camera. It was the girl from the plaza.

The president followed my gaze and suddenly became very agitated. "Her? It's her! She's the reason my firm is going under!"

I learned that the young woman's name was MacMillia. She was, it seemed, persona non grata with the current president. When I asked him why, he started blathering on again. He said that one day not long after she was hired, she stumbled across evidence that the president had been cheating on his

taxes. The then-president had given her a bunch of money to keep quiet, but she had given it right back and reported the tax fraud. The revelation of the wrongdoing dealt a major blow to the company, which brought us to today...

I thought it was pretty unfair of the current president to bear this young woman a grudge for that. I'd always assumed the girl who seemed perpetually stuck in the plaza was just unlucky. I couldn't hide my surprise when I discovered *this* was why she'd been fired.

From that day forward, I started to take a personal interest in young MacMillia. I looked into her, and the more I learned about her background, the more intrigued I was.

At a pharmaceuticals company, she'd discovered a companywide effort to falsify the effects of their drugs. When she turned whistleblower, she was fired in retaliation. So she found a new job at a restaurant. When she found that brutal bullying was rampant in this workplace, she tried to intervene to stop it. She learned only after she was fired that the ringleader of this cruel treatment had been the owner himself.

I'd been so sure it was just bad luck that caused her to tumble from one job to the next—but the reality was different. Those sighs in the plaza were motivated because she always tried to do what was right. If she'd just played along, decided not to worry about it, she wouldn't have had to keep going back there. If she'd only closed her eyes to the wrongdoings around her, she could have been happy. But instead, she chose the clumsy route and tried to live an upright life.

"This next job will be the one," I heard her mumble. It was another day, and she was in the plaza again, still eating that awful bread.

I was watching her as always, and as always, she refused to look away from her trainwreck situation; instead, she got to her feet, and it made me feel like I had to do the same.

Before I knew it, I started to want to talk to this young woman, so when she went by my shop, soaked in perfume, I felt destiny at work.

That was why I hired her as an employee. And it was why I trusted her when she made her ridiculous suggestion.

She'd been right. And I'd been right.

"Stoppit, lemme go!"

MacMillia was the first to grab the robe, clinging on from behind and trying to pull it off. Eve flailed, managing to land a blow on MacMillia and knock her away. But the robe was pulled down to her shoulders.

Elaina promptly used her own cloak to blind Eve. The other woman continue to fight despite not being able to see anything, but Elaina ignored her, giving me a significant look instead.

I got a grip on the robe. The two of us together should be able to drag it right off, I felt sure.

"Stopppp!" Eve howled from under Elaina's cloak.

I only laughed. "I've come this far. You think I'm going to let anyone stop me?"

Eve yelled again for us to stop, but I didn't care; Elaina and I tore the robe off her. The moment it was off the girl, the jabbering voice fell silent.

I looked down at the robe in my hands. It was old, torn, and stained in places. She'd been sitting around outside in it all this time, after all, and probably had never properly washed it. Ugh, it was filthy.

I tossed it aside. The battered black cloak tumbled away, catching the air and briefly puffing up as if some invisible person had slipped it on. As if it were desperate to be worn. But there was no one left to wear the robe, which couldn't grant their wishes anyway.

It drifted to the floor of the shop, untouched, and lay there like a corpse.

"Oh..." The moment she was freed from the robe, the girl lost consciousness. I wasn't sure if she had properly *been* conscious all this time or not, but in any case, her eyes closed, and she slumped to the side.

"Whoa, watch out!" MacMillia caught the girl before she could drop to the floor just like the robe she had been wearing. Then she carried the girl to the sofa, gently, so as not to wake her up, and laid her down. The girl was sleeping peacefully, with no sign of malice or hatred on her face.

“It’s finally over,” I said. I looked around my disheveled shop, but when I sighed this time, it was with relief.

How long I had been waiting for this day to come. For a painful yesterday to be followed by a beautiful today.



It took a little while for my personal foes, by which I mean the officers from the police bureau, to arrive. They showed up just about the time the girl was opening her eyes. Some of our neighbors had called the police—I guess it was pretty obvious that something ugly had been going down in this shop.

Henri arrived, white as a sheet, and when he saw the state of our store, his mouth hung open. “Wh-what in the world happened here?!” he demanded, rushing in.

“Oh! Be careful—there are traps everywhere!” Riviere cried. He was very serious about his business, though, and she was just a little late—he stepped square on the carpet and fell right into the pit.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

We rescued Henri from his unexpected brush with death, then set about explaining what had gone on. We gave him the short version—we would have been there all day trying to tell him everything.

He nodded, then said, “Well, you can give us the details at headquarters.” I guess he didn’t want to hang around too long in a shop bristling with traps.

“Sir, what will happen to this girl after she’s arrested?” I asked. I’d meant to sound cool and collected, but I think the anxiety showed on my face.

Henri gave me a soft smile and shook his head. “We just want to get her story. If what you’re saying is true, then she was under the control of a sancta this whole time, and she didn’t personally want to commit any crimes. There wouldn’t be any point throwing her in jail for that.”

Just as I was starting to feel better, he added that if it turned out during questioning that things weren’t as we assumed, he couldn’t say what might happen to her—neatly undercutting his earlier reassurances. Then he and the

other officers led the girl who had called herself Eve away.

She glanced at me as she went by. Those golden eyes—she looked like she wanted to say something. Just for a second, she almost stopped walking. Her mouth started to open—and then Henri tripped on the robe and took a spectacular tumble.

“Yaaaaaarrrgghhhh!”

What the heck?

“*Hrk!* Another trap...here, of all places!”

“Uh, there’s no trap there,” Riviere said, sipping her tea and looking down at him, distinctly unimpressed.

Henri’s shouting had interrupted the moment of near connection between me and the girl. The officers started walking again.

She left the store without looking back. And just when I thought I might be able to talk to her...

Riviere put her hand on my shoulder as I stared vacantly at the door. “There’ll be another chance,” she said, and she smiled.

I paused. “Am I really that easy to read?”

“Oh please. I’m your employer, aren’t I? I know everything about you!”

“That’s creepy as heck!”

“Want me to guess what you’re thinking right now?”

“Yeah, give it a shot.”

“You’re thinking I’m really creepy.”

“I just said that. Try again.”

“Your face also says you want to get back to work.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

I’d spent all morning hiding in the storage room and then nearly died on top of that. Riviere might have forgotten, but I’d been stabbed with an instantly fatal knife not too long ago. Even I was feeling a bit tired.

“I know you, and I know you’re a diligent young lady,” Riviere said, giving me her loveliest smile. “Let’s drink our tea, and then let’s get this place straightened up. The three of us.”

I looked around the upended shop. It was going to take some time to clean this up. Then I realized—I didn’t see Elaina. Where was she?

“I think I’m gonna call it a day. See you!”

I turned toward the voice and saw Elaina peeking through the door. Riviere gave her a *what-are-you-doing* squint. “I’m *not* a diligent young lady,” Elaina said. “And my contract doesn’t include anything about cleaning up.”

She wagged her fingers at us, and then without giving us a chance to stop her, she darted away. So the world turns. Now that I thought about it, I realized she wasn’t a formal employee of this shop so much as just somebody helping out a little... And to be fair, she’d gone toe to toe with Eve. Maybe I should just be grateful.

“Let’s drink our tea, and then let’s get this place straightened up. The two of us,” Riviere said with an exaggerated shake of her head, accompanied by a look in my direction that said *You’re not going to run away on me, are you?* Those ultramarine eyes were glowing.

Sure, of course not. But rearranging a shop turned upside down by a violent battle seemed, you know, likely to take a while. It seemed, you know, like a lot of work. Like, I kind of wanted to run away. Like, maybe I could find my way out that door, too...

“Do you know what I’m thinking at this moment?” I asked.

“No, you can’t.”

“I haven’t told you what it is yet!”

“I’m the one who hired you, remember?”

So I was trapped.

“Okay, guess we’d better get down to it.” I hurriedly finished my tea and got out some cleaning equipment. It wasn’t like we could do business with the shop in this state. We were going to have to do this sooner or later.

I glanced at Riviere and saw she'd just finished her tea as well and had picked up a broom. She saw me looking at her and turned toward me. We met each other's eyes. Hers were ultramarine. I had a broom in my hands, but I hesitated; I found I couldn't start sweeping. Her mouth twitched, as if she wanted to say something. We looked at each other for only a second, but it felt very, very long.

This was only the second time in my life I'd felt anything quite like this.

Finally, she spoke—and whispered just two words: "Thank you."

I wasn't really sure what she was thanking me for. But when I thought back on my life as an adult, bouncing from job to job to job, I realized hardly anyone had ever actually said that to me. Maybe because my actual job history was, well, not the greatest.

Em



Because of all that, it took me a moment to think of the right words to say back to her. A lot of anxious thoughts bubbled through my mind: *Can she tell how emotional I am? Am I acting suspicious? Do I have some big, stupid grin on my face just because she said thanks?*

After a moment's hesitation that was at once very short and very long, I knew what to say to her. It was just as simple as what she had said to me.

"Thank *you*."

Maybe if I had another chance to say it sometime, I would be able to reply more naturally. But for now I just smiled at my own awkwardness.



About a week after that, the shop was completely back to normal. Another day, another cup of morning tea, which I sat drinking in my most ladylike manner.

In other words, I had a lot of time on my hands—in other *other* words, it was another day with no customers. It was boring; it was peaceful. Riviere was at her desk, getting her stuff together. She had some sort of business out today. As usual, my orders were to make myself at home. In short, to watch the shop.

"I'll be back by this evening. You can handle things here," Riviere said. She sounded like a mom going out for the day. She gave me a wave as she left; I waved back and watched her go.

Another quiet day at Riviere Antiques.

I gazed around the room. Everything looked just the way it always had. The only thing you could say had changed was that there were a couple more dangerous sancta in the locked storage room. Both things Eve had had on her.

One was a knife that could kill a person with just a scratch. The other was a robe. After the case was closed, it had been entrusted to Riviere Antiques because it was too dangerous to be anywhere else. Riviere said she would disenchant it eventually. Not right away, though. There were too many other sancta in the back room waiting to be disenchanted themselves.



And so, another week went by.

“Man... Another week,” I mumbled. I was alone in the store, as I had been almost the whole time.

Riviere had kept me apprised of the status of the investigation. The girl Henri and his officers had taken in for questioning had been safely released. She’d told them everything about her situation. She’d put the robe on purely by accident. She hadn’t been out to cause people harm, nor was she after the restoration of mages that Eve had talked so much about.

She’d had one simple wish: to see her mother again, even if she’d known it was impossible.

“It turns out, Eve’s not even her real name,” Riviere told me. It was just a name the robe had used. As for the girl’s actual name— “What was it? I’m pretty sure it was—”

From Riviere’s reports, I found out both the young woman’s real name and what she was doing now. I guess it was fairly obvious I was worried about her. It would be pretty embarrassing to know Riviere had seen right through me like that.

Today was the day the young woman was going to resume going to school. I hoped she would be all right. She’d been away for a long time.

My thoughts wandered as I gazed vacantly around the shop—then they were interrupted by the jingling of the bell.

“Oh! Hello! Welcome,” I said reflexively, but then I let myself sink back into the ocean of my thoughts. The place the girl was going to school was a fairly famous institution in this country, one that produced a lot of distinguished graduates. I knew lots of girls who liked that school, thanks to their chic blue uniforms.

I really hoped she would be okay. Like, I hoped no one would bully her or anything...

“Hello?” My thoughts were interrupted again as the customer entered my

field of vision. Their eyes looked fixedly at me. Only then did I realize I was kicked back with my feet up like I owned the place. Oops.

I jumped up and bowed profusely. “Ack! S-sorry! I don’t usually do this, I promise! R-really sorry about that!” How could I be so rude? I could hardly bring myself to look her in the eye. Was she angry with me?

“I’m the one who should apologize, butting in when you’re so busy.”

Huh? Was she being ironic?

I might have been a little confused by the words, but I recognized the voice speaking them.

I could see her feet—she was wearing loafers. Must be a student, I guessed.

“You’re the one I came here to see today,” the voice said.

Slowly, I looked up, my eyes taking in her pale legs, and then a black skirt.

Followed by a blue blazer.

“It’s you...”

Standing there was a girl with golden hair and golden eyes. A face I knew very well.

When our eyes met, she bowed politely, and then she started to talk about what had happened to her in the subsequent week. She told me how she was going to go back to school, starting today. How she was feeling a little anxious—but she was resolved not to run away from her anxiety. She felt she owed her rescuers that much.

Her voice was quiet, but her face was bright and cheerful. It was enough to make me feel happy by association.

“Please let me say to you what I couldn’t a week ago,” she said, and then she looked me squarely in the eyes. She opened her mouth and said, simply but clearly: “Thank you very much.”

Eve. Or I guess I should say, Freja—that was her real name.

Her gentle expression held no hint of the dark shadows it had borne when she was wearing the robe. Now, having stripped herself of that useless thing, her

true self was revealed, blindingly beautiful.

There was only one thing I could say to her. Something very simple:

“Thank *you*.”

The words flowed past my lips. When I’d said them to Riviere a week earlier, I’d felt hesitant and awkward. I wondered if I sounded more natural this time. Could she tell how emotional I was? Was I acting suspicious? Did I have some big, stupid grin on my face just because she said thanks?

I discovered I didn’t have to worry about any of that—because at my words, Freja gave a little smile, like the moon floating in the night sky.



After That

“So what were the results of your investigation?”

Henri had asked me to come to the police bureau, so there I was. I was so used to the reception area by now that I felt like I might as well have been coming here for a hundred years. Almost as soon as I sat on the sofa, I was offered dark tea. Henri paged through some materials.

All very familiar.

“I think we already covered where Freja’s robe came from,” Henri said. “She testified that it was among her mother’s personal possessions.”

“Yes, I remember.”

The moment she had put it on, it had taken over her consciousness.

Thanks to Henri’s diligent questioning, we knew everything about Freja and the robe. If he was calling me in today, a week from the incident, it meant his questioning and investigation must have revealed something.

“We went to Freja’s family home in an attempt to confirm that the robe really did belong to her mother. We spoke to her father about it, but... Well, he gave us a very strange testimony.”

“Strange how?”

“He said Freja’s mother never wore a robe in her life.”

I was silent.

“He did say, though, that the robe involved in the incident looked familiar.”

“What does that mean?” Had he seen it around town? I cocked my head.

Henri looked me in the eye and said slowly, “He told us that about six months ago, a suspicious woman selling sancta came to his door—the robe was one of her wares.”

The woman and everything she had said seemed fishy, and anyway, Freja’s father had no interest whatsoever in a robe, so he shut the door on the woman before she could even finish regaling him with the virtues of her offerings.

He never saw the woman again.

“And yet the robe wound up among Freja’s mother’s belongings,” I said.

“We speculate that the woman used a sancta to sneak in and put it there. Maybe she was targeting Freja the whole time.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The woman identified herself as Antiques Carredura.”

Once again I was struck dumb.

Henri looked at his papers and went on. “And—now, this is something Freja told us during our questioning—after Freja began operating as Eve, there was exactly one time when she met a woman who called herself Antiques Carredura.”

Apparently, shortly after Freja had become Eve, the woman appeared, as if she had been waiting for this. She carried an armload of sancta and said, “People simply need to continue being made unhappy by sancta. Eventually, they’ll have no choice but to revive the mages!”

The woman promised to support Eve with sancta if Eve would become a member of Antiques Carredura. Under its auspices, she would have access to an endless supply of cruel sancta.

To this malicious promise, Eve agreed.

We both knew what had happened after that—all it took was a look at the

harm done over the last six months.

“All this time, we’ve been convinced that Eve was the owner of Antiques Carredura...,” I said.

“But someone pulled the wool over our eyes,” Henri agreed with a nod.

Carredura had started operating in the open three years ago now. If it had been only six months since Freja was possessed by the robe, the timelines didn’t match up. There was someone else we needed to look for.

I’d thought it was odd that she’d started selling on street corners all of a sudden six months ago—but I guess that was only the moment when she’d started targeting my shop.

“She played us all for fools,” I said with a sigh.

Henri sighed, too, but he said, “It’s not all bad news.” He looked at me, extraordinarily serious. “Freja was able to provide us with information about the owner of Carredura. She must’ve let her guard down around Eve—she erased the memories of other people she met with regularly, but she didn’t take the same precautions with her. Probably because she thought of her as a confederate.”

And she never realized Freja was watching from inside.

I leaned forward. “What does this woman look like?” I asked. I had struggled for so long to learn something, anything, about this person, and I was finally going to get real information.

“Here,” Henri said, and he placed a sketch on the desk, a police portrait made with Freja’s help.



There was a polite knock at the door: *knock, knock*.

The man finally had a day off—it had been ages—and he had no desire to go out. He had no hobbies. He was spending the day just lounging in his room, killing time. And yet apparently he had a visitor.

The man gave the door a funny look. He hadn’t ordered any deliveries, and he

couldn't think of any friends or acquaintances or relatives who had been planning to drop by today.

So who could it be? And what did they want?

The man got up, grumbling that he was supposed to be off today. He had nothing to do and nothing but time on his hands, but it was the intrusion he resented—the principle of the thing. He opened the door.

“Hello,” said the visitor.

The man tried to hide his shock behind a fake smile. Standing there was a gorgeous woman. She had long, lustrous black hair and wore a dark dress that almost looked like a mourning outfit. It set off her pale skin, making her look almost translucent.

“My apologies for interrupting at such a busy moment,” she said. “I’m a traveling sancta seller—would you happen to be interested?” She gave him an alluring smile. Her eyes were black, too. The man felt like he was peering into the depths of the ocean, a place so dark that light didn’t even reach it.

So she was just a door-to-door salesperson? He almost told her to go away on the spot. But the man found he couldn’t resist that sultry voice, those absorbing eyes. He had no intention of buying anything—but they could at least talk, couldn’t they?

The man nodded.

“Oh, wonderful!” the woman said, clapping her hands in delight.

Then she identified the name of her establishment: Antiques Carredura.

Afterword

Nice to meet you! Or, it's been a while! Jougi Shiraishi here.

I feel like I looked up, and suddenly, it's been a year since the *Wandering Witch* anime. It's the sort of thing that makes you realize how fast time flies—I could have died of shock.

In fact, I feel that way a lot these days—my life is head-spinningly busy! *Riviere and the Land of Prayer* is finally seeing print. I feel like it's been about a million years since I last started a new series! Okay, maybe not a million—besides publishing *Wandering Witch* commercially, I wrote the pre-reboot version of *Riviere*, so the nuance here is “since I last rewrote a new series from scratch!” I really did write this from the ground up, by the way, so don't worry if you haven't read the earlier version.

Wandering Witch contains a few stories about objects with special powers, but I've always wanted to do a story that focused more on those objects, and that desire is what created *Riviere*.

This volume contains interconnected chapters that tell a single story, but if I get a chance to do a second volume, I think I'd like to try doing a series of short stories instead.

You know, this book contains a prayer—that you'll put it on your bookshelf, which would make me very happy! Ha-ha. I kid, but really, as an author, there's no greater pleasure than having someone put your book on their shelf.

It's a short afterword today, but I hope we meet again somewhere, sometime. And I hope you continue to enjoy both *Riviere and the Land of Prayer* and *Wandering Witch*!

Jougi Shiraishi, over and out.

PS: I started cooking recently. The other day, I realized that for the past month or so, I've been using this slightly dark cooking sake because I thought it was mirin.

Every time I used it, I thought, *Wow, mirin really smells like sake, huh!* But that was because it was actual sake. They got me! So all this time, when a recipe has called for cooking sake and mirin, I've actually been using two different kinds of cooking sake. The funny part is, it never tasted wrong when I was done, so that left me thinking, *Hey, maybe I'm a pretty darn good cook?* Or, you know, maybe my taste buds are dead. Could be either. Please await further reports on the improvement of my cooking prowess in Volume 2.

Hrm... Maybe I should work on repairing my sense of taste before I try to cook anything else...

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