

2 JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE





RIVIERE AND THE LAND OF PRAYER



and the land of
prayer



RIVIERE
AND THE
LAND OF PRAYER





“Yay
there!”

KUROE
A clockwork
doll created by an
engineer named
Helica. Now a
sancta, Kuroe is
talkative and full
of confidence.



“Hullo
there.”

SHIRONA
A clockwork
doll created by
Helica. Introverted
and quiet.



“D-do
you like
flowers?”

HENRI
A member
of the police
force that keeps
the peace in
Cururunelvia,
land of prayer.
Specializes in
crimes and
accidents
involving sancta.



MacMillia's eyes were shining, and she sounded genuinely impressed. How, she wanted to know, did I do it so consistently? I giggled and answered simply:

"Heh-heh! Wouldn't you like to know?!"

"You're amazing!"

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"Any power that helpful has a price, especially if you overuse it. That's all."

"I wish I could hurry and grow up..."

She gave a flick of her hair, like a girl desperately trying to look more grown-up.

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RIVIERE AND THE LAND OF PRAYER

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JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

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UN
NEW YORK

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RIVIERE AND THE LAND OF PRAYER

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JOUGI SHIRAISHI

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Translation by Kevin Steinbach

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Welcome to Riviere Antiques!

For today's story, our news team is covering an old antiques shop situated along the main thoroughfare of Cururunelvia, the land of prayer. Namely, Riviere Antiques.

Riviere boasts the longest history of any of this land's antiques shops. The sancta on these shelves are a cross-section of Cururunelvia's history.

Let's go right inside.

"Thanks for coming!"

As we enter, MacMillia, a friendly staff member, greets our news team. She appears to be in her mid-twenties—you'll know her by her brown hair and bright smile.

"Welcome to Riviere Antiques!"

See the gracious smile greeting our cameras? How sweet! How lovely! Our reporter snaps a photo.

The camera we're using for our report today is a sancta that can develop photographs on the spot. No sooner has the shutter been pressed than a picture drops into the photographer's hands.

The photographer is busy checking the finished photograph, which shows a smiling young sancta expert. She'll be our guide today as we tour these antiques. Maybe she can start by telling us what sancta are, exactly.

“That’s a great question!” *Hooray!* MacMillia is really into this. “The word ‘sancta’ refers to objects that have been imbued with a prayer. I’m sure you know how in our country, people who have a problem go to the cathedral to pray about it. Sancta are objects upon which granted prayers have been bestowed.”

Ah, that makes sense! So all the objects in this shop are a bit different than normal, is that right?

“Another great question!” Hooray! MacMillia’s excitement swells. “You’re exactly right! All the sancta in our shop, and in every antiques shop, are items that moved on from their owners after granting a prayer. Antiques dealers collect these objects and work day and night to help improve people’s lives.”

Ah, that makes sense! Only a minuscule percentage of prayers offered to the statute of Cururunelvia are granted. MacMillia is saying that it’s much more efficient to use sancta that are already around, rather than trying to get a new one, is that right?

“What a great question!” MacMillia doesn’t notice the wry smiles from our news crew at her limited repertoire of reactions. “You’re exactly right!” The news crew is starting to think she needs new material. The photographer, expressionless, turns and starts taking pictures of the shop.

The extensive shop floor contains umbrellas, scissors, combs, jars, mirrors, and masks—at a glance, you could be forgiven for thinking it’s just a collection of old junk. But every object here carries the power of a prayer.

“I’d like to point out that everything we sell at our shop is safe and useful!” says MacMillia, forcing her smiling self back into frame. “Perhaps you’d like to buy a helpful trinket while you’re here?”

We’re trying to get some pictures of those very sancta, but the viewfinder is full of MacMillia’s lovely face. The photographer leans left and right, trying to make the best of the situation. They’re trying to communicate the message: *Outta the way!*

It’s not getting through to MacMillia. Instead, she gives our team a quizzical look and flashes a peace sign. “Hooray!” The photographer rues the difficulty of telepathic communication.

But there's more to Cururunelvia than just prayers and sancta. This country is home to many different kinds of people—beastkin, humans, elves, and more. How do so many different people live in such harmony on a tiny island? The prayers that help resolve any challenges may be one reason.

Our news crew wonders, however—this companionable spirit, this compassionate empathy, might it not be rooted in something fundamental to the hearts of the people of Cururunelvia?

“Hooray! Observe this match. This sancta has an incredible power: Just by striking it, you can see any illusion you want! Would you like one?”

Unfortunately, we cannot observe the match, because MacMillia's face is filling the frame.

Compassion. Empathy. These are the words our photographer is privately repeating while trying to get the shots.

Each time the photographer turns toward a new sancta, MacMillia inserts herself into the picture, bedecked with a knowing smile. “Now, *this* is...” she says.

Compassion. Empathy.

“You know, I think we've heard about plenty of sancta. Perhaps you could introduce the owner of the shop.”

You need to know when to give up. The photographer tries to drop a hint: “Think you could give the camera some space?”

“Oops! Sure, sure!”

It seems we've finally gotten through to her. MacMillia disappears into the back of the store, where the owner is working in a storage room. The news crew feels profound relief.

As MacMillia opens the door to the storage room, she has all the gravity of someone going to call a child who's busy doing homework. She has a brief conversation with the person in the room, two or three sentences, and then she gestures to us. “C'mon over! I already told her the news crew was coming!”

MacMillia is very eager for us to get some pictures.

The photographer gets ready.

The door opens the rest of the way.

“What in the world is going on out here? A news crew? I didn’t hear anything about any news crew.”

The woman who emerges, frowning, from the storage room is a stunning beauty with fiery red hair. Maybe the photographer is overwhelmed by her loveliness because the shutter goes off just a little too late. It would explain why the final photograph doesn’t quite capture the woman’s best side.

“Wow! That photo is *weird* !” says MacMillia, leaning over the photographer’s shoulder. She doesn’t sound at all bothered. The photograph depicts nothing more than a crimson blur passing in front of the door! It’s so blurry that we can’t possibly use it.

The photographer apologizes to the owner, Riviere, and asks for another shot.

“*Sigh*... I swear. What’s going on?” Riviere frowns and looks very annoyed. Perhaps we’ve caught her at a bad time.

This next shot has to come out—the photographer carefully frames the photo and presses the shutter.

The result? A crimson blur in front of a desk.

There’s an awkward pause. The news crew as a whole apologizes and promises to get the shot this time.

They say the third time’s the charm. The photographer gets ready.

Then again, they also say that what happens twice will happen thrice.

This time, the blur is just sort of everywhere in the frame.

“But... But why?” For the first time since we got here, our news crew is brought up short. Why, with all that expertise and dedication, can the photographer not get the shot? It’s like trying to get a photo of a cryptid.

The news team put their heads in their hands. If there’s a story here, they are not getting it!

“All right, cut!”

At those words, the team looks up again to find someone standing there looking very grim.

The progenitor of the idea for this story.

MacMillia herself.



“Come on! Be serious about this, Miss Riviere!” I puffed out my cheeks and glowered at her. “This whole news crew idea started with your suggestion. If you won’t stay in the frame, it defeats the point!”

It had all started a few days ago. Riviere had been sipping her black tea and lounging around as she so often did when she said to me, “I’d like to make this shop a little more well-known.”

Truth be told, antiques shops didn’t actually get a lot of customers, and Riviere Antiques certainly didn’t get any more than anyone else. In fact, “not a lot of customers” is probably an understatement. Here we have proof that Riviere spent most of her day drinking tea and relaxing. This isn’t exactly the sign of someone with a bustling business to attend to.

So she came to me, probably thinking that with my experience at a newspaper company, I would have an idea of what might make for a good story and get people talking.

Of course, I replied: “If you want to get more people in here, I’ve got two letters for you: PR!”

It was perfectly logical: If people didn’t know you were there, you might as well not be. And who would go to a store that wasn’t there? If you wanted to make money, first you had to get your name out there.

“And what better way to do that than to invite a news crew to our shop?” I’d said. So it was that I selected a camera from among our stock of sancta. I figured naturalistic photos of the workings of our establishment would be the best way to go. For a photographer, I turned to a friend of mine, Freja. I caught her when she dropped in the shop on her way home from school and asked her to help me.

She was more than happy to join the effort and snapped a bunch of pictures of me and the store.

“Can I see the finished photos?” I asked.

“Sure,” she nodded.

It had been a month since Freja had been freed of the cloak that had been possessing her and had returned to school. She seemed to be getting used to campus life, and even told me she’d made some friends. She seemed to count me among their number—she gradually stopped being stiff and formal with me, and now she talked to me just like you would to any of your friends.

I looked over the photos she’d shot, but I started to notice something. They were supposed to show the interior of the shop, but they didn’t.

“Why are all these pictures of...me?” I asked.

“I tried to shoot around you, but you kept getting in the way.”

Coulda said something...

I guess I’d just gotten too excited and hadn’t been able to back off. It was picture after picture of me looking positively dumb.

“You’re a funny one,” Freja said, smiling at the photos. “It’s okay. We can shoot the inside of the shop another time.”

There was only one real problem confronting our “news team.”

“Miss Riviere,” I said, getting up. “Could you come stand in front of the camera?”

“What a strange request,” Riviere said but nonetheless she stood there with a prim and serious expression. Perfect! That was a great look! This would make exactly the kind of photograph we wanted. I snapped the shutter without a moment’s hesitation.

Yet for some reason, when the picture developed, it only showed a red blur.

“Why must you move *every single time* anyone takes a picture of you?!” I said.

This was getting infuriating. I looked up to find Riviere had already vanished.

Where could she have gone? I was looking around, puzzled, when Freja tugged on my sleeve and pointed to the storage room at the back.

I followed her finger and saw Riviere, glaring at me from the shadows of the back room.

Uh... What?

“Wait... Are you *afraid* of the camera, Miss Riviere?”

If I’d turned the camera around and taken a picture of myself as I asked the question, I’m sure there would have been a huge grin on my face.

“What? I mean, *what*? No, I’m not scared! Not even a little!”

“Oh, really? Then you won’t mind if I...”

I whipped the camera up, and through the viewfinder, I saw Riviere flee.

“Looks like someone who’s scared to me,” I said.

“I am not scared. And I’ll thank you to stop putting words in my mouth.”

“But you—”

“I’m simply more *careful* than most people. It’s not fear. Really! You know, long ago, there was a sancta, a camera a lot like the one you’re holding, that could suck the souls out of the people it photographed. Just imagine what would happen if the camera you’ve got there had a similar effect. See? I’m always thinking two or three steps ahead, trying to anticipate any unanticipated turn of events. So, to reiterate, I am *not* afraid. Understand? I simply have a more multifaceted view of things than you do.”

“You know you’re talking really fast?”

She was also doing her talking from behind a desk, just peeking over the top to glare at me. It’s sort of undercut her argument that she wasn’t frightened.

“Well, this makes things harder,” I said, looking unhappily at the photograph. This was Riviere Antiques. Her name was right there on the sign. She was the literal face of the shop. We couldn’t expect people to be interested if we didn’t at least have a picture of her with our story.

“I heard what you were saying,” said a gorgeous, ashen-haired young woman

who rather suddenly appeared behind us.

“Oh, hey, Elaina,” I said, turning toward her with the camera. Elaina didn’t specifically work for Riviere Antiques, but she did odd jobs for us, bringing in customers, helping out when we needed it, that sort of thing.

I watched her through the lens as she struck a pose and said, “Sounds to me like you’ve got a problem on your hands. But I can help you!” She reached out a hand of salvation. My angel! I clicked the shutter. At which point she said, “Oh! You should be aware that there’s a fee of ten thousand lain per photo.”

A diabolical mistake! I tore up my photo.

“You’re more than welcome to tear up the photograph if you want, but it doesn’t change the fact that you took it, so I’ll still be expecting my fee.” Elaina clapped me on the shoulder and grinned. That scraping, clutching, covetous devil—er, I mean, Elaina—looked around the store and said, “So you want to do a little promotion, is that right?” She gave me a look of curiosity, but she understood the situation so well that it almost sounded as if she’d been lurking outside the store, eavesdropping on the entire affair.

I nodded.

“I’ve got just the thing, then,” she said and grinned.

“Yeah? What?” I asked, looking ever more puzzled.

If I’d been expecting an actual answer, I didn’t get one. Instead...

...Elaina laughed (“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...”) and grabbed the pile of photographs from me.

“I mean, what...what thing?” I asked. “What thing have you got?”

“I’m just going to borrow these for a minute.”

“Yeah, feel free, but...for what?”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...”

I did *not* like where this was going.



I'd been totally convinced that Elaina must be up to no good, but within a week of whatever she did:

"Oh my gosh! Look at this place! We're really in Riviere Antiques!"

"Wow! Look at all these sancta!"

Our shop, which hardly got any customers on a good day, was suddenly welcoming several starry-eyed young women.

Riviere and I were both shocked. Nothing like this had happened in all the time I'd been here.

"Wow! This must be because of Elaina's PR work," I marveled. She was truly a force to be reckoned with! What magic could she have used? I shot her a jealous look where she stood smirking behind the gaggle of customers.



Riviere gave the young women a gentle smile as they gazed around the shop in awe. She was happy, in her own way, to have people come into her store. “Welcome. Can I help you find something?”

“Oops! Sorry about all the noise. It’s just so awesome to be in an actual antiques shop!” one of the young women said.

“You think so? Well, that’s a lovely thing to hear.” A look I’d never seen from Riviere, a placid smile, came over her face. “Hee-hee. I wonder when my shop became an object of such fascination.”

“Oh, our posse can’t *stop* talking about Riviere Antiques!”

“Oh, really?” Then she shot me a look and muttered, “*Posse?*”

I whispered to her that it was sort of a group of people who share a common interest.

“I see. Yes, of course.” She nodded. “So, what common interest do you share?”

“The occult!”

“The...occult...” Riviere’s smile didn’t slip, but she froze in her tracks. I didn’t like where this was going.

“We saw this article in a magazine the other day! It said this shop is haunted by a crimson ghost!” Our occultist customer held up a magazine—one dedicated to all things strange and unexplained. It was opened to a page headlined “VINTAGE TERROR! THE MYSTERIOUS CRIMSON SPIRIT HUNTING ONE OF OUR OLDEST ANTIQUES SHOPS!” Under the headline was a photograph of a red blur that was, to my eyes, unmistakably Riviere. It was one of our failed portrait attempts.

Incidentally, the contributor, a certain “Miss E,” was presented with a ten-thousand-lain honorarium for her efforts.

“Elaina?” said Riviere, turning toward the witch. Her smile had reached a terrifying intensity.

Elaina, grinning, clapped Riviere on the shoulder. “Don’t you think this would be an excellent time to take a multifaceted view of things?”



Sentiment Soap

Six months earlier.

When the man opened his eyes, it was nighttime, and he was in the cathedral. Pain wracked his body; he felt like someone had worked him over with a vengeance. He forced himself to his feet in spite of the pain and looked around. What had he been doing sleeping in a place like this? He couldn't remember.

What he did remember was a feeling of all-consuming panic. But panic about what? No memory of that, either.

The cathedral was eerily quiet.

"Hello? Is anybody there?" he said, his voice echoing around the building. He sounded silly even to himself. Who would be there at this hour? Nobody, obviously. He knew that. The fact that he couldn't stop himself from asking out loud showed just how utterly confused he was by the situation in which he found himself.

Or maybe it was because he sensed someone there.

The man looked up, wondering. The statue of Cururunelvia seemed to look over his shoulder, and he almost would have said he felt something move behind him.

He turned around.

The first thing he thought of was a clock—the way it swung slowly back and

forth reminded him of a pendulum. But that didn't make any sense. Why would there be a clock on the carpet leading up to the statue in the cathedral? And why would it be shaped like a person?

His blood ran cold when he finally registered what it was: a body, hung from the neck by a rope that came all the way down from the cathedral ceiling far, far overhead.

"No...!"

The body's lifeless eyes were agog, staring reproachfully at the man. Pressed into its forehead was a sealing stamp of black wax.

The man had no idea what was going on, what had happened, or what to do about it. He looked around again. There was still no one else there.

"Ahh... Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

He ran, fleeing through the darkness, trying to escape this incomprehensible situation. He ran with no idea where he was going, praying that no one would see him.

When he finally took stock of his surroundings again, he caught himself reflected in the glass of a shop window on the street.

He was grinning madly, as if he was having the time of his life—his own face twisted into a sinister grimace.



Linabelle first encountered this person about three months ago. She played the trumpet in a jazz band she'd started with some good friends of hers. That day, like so many other days, they'd been performing in the corner of a small bar.

They were playing a popular song. Linabelle knew it by heart; she could follow along with it as easily as breathing. Maybe it was all the practice, but she felt like she was playing better than ever that night. Her fingers moved almost before she thought about it. The notes sounded sharper and cleaner than normal.

She loved it. From the bottom of her heart, it felt wonderful.

It happens, sometimes, when you play a musical instrument enough. It's that feeling of absolute satisfaction and fulfillment. Her heart danced; she *wanted* people to see how she was playing.

It was at that moment that something, or rather several somethings, rose up from among the audience seats. Three spheres that glittered in the darkness, passing slowly over the audience's heads. They were about the size of the circle produced if you put your thumb and pointer finger together.

They floated in a neat line, all traveling in the same direction. Linabelle saw them out of the corner of her eye, but she was busy playing and didn't really see what they were.

Eventually she realized, oh, they were soap bubbles. The song had just ended, and the bubbles had floated past the audience and were coming toward the brightly lit stage. She wondered, had someone blown these bubbles?

One of the bubbles popped against her shoulder.

She found its behavior strange. Normal soap bubbles were lighter than air; they should float upwards and disappear, not come drifting directly at a person in a straight line. So when something strange started to happen as soon as the bubble burst, Linabelle had a sort of distant thought: *Oh. Of course. It was a sancta.*

"What a wonderful performance."

"I feel revived after hearing that!"

"Thank you!"

The warm words seeped into Linabelle. It wasn't a voice; instead they were thoughts, resonating directly within her heart. She gathered that this sancta allowed one to hear people's thoughts.

When the lights came on after the performance, she scanned the seats. Whose thoughts was she hearing? She only had to think about it for a second, though, to conclude that no one who would send soap bubbles flying from a darkened house to communicate their thoughts would simply sit around

waiting to be discovered afterwards.

Then again, maybe she didn't yet deserve to see them. She'd played as well as she had ever played in her life, and she'd felt amazing. But as she looked out over the audience, no one was cheering. There was only a smattering of hesitant applause that quickly trailed off. Maybe she and her band weren't good enough yet for her to get too proud of herself.

"Thank you very much for listening," Linabelle said. She bowed to the audience, and privately vowed that she would keep getting better, good enough to make whoever had granted her those soap bubbles reveal themselves.

More soap bubbles did come, in time. In fact, it was right about three months later...



"It's not easy being famous!" Linabelle said, staring off into the distance. She had just finished an intimate concert to commemorate her band's debut with a major record label, and she had told me the story about the bubbles. As a personal friend, she'd gotten me tickets for some of the best seats in the house. I spent the entire concert clapping and crying "Wow!" at the power of her performance, and then when she came down off the stage and took me out for a lovely dinner, I clapped and exclaimed some more.

As we sat facing each other across the table, Linabelle debriefed about the performance—and then, with a sigh, she told me about the soap bubbles. It had happened three months ago, long before she and her band were popular. Yet those words of encouragement had given her the strength to push on.

"And you know what? At today's performance, those soap bubbles came again."

Well, now!

"That's great," I said. So the person behind those bubbles had sent her another message? That was cause for celebration, wasn't it? It meant this person had been there all along these last three months, rooting for her as she

moved up in the world.

I clapped again and congratulated Linabelle, but she made an uncomfortable sound and said, “I don’t know...”

It was almost like she wasn’t happy to see the soap bubbles again. She even looked a little...upset by it.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“The message in the bubbles was...different from last time,” she said, knitting her brow. From the frown on her face, I figured it was less encouraging than before.

“What did they say?” I asked, curious.

She repeated the thoughts that had been in the bubbles...and they shocked me.

“Your music makes my ears bleed.”

“Just stop already.”

“I’ll kill you.”

Just like before, she said, the bubbles had drifted up in the middle of a performance and burst against her—but it was a completely different experience from the first time.

“I wonder if something happened to this person to make them so unhappy,” Linabelle said, hemming thoughtfully. “I don’t think they’d really kill me, but I’m a little worried for them.”

“I think you should be worried for yourself! You’re the one who just got threatened!” I didn’t have personal experience with this sort of thing, so I could only speculate. But still. “If this person is a former fan, they might be a lot more tenacious than just some random person who doesn’t like you. You don’t know what they might do!”

“That’s true...” Linabelle made another concerned sound. “But I don’t think it’s that they don’t *like* me. I hope.”

“I don’t think you usually threaten to kill someone you don’t, you know, *not*

like,” I said.

“Yeah, true... But, actually, those weren’t the only words directed at me today.”

“Huh?”

Was there something worse? I leaned in.

“Well, see...” Linabelle looked this way and that like she was trying to remember something, then opened her mouth a little before she finally got the words out. It was, she said, a thought that *felt* different from any of the other bubbles, either the nasty ones or the encouraging bubbles from three months ago.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“I’m not really sure myself...” She shook her head.

In the end, she never got so much as a glimpse of the bubble blower. We dropped the subject, and our dinner chat turned to little updates about our lives, which we shared over a drink before wrapping up for the night.

“It’s my treat,” I said, pulling out my wallet as the bill arrived. We were celebrating her concert, after all.

But Linabelle said, “No way! Not allowed!” and headbutted me in the shoulder, diving for the counter—and the bill. “I’m in a good mood today—it’s *my* treat!”

Good mood or not, I had perfectly valid reasons to pay the bill. “We’re here to celebrate your concert, Linabelle! It’s not fair for the guest of honor to have to pay for their own meal! It’s my—”

Linabelle cut me off. “Okay, MacMillia, let’s do this.” She gave me a flirtatious wink. “Maybe you could look for whoever’s behind those bubbles. I’ll pay for the meal to compensate you for the work.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. I was planning to do that anyway.”

We stood there at the register a few more moments, scuffling back and forth, but in the end, I succeeded in paying.

“Next time I’ll take you to an even better place, and it’ll be my treat,” said Linabelle. “My way of saying thank you for finding out whoever sent those bubbles at me.”

“I, uh, haven’t even started looking yet.”

Let’s not get ahead of ourselves...

I was lost in thought on the way home. So, we had a mysterious person who’d used bubbles to communicate their thoughts or emotions on two occasions: three months ago and today. I had no idea who this person was, or where they might be right now, or what they might be doing. I knew that presumably they were somewhere on this island, but that was it. And I was supposed to find them?

I wasn’t sure it was even possible.

“Oh, it’s very possible.”

Well. That settled that, then.

I asked Riviere about it the next day when I got to work, with all the fanfare with which you might say “good morning.” She responded just as casually.

“From what you told me, it’s not as if you have no leads at all,” she said. “And this sancta doesn’t sound like it has a particularly unique effect. I really don’t think it should be that much trouble to find this person.”

Huh! Who knew?

“I knew I could count on you!” I said, clapping.

“Hee-hee!” She tossed her head, making her hair flap. Precious.

“So, what kind of sancta can we use to track our bubble buddy down?” I asked.

“Don’t be silly. If you think you can use sancta to solve every problem, you’re making a big mistake.” Riviere shrugged expressively, clearly enjoying being the more knowledgeable of the two of us. “The real key to solving any problem is *information*. Relying on sancta to take care of everything for you will only turn

you into a trash human being.”

“Gee, you’d expect someone who buys and sells sancta to be a little more positive about her product...”

“I get a pass.” Riviere tossed her head again. Another swish of her hair. She looked very sure of herself, as usual.

“Okay, but if we don’t use a sancta, then what do we do?” It was an obvious question, and by the time I had tilted my head quizzically, Riviere was already turning and walking around her desk. She opened a drawer and pulled out a thick book.

“If this person purchased those soap bubbles from a reputable antiques dealer, their name should be in here.”

She opened the book and started flipping through it. I came over and gave it a curious look. I realized it was a register: It listed objects along with the names of shops, names of people, and dates.

“Every reputable antiques place, including ours, is part of this network. We record who sold which sancta, and to whom, and share that information.”

“Wowee...”

Now that I thought about it, I did remember Riviere asking customers for their personal information each time she bought or sold a sancta. Now I understood... She’d been recording all of that.

“Of course, a place like Carredura that sells dangerous sancta isn’t registered with the group,” Riviere said. The place that sold the soap bubbles to Linabelle’s assailant seemed to have been reputable. That entry was in the book, after all.

Riviere pointed at a line that said *soap bubbles*, but just as she was about to read out the name, she seemed to catch her breath.

Was there something wrong? I gave her a questioning glance at the same moment she looked at me. Our eyes met. Riviere’s expression was grave.

“Let me make sure I’m clear on this, MacMillia,” she said. “Your friend Linabelle was hit by these soap bubbles, right?”

“Yeah...”

“From what you said earlier, it sounded like she heard something else besides the threatening words.”

“Yeah, uh...”

I hadn’t really wanted to mention it—I thought it would just make Riviere worry. But yesterday, Linabelle had eventually confessed that besides the nasty stuff, one of the messages had been very strange.

I finally told Riviere: “She said the words were... ‘Help me.’”

Even Linabelle hadn’t been sure whether this was a true cry for help from the bubble sender, or just another nasty trick. On some level, it would be a relief to know this was just some overheated fan making mischief.

“I see,” Riviere said and closed the book with a soft sigh. “Next time, please don’t withhold such important information from me.” Her voice got even quieter as she said: “The owner of the shop that sold those bubbles was murdered.”

Exactly three months ago.



“Hey, partner,” came the voice from the mirror.

The man looked up and saw his own face grinning at him.

Simon.

Simon, the murderer who had been operating in the shadows of Cururunelvia for the last six months. Simon had the man’s face—they looked absolutely identical—but Simon’s expression was twisted with evil.

“How you feelin’? Nice weather today. Makes a guy want to go for a walk, doesn’t it?”

The man looked away from the mirror. But that didn’t stop the voice.

“Hey! Think you can get away from me? Don’t make me laugh!” He heard Simon’s words directly inside his own head. *“You and I are together, partner, body and soul. Can’t nothing separate us. You might as well enjoy it—or you’re*

only hurting yourself!”

“No, stop! Shut up!” The man fell to his knees and covered his ears, but that didn’t keep out Simon’s voice.

“You think someone’s gonna rescue you? Fat chance. Don’t forget, while you’re asleep, I can do whatever I want.”

“Hrgh...”

The implication was obvious: If the man ever sought help, Simon would simply murder his would-be savior.

The man left the house, walking unsteadily. He had to do *something* about Simon’s voice echoing in his head.

“So, what’re we gonna do today? Maybe we can find the materials for my next work. Haven’t made anything new in a while. I’m gettin’ bored here, ya know?”

Simon referred to the people he killed as his “works.” It didn’t make sense to the man, but apparently, he viewed the corpses as some kind of art.

And he’d already made several works. The first was the body hanging from the cathedral ceiling. He claimed that he thought it was pretty well done, considering it was his first try and he hadn’t really known what he was doing.

The second was a friendly-looking middle-aged woman. Someone kind enough to reach out to a man who appeared to be suffering. The day after the man told her his troubles, Simon decided to try out his new tools on her: He sliced her up and left her by the roadside with a wax seal pressed into her forehead.

The third and fourth “works” were people the man didn’t know. Simon, it seemed, had found them himself while the man was asleep. The man had learned of the crimes when Simon complained, *“I do two new pieces and the newspaper doesn’t even review ‘em!”*

Within just two months after Simon and the man had been joined, there were already four victims.

“I have to do something... Anything...”

Then came the fifth victim—the owner of the antiques shop who had sold the man the soap bubbles. A nice person who had taken pity on him as he knelt, desolate, by the roadside. The man had shared his troubles with the shop owner.

“I try to get help, but I can’t. I can’t ask anyone to do anything for me. I just don’t know what to do!” The man clutched his head in his hands, terrified.

The owner hadn’t really grasped the true depth of the man’s problem but tried to comfort him all the same. “Use these soap bubbles. They’re a sancta that will communicate your feelings to whomever they strike. With these, you should be able to say even the toughest things to the people around you.”

The shopkeeper technically “sold” the bubbles to the man but asked for no payment. The man must have looked that haunted. He left the store, apologizing to the kindly owner.

A month later, Simon went back to deal with the shopkeeper.



“I knew the owner for a long time. I remember the events of three months ago very well.”

We were at an antiques shop on the east side of town. The place was shuttered, and there was a note thanking customers for their loyalty and describing the circumstances of the shop’s closure in studiously neutral language.

According to Riviere, the owner’s body had been found right outside the shop. He’d been beaten with a blunt object he himself carried, so severely that there were broken bones all over his body, including his skull.

“The murderer is known as Simon of the Black Wax.” That was what the police called him, she said, because of the sealing wax he pressed into his victims’ heads. “The brutality of the crimes along with the perpetrator’s obvious pleasure in seeing them reported has made catching him a top priority for the police, but they still don’t actually know where he is.”

“But they know *who* he is,” I pointed out. That showed what good

investigators they were.

“He told them himself.”

Okay, so maybe not.

“He deliberately left his name in the wax seal. When we looked at the records, we found he’d purchased sancta at several shops, including this one. And that most of them had been used in his crimes...”

She said, though, that so far that didn’t seem to include the soap bubbles.

In Riviere’s book, Simon’s name was associated with this shop on a day four months ago. Meaning that a month after he’d bought the soap bubbles, he’d returned to kill the owner.

“Why would he leave his own name on the murder scene? What’s he doing?” I asked.

“If I knew that, we’d have cracked this case already.”

“You think he enjoys the thrill of being chased by the police?” Like it was all a game to him?

“Maybe. Or maybe he just doesn’t care if they know who he is. Anyway, no point in the two of us playing detective.” Riviere turned toward me, her back to the deserted shop.

Multiple people now, including this shopkeeper, had lost their lives to Simon of the Black Wax. And yet the feelings the bubbles had conveyed to Linabelle seemed so peaceful, like they had next to nothing to do with murder. I just didn’t understand how it all went together.

“I think the most we can say right now is that your friend already seems to have attracted Simon’s attention,” said Riviere.

“Yeah... You’re probably right. I was thinking the same thing.”

“I’m going to tell the police what’s going on. You should stay close to your friend until they capture this killer.”

Roger that!

I wanted to nod eagerly and get started, but I wished she would remember

that that would leave me facing a murderer with pretty much no way to defend myself. “It’d sure be nice to have a sancta that would help keep me safe,” I said, hoping she would get the hint.

“Take this,” she said immediately and gave me a round leather whip.

What a thoughtful boss!

“If you run into Simon, crack this whip at him while thinking, ‘I want to capture him.’ As long as the equipment can reach him, it should be able to bind him.”

I guess the whip was imbued with a prayer that allowed it to capture anything the user wanted it to. It might not be much help in a serious fight, but it was a lot better than nothing. I was glad to have it.

“Keep it close, to protect yourself,” Riviere said.

I nodded and hooked the whip on my belt. I could feel the weight of it, and the realization that I was carrying an actual weapon left me sober. I’d thought we might be dealing with a garden-variety stalker—I’d never imagined it would come to something like this.

“I don’t think I have to say this, knowing you, but don’t misuse that whip. Any sancta can be put to either good or evil purposes.”

I nodded: I understood. Doubly so, because we were dealing with someone using sancta to commit heinous crimes.

I looked at the ground and heaved a sigh.

“No matter how careful you try to be, someone will always misuse sancta,” said Riviere.

You could make a list to try to keep everyone safe. You could put dangerous sancta in storage. It wouldn’t matter. People would keep praying, and somewhere along the line, something would slip past you.

“It’s almost like a curse.” And with that, she started walking away. I could see her shoulders slump as she went, and to me, she had never looked sadder.



The man's life had been a waking nightmare ever since he collapsed in front of the cathedral six months ago and found himself sharing his body with Simon.

When the man went to sleep, Simon would use his body, and when Simon slept the man would use it. The moment one drifted off, the other would take control. They used the same bed, with the waking one connected to the outside world. That, at least, was how the man perceived his shared life with Simon.

"You don't just talk in your sleep, partner. You give whole freakin' monologues!"

Even when the man was in control of the body, Simon didn't sleep, and often talked to him. Every day he launched into a bored invective from the bed.

"Oh, help me! Help me, pleaaase! Boo-hoo-hoo! That's all it ever is. Can't you sleep soundly for once?"

The man had never gotten used to the way Simon's voice rang in his head, not in six months of living with it. He would plug his ears and stare at the ground as he walked down the street, but Simon would only laugh at his terror. *"Dumbass!"* the man would hear in his head. If he looked in the glass of a shop window, he would see Simon's face leering back at him.

Horried, the man would run—even though he knew he couldn't run away from Simon. *Help! Help!* he would cry in his mind as Simon laughed; the man would look at the people of the town and think the words he could not say.

He had tried to get help from several people over the past six months, but he knew all too well that if he approached someone carelessly while Simon was awake in his head, he would be putting that person in danger. Since he didn't know when Simon was awake or not, he didn't know how to go about seeking help. No method occurred to him. It was like living with a gun pointed at his head.

He certainly couldn't go to the police.

"If you try to turn yourself in, I'll kill everyone at the station using any method I can, and then I'll kill you, too. But I'm sure you knew that already."

The man could only wander in a daze.

His first real opportunity to try to get help came four months ago. It was the soap bubbles the kindly shopkeeper had given him. He was standing outside the shop and looking at the soap when he heard the voice in his head: *“Never pegged you for a bubble blower.”*

The man hadn’t said anything.

“What a dumbass hobby.”

Simon snickered, and simply observed how the man reacted. He didn’t say anything else out of malice or even threaten the man, and the man realized that Simon didn’t know about the prayer imbued in the bubbles.

The bubbles could be the man’s ticket to getting help, without having to say the words aloud. It was the one ray of hope he could find.

After that, he started blowing bubbles into the crowds around town. Once at a man who was waiting for someone. Once at a clerk at a restaurant. Another time, at a young woman walking down the street.

The man asked for help, but it was always useless. Most people never realized that the man was the source of the bubbles—and the few who did were always scared off by his shady appearance. So the man spent his days unnoticed by anybody, even as he carried these thoughts around with him like a bomb.

Then, one day, he happened to go to a bar where he heard a jazz band performing.

No one in attendance seemed to be paying any special attention to the music. It was mostly a few audience members looking a bit overwhelmed by the bright lights.

The man wondered if the performers noticed how blasé the audience was. Then he spotted the young woman playing the trumpet. She looked like she was having the time of her life on that stage, utterly unaffected by the audience’s indifference. She looked like she belonged up there, shining, the notes of her performance piercing through the darkness.

As the song picked up, the boredom began to vanish from the audience’s faces, one after another. The man’s own face was among them.

Before he knew what he was doing, he had blown the soap bubbles toward the young woman. They drifted through the bar, three perfect globes sent right to her.

If he didn't give up, maybe he could get someone to turn toward him, the way she had enticed the audience to turn toward her.

He just needed to keep trying.

It was the first optimistic thought he'd had in a long time.

Then he heard the voice. *"Fancy bubbles ya got there, friend. Lemme guess. They're sancta?"*

The man felt a chill run down his spine. Simon had seen through everything. And when he woke up the next day, his alter ego had completed another "work."

Just thinking about the sight made him nauseous. He remembered sprinting through the streets of the city until his lungs burned and he had to stop. His heart felt like it would explode, it was pounding so hard.

The nightmare still wasn't over.

"Hey, partner. Thought maybe you could give me a little advice on my next piece."

If the man was just going to stand around, Simon suggested, he might as well make himself useful.

His next piece?

The thought sent a shiver up his spine.

"I'm thinking I'd like to do one about a girl who plays the trumpet. Whaddaya say? You had your eye on her back there, didn't ya?" The man didn't have to be looking in the mirror to see Simon's grotesque smile in his mind's eye.

"N-No, don't! Don't lay a finger on her!" he howled.

What was he going to do? What *could* he do?

Simon laughed in his mind, great guffaws of sheer hilarity. The man ran and ran, not even knowing where he was going. All he knew was that he had to help

the woman who, three months before, had given him the only shred of hope he had.



When I'd met Linabelle yesterday, she said that she and her bandmates were getting together at a café today for a meeting. So I started checking the places I thought she might go.

It only took me about three tries to find her, sitting and chatting amicably with the other band members. When her friends saw me burst in with a crazed look on my face, they grinned and teased her. "Ooh, who's this? A budding romance?"

Linabelle just laughed. "Hee-hee-hee. Wouldn't you like to know?"

Wait, um... Isn't this the part where you're supposed to deny it? Please?

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to bask in the ripply, wavy, time-to-kill atmosphere. I didn't even slow down to tell them it wasn't true. I just told Linabelle to come with me.

I must have looked pretty desperate, because she didn't ask any questions, she just followed me. Once we were alone, I told her what was going on.

"Wow... So it turns out they were a bad person?" She sighed.

"Whatever they are, this is an emergency. I need you to come with me for now. I'll take you home."

"That's very nice of you, MacMillia, but you can't *take me home* because you don't know where I live."

"Oops." She wasn't wrong.

"Wait a second... Is this a roundabout way of asking for my address?"

"N-No way! Not even!"

"Hee-hee, sorry. I guess now's not the time for jokes." She whispered that maybe she wasn't feeling completely coolheaded herself. She looked deeply conflicted. I would have been pretty surprised if she hadn't. She'd thought she

had a superfan, and now I was telling her it was just somebody who was trying to murder her.

She gave me directions to her place and off we went, with me walking a few steps ahead of her.

“Don’t worry!” I said. “I’m here to keep you safe!”

I was ready and willing to capture anyone who got within spitting distance of her with my whip. I had to be the one to keep her safe until the police arrived.

“So, just to be sure, you have no idea who this person could be or any of their identifying characteristics?” I asked. That was what she’d told me yesterday. She didn’t even know whether it was a man or woman, let alone how old they might be. The only thing she knew was what those soap bubbles had told her three months ago:

“What a wonderful performance.”

“I feel revived after hearing that!”

“Thank you!”

And then again just the other day:

“Your music makes my ears bleed.”

“Just stop already.”

“I’ll kill you.”

“Huh?” I said. Something didn’t seem right. I’d been assuming the sender of these thoughts was a fan of Linabelle’s because of the praise they’d sent her a few months ago. If this Simon was nothing but a murderer, why would he go out of his way to say nice things to her?

It was almost like he was two different people.

Linabelle interrupted my thoughts. “Actually...I did figure out something about this person,” she said. “Just before I talked to you yesterday, I told my bandmates about the soap bubbles, too, and asked what they thought.”

Before the meeting today, they’d been kind enough to ask around with the staff at their performance venue. Truly, the antidote to fifty enemies is one

friend. To say nothing of a whole jazz band full of them. It turned out that Mister Bubble Blower stood out among the members of the audience, and one of the staff remembered some pertinent details.

“They didn’t know his name, but they told us what he looked like.”

“His name is Simon, it sounds like.”

“We’ve got everything, then,” Linabelle said, her expression softening. She looked like she was almost starting to feel relieved.

I couldn’t help smiling a little myself at that—but then I cocked my head. “So what did this guy look like?” If I had some idea who we were looking for, I could stop openly staring at every single person who went by.

“Well, he...” she began, and then she told me everything she knew about what the bubble blower looked like.



A ragged shirt and slim pants. Short black hair. Not overweight, but not really thin, either. Face? Handsome-ish. Average height. Medium, unremarkable build.

Such were the physical characteristics of the man running through town, his breath coming in short gasps. He had a small bag over his shoulder, filled with deadly weapons: Simon’s work implements. Simon would pick one based on the time, place, and his mood.

“Ooh, that girl, she’d be good. Oh! Or that guy over there. The main avenue is just bursting with great material!” Simon said in the man’s head. He sounded as relaxed as if he were lounging on the bed, but he wasn’t reaching the man. The man didn’t have time to listen to every little thing Simon said. He knew who Simon would be after next.

The woman who had given him hope three months before.

Even as the man ran aimlessly through the streets, his memories of that moment appeared in his mind’s eye. He could see the woman’s face, how tall she was, what her hair had looked like.

As he remembered, he ran.

He couldn't allow any more victims.

He had to protect her.

"I have to keep her safe...!"

But if he found her, what then? What would he say to her?

Soon after he'd had that thought, the man came to a stop. He'd found a woman who looked like the one he remembered. It was pure coincidence. She was walking down the avenue with another person who looked like a friend of hers. She jumped right out of the crowd at him; it was like he couldn't see anything else.

"I have to help her..."

The man stood looking at her, his shoulders heaving.

At the same moment, she noticed him. She stopped and stared at him and then, slowly, she pointed at him.

She remembered him!

For a second, the man felt like he could have danced for joy. But then he snapped back to reality.

She couldn't remember him. They'd crossed paths only once, three months before, and he'd made his exit before she even saw his face.

"Oh! Hey, partner, that reminds me." That was the voice in his head, mocking him. *"I don't think I mentioned, but I threatened her just yesterday."*

The woman was saying something to her friend now.

"I think that's him, MacMillia!"

So, in the end, there was no salvation.

The hope had been just an illusion.

The woman who had stood shining on that stage three months ago looked at the man as if he made her sick.

"Murderer!" the woman's friend exclaimed, jumping forward. She had a whip.

The man's mind filled with the sound of Simon's laughter.



“N-No! I’m not... It’s not me!”

I wasn’t sure what made him say that—this guy had all the characteristics Linabelle had described. The moment she pointed at him, he panicked, shaking his head as hard as he could. Unfortunately for him, the immediacy of his reaction and his general weirdness didn’t help his case. He might as well have been wearing a sign saying *I’m a criminal*. Plus, the way he was panicking suggested he knew what we were talking about.

I did have to admit, he looked awfully freaked out for a murderer...but you couldn’t be too careful. I brought up my whip. If it worked the way Riviere had said, I just had to think about how I wanted to capture Simon, and the whip would do the rest.

“Fortune favors the bold!” I cried, and then I cracked the whip. It whistled through the air and caught the man by the wrist.

Yes! I did it! Problem solved.

Or so I thought for an all-too-brief moment.

“N-No! I’m not... It’s not me!”

No sooner had I caught him than the man pulled back violently, easily breaking free of the whip, which dropped and hung limply like a fishing line after the fish got away.

I looked at the whip. *Huh?*

Having been eluded by its quarry, the whip rolled itself up and settled back in my hand. It couldn’t talk, but I could almost hear it chuckling, “Oops, so much for that!” It could at least *try* to look remorseful.

This wasn’t what I had been told! Wasn’t this sancta supposed to guarantee capture? Hello?

That was my one chance to seize the initiative, and now that it was gone, my good luck was gone with it. “Arr...arrrrrrghhh!” the man cried, and with a

terrified look he turned and fled, running as fast as he could.

“No! Wait!” I cried. I couldn’t let him get away. He was just on the verge of being too far away to reach with my sancta, so I raised the whip again and set off in pursuit. “You stay there, Linabelle! I’ll grab him and be right back!” Thankfully, the man didn’t seem to be a very fast runner. I was confident that I could beat him in a foot race, and then I would have him.

As I set off, though, for some reason I found Linabelle right beside me. “I’m coming too,” she said. I thought I’d told her to wait here!

“Why would you...?” I asked. She was going to follow this guy? When he was trying to kill her?

Linabelle said, “You realize he’s already murdered a bunch of people, right? He might even try to take someone else out to help himself get away.”

“Well... You’re not wrong about that...”

“And anyway, I can’t have you dying on me, MacMillia.”

“Believe me, I’m touched.” But that would sort of defeat the point of me being her bodyguard, wouldn’t it?

As we talked, we ran. I followed the man’s getaway path. What was he so afraid of, anyway? The expression on his face as he glanced back at us was one of preternatural fear. He looked like he was being chased, all right...but by something other than us.

I couldn’t imagine what had him so scared. The people he’d murdered had probably been even more frightened than he was now.

“You’ve got it all wrong! It’s not me! *It’s not me!*” he shouted at us over his shoulder.

“If it’s not you, then stop running!” I shouted back.

This was getting really annoying! I raised the whip and tried to get a bead on the guy as I dodged around pedestrians. I needed to be closer than last time, so I would be sure to get him.

At last, the man burst into the plaza with the fountain—the end of the main avenue. It was a circular space with a fountain in the middle. Only one road led

in or out, and Linabelle and I were standing right there. It was a dead end. The man was trapped.

“No... Nooo...” He turned toward us and backed toward the fountain. He was still in the grip of his terror, his expression still horrified.

“Please. Don’t fight us,” I said. I couldn’t help feeling a flash of pity for him. Maybe there was more to the story than I knew. But it didn’t mean I could just let him go. He was wanted for several murders, after all. “You can tell us your side of things...later.”

But at this moment, I added softly, I just needed him to come quietly with us.

“No... It’s not... It’s not...” He held his head in his hands.

I moved toward him cautiously. He was completely open, and I had my whip at the ready. I took a few more steps, until I was much closer than the last time I had used it.

“No mistakes this time,” I said. I made sure I had a firm grip, then I flicked the whip, thinking about how I wanted to catch the murderer, Simon. The whip raced out, responding to my desire, and wrapped around the man.

I gave it a tug and could feel it had a firm grip on him. I had him.

Yes! See? You can do it, I thought, wishing I could give the whip a pat on the head.

“Hrrgh... Arrrrgh...” The man wept. He didn’t look like he was going to fight back—but he did look deeply, deeply sad.

I’d sort of expected more from a killer. Linabelle must have been thinking the same thing, because she came up beside me and whispered, “Do you think it’s really him?”

“Urgh,” the man groaned again and looked up. “Y-You... You have to run,” he said. He looked positively desperate.

“Run?” I said. When we had just captured our target? Why? “What do you think he’s talking about?” I asked Linabelle.

“I’m not sure,” she said.

We'd successfully captured the man. Now all I had to do was send Linabelle to alert the police. Then they could arrest him, and everything would be set.

It was all so simple. So why did it feel so wrong?

"Run!" the man shouted, his face a mask of horror. "You have to run!"

Yeah. Something was definitely wrong.

There was a sort of *plop*, and something dropped off the man's body. When I took a good look, it seemed to be a thin, whitish thing that was now flopping around near his feet.

Definitely, definitely wrong.

"MacMillia... I don't think this is...normal," Linabelle said, taking my shoulder and looking disturbed.

The man started to thrash, as if trying to escape his own body, tied up by the whip. Each time he moved, more of that white stuff dropped from between him and the curls of the whip.

"What *is* that?" I muttered, watching him. A gap had appeared between the equipment and the man.

"Arrrrgh..."

It was like a membrane of ice. The man seemed to be squeezing it out of himself; each time he moved, a crack ran along his body. Down toward his feet. Then up toward his head. Until finally...

"Yaaaaaarrrrrrghhhhh!"

First his face, then his entire body, split clean in two.

Staring out from inside was another man with an identical face. Each time the man inside moved, the man outside flopped a bit, sloughing off further. The second man was shedding him like an old skin.

The sight gave me goosebumps.

"Eeeeeek! What's happening?! That's *disgusting*!" I shrieked. But who could blame me?

The floppy man glared at us, but his body was already melting like ice. It

started at the head and proceeded right down to his toes.

“What... What *is* that?” Linabelle gasped from behind me. Her hand, clutching my sleeve, was shaking. No, wait, that was me shaking. But you couldn’t blame me, right? I mean, this was gross as heck.

Once the entire “shed skin” had slid off the man, it collected at his feet in a pool of gel that congealed into a little lump. Almost as if it were some kind of sentient liquid. I wasn’t sure what it was or what it had been originally, but there was no mistake about one thing: It was a sancta.

“I guess we’ve figured one thing out,” I said, readying my whip again.

I’d kept asking myself the same question, never coming up with an answer: Why had the thoughts sent to Linabelle three months ago and yesterday seemed like they came from completely different people? And why had there been a cry for help mixed in among the thoughts she’d received yesterday?

“Urgh!” The man freed from the gel collapsed to his knees. Startled by the sound, the gel thing jumped a little, then scurried to get away from us.

I knew from experience that sometimes, when a person wore a sancta, it took away their autonomy and made them act completely different.

“Fortune favors the bold!” I cried and cracked the whip, thinking about how I wanted to capture that gelatinous thing.

I’d acted on pure instinct, without thinking. But now a cooler-headed part of me analyzed the situation: *Isn’t it sort of silly to try to capture a gelatinous lump with a whip? It’ll just slip out.* Okay, fair point.

Notwithstanding my concerns, the sancta whip darted back behind me, where it grabbed a cloth from a nearby street stall and then, as I brought my hand down, stretched out toward the man’s feet. What a very considerate whip.

It dropped the cloth right over the gel thing. Then it curled around the cloth like a snake.

The gel thing fought back, sloshing from side to side inside the cloth. But just like Riviere had promised, once this whip had a hold on something, it didn’t let go. I could almost feel it saying, *See what I can do when I get serious?* Heck, why

couldn't it have gotten serious before?!

Anyway.

"That's amazing, MacMillia! You got it!" Linabelle said from where she had been hiding behind me. If she was safe, that was really all I cared about. She grabbed me in a hug and cried, "Thank you!" A smile blossomed on her face.

And so another case was solved. The police heard the commotion and came rushing into the fountain plaza a few minutes later.



He felt like he was awakening from a very long dream.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the familiar scenery of the city. All just the same as it had always been—so why did it all look completely different to him? It must have been the change within him.

That eerie, *wrong* feeling that had enveloped his body was gone.

The man pressed his hands to his head, as was his habit—it made his "roommate's" voice come through especially clearly.

But now he heard nothing.

The strange feeling that had wrapped around him for so long had left.

"What in the world is going on?" he muttered. He looked around. His memory of recent events was hazy.

He was in the fountain plaza. It was more crowded than usual—and most of the people were humans with black uniforms. It was the police. They seemed to be trying to keep people out of the plaza. There were just a few people there in civilian clothing.

"I'm, uh, not sure how to explain this, but it looks like this sancta was stuck to that guy, and that's what was making him commit those crimes!" a young woman was saying animatedly to one of the officers. She was holding up a bag of some kind. Behind her was a pretty young woman—the one the man had sent the soap bubbles to.

“Ahh,” said the police officer, nodding at them and taking some notes. Occasionally he glanced in the man’s direction, and his eyes were full of pity.

Suddenly there came a voice from beside him. “You all right?” He looked up in surprise to see a young officer gazing down at him. “Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to startle you,” she said.

She must have realized the man didn’t fully grasp what was going on, because she crouched down so she was eye to eye with him, the way you might talk to a child. “Just stay calm. You’re safe now. We’ve heard all about it. You were possessed by a sancta, right? That must have been terrifying.”

But he could relax now, she added, giving him an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

“R-Right... Thank you.” The man nodded and looked at the officer’s fingers. They were pale and slim. He followed them to her hand, then let his gaze move up her arm to her face. She had brightly colored hair and an equally bright expression—in her early twenties, perhaps.

Good material, the man thought.

“Can you tell us your name?” the officer asked.

The man nodded. “Simon... My name is Simon.” Almost as soon as he had said it, though, he panicked a little. “But not—! I mean... I’m not the one who killed those people...”

Even he thought it was an obvious performance.

He remembered everything.

His name was Simon.

Simon the killer.

“Please, don’t get overexcited. We’ve heard the whole story. We understand.” The young officer looked at him, obviously convinced that he was a poor, ordinary soul who had been possessed by a sancta. “The sancta was using your name and living your life, isn’t that right?”

The man nodded.

It wasn't untrue. The sancta had indeed possessed Simon six months before and begun living as a person.

An ordinary person.

As for Simon, he had always been a killer.

Simon had first been possessed by the beauties of sancta in his sensitive teenage years.

Use them the right way, and they could do virtually anything. Whenever Simon found one with an interesting effect, he would buy it and add it to his collection.

At first, he just played little pranks on the townspeople using his sancta. Digging a pit for them to fall into, for example. Or putting a bit of poison in the food. He started to think of these sancta-powered practical jokes as his works, his art. But Simon had always been the fickle type, and soon these games weren't enough for him anymore. He was frustrated that the world at large took so little note of his efforts.

After that, he spent his days buying sancta and daydreaming about how he might use them. Imagining how he could employ them to create the perfect work. In his mind, murder was simply the logical extension of the pranks he had been pulling since his interest in sancta first blossomed. These objects that could make any wish come true accelerated Simon's fantasies.

He had made his first kill six months ago.

"No! It's all wrong!"

He'd tried hanging the body in the cathedral, the very place where sancta were born—a stroke of audacity. But no sooner had he done it than he stood in front of the corpse, shaking his head. It looked nothing like what he had so often imagined. It was just...boring.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

He'd used a sancta. They were supposed to be able to do anything—was this the most they could give him? He was devastated. He glowered at the statue of

Cururunelvia standing in the center of the cathedral. “I used one of *your* little toys to create this piece. I thought it would make me *feel* something—but no! If you can do anything, then do something about this *apathy* I have to live with!”

The statue gave no answer.

If you prayed to the statue, it could grant anything you asked on the spot—but it might choose not to. Not exactly hoping for much, Simon tossed a coin at it and said, “It’s hard work, buying a new sancta every single time. Plus, they’re making it harder and harder to get sancta that can serve as weapons. Give me a sancta that can do anything. One I can use to make my art!”

When the coin landed, most unfortunately, Simon’s terrible wish was granted.

A pale blue light flashed out of Simon’s bag, almost blinding him. When he opened it, he discovered that one of the items he’d used in making his piece just now—some black sealing wax—was glittering.

The light gradually faded, but as it did so, the wax slowly changed color from black to white. Then, although he hadn’t heated it or done anything to it, the wax began to melt, dribbling down toward Simon’s feet.

“Urgh... Urgh...”

It had a voice. A voice that oozed out from the puddle on the ground.

“Ur...Urrrghhh...”

Simon’s ambiguous wish had birthed this thing.

A sancta that could do anything.

It had started as wax, but it could change its color at will. It could melt without being heated and return to shape as well. It could be formed into any weapon one chose.

And it could communicate telepathically. Exactly as Simon had wished, it could literally do anything.

There was just one thing Simon hadn’t counted on: the wax didn’t like its owner. Its first coherent thought, having observed Simon’s MO for so long, was that it had to do something about this man.

“Urrrrrgh... Urrraahhhhhhhh!”

With a terrible cry, the thing that used to be wax spread out flat and thin in front of Simon, like a pair of giant jaws opening.

“Huh?” said Simon.

It happened in an instant: The white jaws swallowed Simon and crashed back to the ground. Ripples passed through the wax like it was chewing, and it began to overlap Simon’s body. It grew so thin that no one would notice it.

And then, moments later, the man had opened his eyes in front of the statue of Cururunelvia.

“Hello? Is anybody here?”

The thing that had once been black wax now ensconced itself on Simon. Capable of doing anything, just as Simon had asked, it now covered him completely. It had stolen the ability to use this body from Simon, and now it turned to the corpse. Simon watched as the thing fled in horror and confusion, and Simon laughed.

Yes... This would cure his boredom.

Simon found a certain kind of fulfillment in the days that followed. Whenever he made a new work, the man was suitably and theatrically distressed. Sure, maybe the world at large hardly seemed to care about his pieces, but he had front row seats to one particular person’s response, and he enjoyed that.

Yes, that made it all worth it. Simon threw himself into his work. First one person, then two—and if he chose people the thing that used to be black wax had been especially close to, the reaction was even better.

Guess that’s all over now, he thought. He was sorry about that, if only a little.

“This way, please,” the young officer said. He turned to find that she had opened a carriage door and was looking at him. “Would you be kind enough to come to the station? We’d like to get your version of events.”

Simon nodded, and then he looked around. He saw his “partner,” with which

he had shared a body for six months, being locked in an iron box. Apparently, they weren't interested in getting a statement from the white lump.

The carriage into which Simon was being ushered was the kind they used for transporting criminals. You could only see out from small windows to the left and right, and it couldn't be opened from inside. A piece of steel separated him from the driver.

It was almost like... Almost like they thought he was a criminal. Simon started to feel anxious.

They could stand to treat a guy a little better...

He was the victim here, after all. Just a poor guy who'd been turned into a puppet by a sancta and forced to kill people.

The carriage door opened again soon after. On the other side of the window, he saw an attractive woman with red hair peering in at him.

"Cough 'em up," she said and stuck her hand out at him.

What was she talking about? He gave her a questioning look.

"You've got lots of sancta on you, right?" she asked. "Hand them over." She gestured insistently with her outstretched palm.

She must have been talking about his work tools. "Do I have to...?" he said, playing the part of the simpering victim to the hilt. "I need those for my work..."

Once again, even he thought it was a laughably obvious performance.

"You're legally required to surrender any sancta before entering the police station. But don't worry. It's only temporary." The red-haired woman gave him a gentle smile, completely taken in by his acting. Simon could have burst out laughing.

"It's the law, is it? Well, all right then." Restraining his hilarity, Simon gave the woman his tools. "I'll get them back after they're done questioning me, right?"

"No," the woman said, snatching the objects from him. "They'll be returned to you after you've been rehabilitated and released from prison."

"...What?"

Rehabilitated? Prison?

Why, those sounded like things you would say about a *criminal*. Simon felt his mind go blank. What was the woman talking about?

The woman, meanwhile, gave him a quizzical expression. “Why so shocked? Didn’t you hear the officer?” She was looking through the items she’d taken from him, and her tone said she couldn’t have cared less if he had heard the officer or not. “You’re going to be taken to police headquarters, where you’ll be gently interrogated and then put in jail. I hate to break it to you, but I’m going to hang onto these sancta. Depending on the charges, there’s a good chance you’ll never walk back out those doors, so I guess they’re pretty much mine.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Riviere, and I help collect sancta for the police. All the sancta you’ve used so far will also be placed under my care.”

Including, she added, that weird white thing in the box.

In that moment, the man was gripped by an uncontrollable rage. “That’s bullshit! I’m no killer! It was the sancta! The sancta did it all! Give me back my tools!” He reached out for the woman named Riviere, fully resolved to strangle her on the spot.

“Now, now. Violence is *not* the answer.” She sounded like she was chiding a child.

Simon felt a sharp pain. He seemed to have been jabbed by, of all things, an umbrella. He tumbled back in the narrow confines of the carriage.

The woman wiped the tip of the umbrella and glared down at him, contempt in her eyes. “You’ve had the run of the city. You could have at least tried to lie convincingly. Did you really think we didn’t know who you are?”

It was at that moment that Simon finally realized his mistake. Everyone at the fountain plaza, all the police officers, had known already that he was Simon of the Black Wax—Simon the killer.

What could he do? There had to be some way out of this.

“N-no, wait! You have to listen to me! Please!” Simon thrust a hand out of one of the small windows, which was still open.

“Of course. They’ll listen to everything you have to say at the interrogation,” Riviere said, and then she closed the window.

There were two quick knocks on the shuttered carriage, the signal to get going. Simon heard the driver crack his whip.

“Bye,” the woman called Riviere said. “I hope you enjoy a nice, boring stay in prison.”

Simon’s last glimpse of the outside world was of a beautiful woman watching him go with complete disinterest, even boredom.



I went back to the shop, still looking over the items I’d confiscated from Simon. The first person I saw was MacMillia, who greeted me with a shamefaced apology. “I’m sorry. I had it all wrong,” she said.



I presumed she meant that she'd assumed the sancta was the real killer. "It was the obvious conclusion for you and your friend to draw," I said, not to comfort her, but simply because it was true.

Simon first came to the attention of myself and the police about a year ago. At the time, he was still only using his sancta to pull nasty pranks on people on the street.

"We've been after him for some time, because eventually people like him go too far," I said. "But then there was the incident six months ago."

Simon's first murder.

The moment it happened, the police stepped up their investigation, but all we knew about Simon was his name and age. Not to mention that from the day of the murder, he began acting almost like a different person, and his targets didn't seem to follow a consistent pattern. We knew something must have happened, but none of us imagined that he'd been possessed by a sentient sancta.

"What's this sancta, anyway? I don't really get this thing," MacMillia said, holding up the steel box. Inside, the white lump she'd captured was sitting quietly.

I hadn't really understood what it was at first, either, but with my long experience as an antiques dealer, I thought I had a sense of what kind of wish had been granted to create it.

"My guess is that someone probably wished it could 'do anything.'"

It was a white lump—an object that didn't seem to *be* anything. This happened a lot when a prayer without a concrete form was made and happened to be granted. Some item the wisher had been carrying had been turned into a thing that was no thing, so that then it could be anything.

"Huh! If it can do anything, does that mean it can talk?" MacMillia asked, pressing an ear to the box.

You didn't have to be that close to hear the sobbing coming from inside—even I could hear it from where I stood.

“Let me see that,” I said, plucking the box out of MacMillia’s hands. I set it down and opened it. The white lump, which had been in a gelatinous form until that moment, retreated to a corner, where it became a small square.

Consider this a non sequitur if you will, but isn’t there some eastern food that they call “tofu”...?

“Hello there,” I said to the tofu—er, I mean, the square thing. It quivered and gave a little “*EEK!*”

“Are you able to talk right now?” I asked, speaking as gently and quietly as I could. The lump shivered up and down in what I took to be a nod. MacMillia and her friend looked on with interest as I said, “Your owner is in police custody now. You’ve been through a lot. Are you okay?”

The lump shook from side to side. *“It was s-scary.”*

I imagined so. Living with a killer for six months and all.

“If I may, what would you like to do next?” I said, and then I gave the white lump a choice. “Do you want to go back to being an ordinary object? Or do you want to continue living as a sancta?”

I had a suspicion I already knew the answer. This white lump had been forcibly stripped of its original form by an impossible wish, turned into something that was nothing.

“I want to go back to n-n-normal! I used to be wax, black wax, and this—this isn’t what I look like! I want to be used the way I was m-meant.”

The lump was so desperate, it could hardly get the words out.

Simon of the Black Wax: We had called the killer that because he always stamped his “work” with a black wax seal. It must have been agonizing for the former wax, which was never meant for such terrible things. And all that on top of the pain of having been turned into some non-thing by an aimless and impossible prayer.

It was being misused both as an object and as a sancta.

“Come over here, then,” I said. I took off my glove and reached out my hand.

The white lump melted down and crawled across the box, then jumped into

my hand. It was the slightest bit cool.

“Thank you v-very much.” The lump shivered.

I nodded. *“It’s my pleasure.”*

When we had shared that most ordinary of conversations, I focused my power. The lump was surrounded by a pale, bluish glow and began to change shape.

It would no longer speak now, nor move. Instead, in my hand there was a perfectly ordinary, inert piece of black wax.



Linabelle invited me to another of her performances a few days later. Unlike the last one, Riviere was with me this time. She spent all her time drinking tea and dealing with antiques, and a jazz band performance was a new experience for her. She looked around and mumble-cheered, “Y-yaay,” trying to do as those around her did. She seemed to be having fun, and hey, this was a side of her I hadn’t really seen before.

She told me that after the dust had settled, Simon had been safely taken to jail; he was now living the convict’s life somewhere on the outskirts of Cururunelvia. I, for one, hoped he would never come out again. His murders sounded especially brutal...

“Imagine, complaining of boredom in a country as overflowing with entertainment as this one is. What more can one criminal want?” Riviere sighed as she watched Linabelle blowing her trumpet on stage.

I couldn’t help remembering what Simon—the killer Simon—had said to her in his thoughts.

“Your music makes my ears bleed.”

“Just stop already.”

“I’ll kill you.”

If those words were to be believed, he obviously didn’t enjoy Linabelle’s music. If he’d been someone who, like Riviere, could cheer along with the rest

of the crowd, maybe none of this would have happened.

It was so sad, not to be able to understand each other. And even sadder that such incomprehension brought people pain.

“Hm...?”

While I was thinking these somewhat challenging thoughts, the song ended and the audience burst into applause—and I saw a small soap bubble go drifting through the air.

I knew at a glance that it was a sancta, because of the way it traveled dead ahead, straight at me.

“Sentiment Soap,” Riviere said. That was what this sancta was called. She was nodding and looking at Linabelle, who held a small container and was smiling at me.

Then, *pop*, the bubble burst against my chest. Warmth flooded my heart—the warmth of all the feelings the bubble’s owner, Linabelle, had for me.

“What does she say?” Riviere asked, giving me a quiet smile.

I wasn’t quite sure how to respond. I looked away from Linabelle, hoping to hide the flush in my cheeks. “Say, uh, Riviere,” I said. “What exactly does Sentiment Soap do?”

“It’s a sancta that communicates things that are difficult or embarrassing to say, directly to one specific person, so that those around you don’t know about it. I’ve heard that lovers used to use it in the old days, in lieu of sending letters to each other.”

“Makes sense...”

In that case, there was only one thing to say to her. I held up my pointer finger and put it to my lips.

“It’s my secret.”

After all, you should always use a sancta the way it was meant.



“Say, um, Miss Antiques Dealer? What’s going to happen to that poor thing now? What are you going to do with it?” asked MacMillia’s friend, Linabelle. It was just after all the trouble was over.

What poor thing? I wondered, looking at her. She was looking down at the black wax.

What exactly did she mean, what was going to happen to it? I wasn’t sure what to say. It wasn’t like I had any special plans for it.

“If it’s all right...maybe I could have it?”

I wasn’t sure what to make of her request. At this point, it was only a lump of black wax.

“And what are *you* going to do with it?” I asked her. Fair was fair, right?

She seemed to already know what her answer was. She looked me right in the eye and said, “Since it was able to return to its original form, I’d like to make sure it gets put to its original use.”

Black wax like this was normally used for sealing letters—and the wax itself had expressed a desire to be used as intended.

No real reason to turn her down, then.

“Be my guest,” I said. In any case, I didn’t expect the wax’s original owner to ever come back to claim it. I handed the lump to Linabelle.

“Thank you very much,” she said. Then she bowed to MacMillia. “I hope I’ll have a chance to thank you again sometime.”

A few days later, a letter arrived at the shop. MacMillia said a similar letter had been sent to her house, so I didn’t have to open it for us to have a good idea what was in it. She said there had been a thank-you note and tickets to a live performance.

The wax seal remained unbroken.

I gazed at the letter and said, “So. Are you happy?”

Of course, there was no answer.

But I thought I knew anyway—yes, it would be very happy. For that black

sealing wax held the letter fast, diligently keeping watch over the sentiments inside.



A Simple Solution for a Sleepless Night

Summer was coming, but not quite here.

"Ahh, I just...I just can't seem to fall asleep these days."

That day, a man in his mid-twenties walked into Riviere Antiques. He gave me an exhausted smile as he explained his situation. He said work kept him busy until late into the night, and then he found he couldn't get to sleep.

I agreed—that's rough. I'd been with enough companies in my time to have run into one or two places like that. When you don't sleep, it makes the next day's work even harder, and then you end up staying even later because you're not getting your work done, which means you sleep even *less*... Plus, the stress of knowing you've got mountains of work makes it hard to sleep even when you do get the chance. It's the most vicious of vicious cycles.

"Wow, believe me, I sympathize. Going without sleep is the *worst*..."

"Uh, why are you crying?"

Oops! I guess I sympathized a little too much.

But I really, genuinely did feel for him—so much so that I couldn't help shedding a few tears—and I resolved to help him in any way I could.

"Okay, you can't sleep. We've got a sancta for that!" I darted through the

store to one of the shelves along the wall and selected a pillow. I moved with the confidence of an employee who knows her store's stock inside and out. Somebody give me a cookie.

I proudly held the pillow out to the man. "Try using this tonight! You'll sleep like a baby!"

"Uh... What's this?" He wanted to know exactly what kind of sancta it was.

Hoo-hoo-hoo! I was more than happy to explain it to him.

"It's called the Sound-Sleep Pillow," I said, looking very pleased with myself. "It does exactly what the name says. As long as you use the pillow, you'll be guaranteed to sleep enough to eradicate your exhaustion every day!"

"Wow! What a great sancta!"

I handed the pillow to our deeply impressed customer. It made a sort of *shhk* sound as he took it. I'd heard that in the east, pillows were sometimes stuffed with the husks of shells from plants. Maybe this sancta's original owner came from that area. Who knows?

"The material inside has kind of a unique texture, but with this thing, you'll fall asleep so fast I doubt you'll even notice."

I spoke from experience. As a matter of fact, I had recently taken to testing out our various wares, the better to explain their benefits to our customers. I'd spent a few nights sleeping with the Sound-Sleep Pillow. You could say it had the Employee Seal of Approval.

"Oh—there is one thing I should mention," I said.

As convenient as sancta could be, they also had to be handled carefully. There was a proviso on *how* we would give the Sound-Sleep Pillow to customers.

"The Sound-Sleep Pillow isn't something we actually sell—instead, we lend it out. When you're finished with it, we ask that you please make sure to return it."

In general, assuming there were no extenuating circumstances, we loaned the pillow out for up to a month at a time. Rental fee to be paid in advance—today, in fact. I informed the man of this and other terms and conditions in an

expository patter.

“Wait, why don’t you sell it?” he asked, confused. It was only natural for him to want to get one he could keep—it *was* an awfully convenient sancta.

“I’ll field that one,” said a voice from the back of the store. It was the owner, Riviere.

The store wasn’t exactly large, and she would’ve heard everything we said. Now she told the customer calmly, “The Sound-Sleep Pillow is merely an emergency measure. A way of shoring up your sleep while you deal with whatever it is that’s preventing you from getting good rest.”

All kinds of things could keep people from sleeping well. In the case of this customer, it was being busy at work. For other people, it might be stress, or a major change in their lives—there was any number of possible reasons. If they let the problem fester while using the Sound-Sleep Pillow to paper over it, it could end up seriously harming their health. Anyway, it was best for people to sleep naturally.

“If you want to rent this pillow, we ask that you make the effort to deal with whatever is going on in your life within the next month,” Riviere said. “Think you can do it?” She gave him an appraising look.

The man looked longingly at the pillow, then said, “It’s only my work that’s keeping me awake. Once things calm down, I guess I won’t need this pillow anymore.” It was obvious enough what he meant by that. “I’d like to rent it, if you’d be so kind.”

He was still willing to rent the pillow even after hearing Riviere’s instructions. His sleep problems seemed to be really serious. As someone who knew all too well the pain of sleeping poorly, I was genuinely thrilled for the guy to know that this pillow might solve his problems.

“That’s really great,” I said.

“Uh, why are you crying?”

Oops!

Anyway, the agreement was made. With a happy little cheer, I put the pillow

in a bag. Then I took the man's ID and made a note of his personal details. *Name: Leo. Age: 25 years. Residence: on the outskirts of town.*

"Starting tomorrow, I think you'll find yourself much more ready for work," I said. He smiled and took the bag with a look of gratitude. I didn't think just touching the Sound-Sleep Pillow was enough for it to have an effect—but who knew? Or maybe it was just the relief of knowing he'd be able to sleep tonight.

He left the shop looking just a little less harried than when he'd come in.



Leo began sleeping with the Sound-Sleep Pillow that very night. Just like the clerk, MacMillia, had told him, the effect was astonishing. He lay down in bed and put his head on the pillow. He heard that *shhk* sound and felt something hard shift beneath the white cover. Then he closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, it was morning. He'd fallen asleep so easily he hadn't even noticed it happening.

"I like this thing!" Leo said.

He woke up feeling lovely, and it made his entire day's work go smoothly. He left the office at the same time he always did, and just like he always did, he headed to the neighborhood bar for the evening.

"...So they gave me this sancta called the Sound-Sleep Pillow, and boy, does it live up to the hype! Best sleep I ever had!"

Leo was sitting at the bar, proudly telling his friends about his experiences of the past day.

He'd just told one little lie.

Namely, he wasn't especially busy at work, and he didn't do any overtime. He wasn't particularly stressed and life was treating him pretty well. There was one simple reason why he wasn't getting enough sleep: He spent every night after work partying with his friends.

"All I had to do was pretend to be some poor, overworked corporate flunky and they practically flung this thing at me!"

He'd seen the red-haired shop owner—if he'd told her the real reason he needed this pillow, she probably wouldn't have let him have it. When he thought of the clerk, so thoroughly taken in by his lie that she was *weeping* in sympathy with him, Leo couldn't help but laugh.

"Thanks to that dumb clerk, I'm gonna get my forty winks every night from now on!"

Staying out so late drinking had a way of making Leo sleepy at work the next day. Every time he started to drift off, his boss would lecture him about his "unprofessional attitude," but now he could stop worrying about all that.

"Lucky guy," said one of his friends.

"Yeah, wish I had a pillow like that."

They'd been his drinking buddies since they were all in school together, staying up until all hours hitting the bars. Leo could hardly even remember when they first started getting together. They'd just needed people to vent to about their obnoxious jobs, and before long they were seeing more and more of each other.

Their conversations always seemed to cover the same topics: "I wish I could score with the women!" "I wanna get rich, quick!" "Wish I could get a better meal than this slop!"

Yeah, Leo's buddies always *wanted* something, and now they wanted his Sound-Sleep Pillow. "Forget it!" Leo said with a laugh and a shake of his head. He was the one who'd paid to rent this thing! He wasn't about to let anyone else get their hands on it.

A gem of a sancta like this? They can pry it out of my cold, dead fingers!

He really, truly meant it.

No matter how wildly Leo debauched himself, the Sound-Sleep Pillow always enabled him to get a pleasant, restorative sleep. All he had to do was lie down, and his exhaustion disappeared. No exhaustion, plenty more energy to play.

Even his job, which he went to mostly out of force of habit, started to seem

bearable when he thought of it as a sort of prelude to the night's festivities. One day not long after Leo had gotten the pillow, his boss even put a hand on his shoulder and said, "You've been doing excellent work lately."

His time with his friends felt more fulfilling, too. He could party as late as he wanted. He literally forgot about the time, savoring the days as they went past.

Still wish I could have a little more fun, though.

Leo started looking for bars that were open into the wee hours. After all, he had the Sound-Sleep Pillow. That was all he needed to get some rest.

At last, wandering around the night-darkened town, Leo found a light. It called to him; he tottered toward it to discover a small bar.

It was quiet, the lights down low, as if to avoid disturbing other people's sleep. There were just a few customers inside.

Leo sat down at the counter, alone. A middle-aged man stood behind the bar. He asked what Leo wanted, and Leo decided on a whim to start with some wine.

The drink showed up in a moment, and Leo slugged it back. An unfussy, moderate flavor that matched the bar's unfussy, moderate atmosphere. Leo was used to places that were a little rowdier, and he couldn't help feeling that there was something missing here.

The feeling didn't last long, because a moment later somebody put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey there, brother. Don't think I've seen you around before."

Leo turned to find a well-built man standing behind him. The man identified himself as an entrepreneur—evidently one who had taken an interest in a young man drinking alone.

"I'm having a drink with a few of my friends. Wanna join us?" he asked, pointing back. Leo looked over; a small group of ostentatiously dressed men and women waved at him.

"Uh... Sure." Leo would have been just as happy to be left alone, but he nodded and followed the man to his table.

That day, he ended up drinking straight through till morning.

He'd never known this world existed. The man and his friends went through bottle after bottle of stuff that cost more than anything Leo had ever drunk before. The man chatted with Leo while the women hung around looking gorgeous. Leo felt alive in a way he had never experienced with his usual friends.

Thanks to the Sound-Sleep Pillow, Leo was still able to wake up in the morning feeling fresh. He sped through a bit of work, spent a few minutes with his friends, and then headed for the bar. Already, the focus of his pleasure for the day had become seeking the stimulation of that new, after-dark world. It marked the beginning of a new routine for him.

One day, sometime after this new life had taken hold, Leo woke up, his head on the Sound-Sleep Pillow as usual, and said, "Huh?"

From the moment he opened his eyes, something felt off. The sunlight seemed brighter than usual. He turned and looked at the clock.

The hands pointed to noon.

"You *were* doing good work recently, but I see you're back to your old ways," Leo's disappointed boss said when he came rushing in to work.

He'd used the Sound-Sleep Pillow like he always did, so why had this happened? The question wouldn't leave him alone, but nonetheless he tried to get down to work. He did overtime that day. He was late to join his friends, and he headed for the bar at the same time he had the night before.

The next day, he woke up after noon again.

The boss sighed to see Leo come in late two days in a row. "What's happened to you? *Something* has, that's for sure."

Leo couldn't exactly tell his boss what he'd been doing. He was using the pillow, so why was he waking up so late?

All he could say was, "I'm sorry, sir. I'll try to do better." He tried his best to look remorseful. In the same way he'd come to think of his job as nothing more than what he did on his way to enjoying the evenings, meeting his friends had

become just a way to kill time before he went to “his” bar.

He wanted to hurry and get to the bar. He decided to try to duck out early, earning frowns from his buddies.

“You’ve been acting funny lately, man,” one of his friends said.

“Yeah, are you even here?”

“Hey, I’m sorry. I’ve got some stuff I’ve gotta do tomorrow, so I want to get to bed nice and early.”

It was a transparent lie.

“Huh. Fine,” one of his friends said.

“Suit yourself, I guess,” the other said. Neither seemed very, well, friendly.

Leo, though, felt nothing but annoyance at them—that late-night bar was his place now. He didn’t know when he’d started to think of it that way, but he had.

“You’re a real interestin’ guy, you know that?” the entrepreneur said. He seemed to have taken a liking to Leo. So much so that he said jokingly, “Whaddaya say? Wanna come work for me?”

The man at the bar was obviously rich. Leo felt his heart start to race. He wanted to press his case with this man, to free himself from the life he was living now. He wanted to cut ties with the boring people around him. He wanted to stop worrying about whether or not he managed to wake up bright and early each morning.

Not sure what else to do, Leo went to an antiques dealer—but not Riviere Antiques, the one he had been to before.

“I just don’t know where to turn... I have so much trouble waking up. It’s been terrible,” he said, putting on his most pained expression. “I have so much to do at work, I really need to get up first thing in the morning, but I’m always just this close to being late!”

That was a lie, of course. But the owner never realized that. They sympathized with Leo’s obvious distress. They offered him an alarm clock.

Leo bought it immediately. The Sound-Sleep Pillow had already demonstrated

to him just how powerful sancta could be. The alarm clock had a very simple function: It would ring at the time you set, and you would be sure to wake up. Simple as that.

“Now, this I like!” Leo said as he woke up the next morning, greeting the sun for the first time in many days.

A few days after he’d started combining the Sound-Sleep Pillow with the alarm clock, though, he began to find himself assailed by irresistible waves of sleepiness in the middle of the day.

“Hey, are you okay?” asked his boss, who was so worried about him that he sent Leo home early. Leo was more than happy to accept his boss’s concern, but on the way home, his only thought was about what sancta he would buy next.

The thoughts swirled in his head. *So even the pillow and the alarm clock together can’t help me, huh? I need to find a sancta that will keep me good and awake until nighttime.*

He had an agreement with the man at the bar—when they met tonight, the entrepreneur would give him an in with some work. Sucking up to the guy had finally earned Leo his chance. He wasn’t going to miss it.

As he was on his way to an antiques dealer, he heard a voice. “Good day, sir. You look troubled. Is something the matter?”

The voice belonged to a woman dressed in an outfit as black as if she were in mourning. She introduced herself as Carredura and informed him that she ran an antiques shop of the same name.

What luck!

Leo filled her in on his situation. Carredura listened patiently, then said, “I see... Yes, that sounds terrible.” She knitted her brow, deeply worried for him—and then she handed him a sancta. “I suggest you use this. It will banish any hint of sleepiness.”

Dark tea leaves.

Leo, well acquainted by now with the power of sancta, bought them

immediately and went home. He brewed a cup of tea, and just as Carredura had promised, all his fatigue vanished. In fact, he felt revitalized, as if there were a limitless well of energy in his body.

“Now this, I like!”

That night, Leo headed to his bar, convinced that everything was going great. That he had nothing to worry about.



The rainy season ended, leaving us with a cool breeze. The air started to dry out, and summer would soon be here.

“Excuse me? Hello?”

As for me, I was on the outskirts of town, map in hand, looking around. I didn’t come here much, so I got lost a few times on the way to my destination, but I finally found the place around noon.

“Mister Leo? Hellooo! I’m here from Riviere Antiques?”

I stood before a room in an apartment complex. There was no name on the door, but if the lease Leo had signed a month ago was still accurate, this should be where he was living.

No matter how many times I knocked or called out, though, there was no answer.

I stopped and thought. It was the middle of the day on a weekend—was he out somewhere? No, wait. I glanced down and spotted a mail slot. It was choked with letters and flyers. Which meant he wasn’t reading his letters or flyers. Which, put *another* way, meant either he hadn’t been home for a long time, or he wasn’t coming out of his room.

Just out of curiosity, I tried the door.

Ka-chak.

“Huh?”

It opened.

That wasn't very safe, if he was in there—and it was even less safe if he wasn't. What was going on? Confused, I pushed the door open a little farther and peeked in. Then I shoved it all the way open and rushed into the room.

“Wh-whoa, whoa, whoa! Speak to me, Leo!”

The room was full of the aroma of dark tea—and Leo was sprawled on the floor in the middle of it. The Sound-Sleep Pillow was on the bed just in front of him, but he hadn't reached it; it was almost like he had been drained of all his strength.

We rushed Leo to a hospital. I sat in the waiting room until Riviere, who had joined me, came out and told me what the doctor had told her: “His life isn't in danger.” She went on, “He seems to have lost consciousness from sheer overexertion. It looks like he collapsed yesterday—we're lucky you went to collect the pillow today. If you hadn't found him, it might very well have cost him his life.”

“Wow. He must have *really* been busy at work.”

“Or maybe not.” Riviere shook her head.

We'd let Leo's boss at his workplace know what had happened to him. The boss told Riviere that Leo hadn't been working particularly hard lately.

“He also said that Leo always left work precisely on time.”

But he'd claimed he needed the Sound-Sleep Pillow because he was working so hard. Apparently, he'd conned us.

“Ugh... Isn't there a sancta that lets you tell when someone is lying?” I groaned.

Riviere, meanwhile, simply sighed and started out of the room, saying she was going to go get the pillow back.

What was going to happen to it after that? “Are you going to disenchant it?” I asked.

Riviere shook her head. “The pillow didn't do anything wrong.” Turning

toward the hospital room where Leo was still sleeping, she said, “The fault always lies with the one using a sancta.”



“Oh... I see...”

Leo woke up the next day, but he had no memory of the past several days. He could only nod and try to fill in the gaps in his recollection as the doctors explained what had happened to him. Overuse of sancta, they said. The pillow, the alarm clock, and then the tea. Continually using them all at once had finally, and suddenly, pushed his body beyond its limits.

When he heard it all spelled out like that, it sounded awfully foolish.

“I retrieved all the sancta from your room, and I have them at my store,” said a red-haired woman standing beside the doctor with her arms crossed. It was the owner of Riviere Antiques, where Leo had gone exactly once, a month before. “The Sound-Sleep Pillow, the alarm clock, and your tea.”

All of them were now at her shop, she said. They would treat the Sound-Sleep Pillow as returned, which it was always supposed to be. She handed Leo some money. It wasn’t up to her, he thought, but he couldn’t muster the energy to object. His brain still felt a little fuzzy.

He looked up at the woman from Riviere Antiques. She looked down at him coldly. “You’re no longer welcome in our store. We can’t have someone like you using our sancta.” She didn’t try to soften the blow or hide her contempt for him. “I’d suggest you stay away from sancta entirely after this. They’re more than the likes of you can handle.”

He would be lucky, she advised him, if he only fell unconscious next time.

The ultramarine eyes glared at Leo. They were full of fury at him for the lies he had told when getting the pillow from them—but the warning was also genuinely meant to keep him safe.

Never use sancta again? Leo thought vacantly. His mind went back to when he had first started using the Sound-Sleep Pillow. The envious looks of his friends. The new people he’d met. The connections he’d made. Everything had

been smooth sailing in his personal life.

And she thinks I'm just gonna give up on the thing that made all that possible?

Like hell.

He just hadn't been using it right. Next time he would figure out how to make it work. He wasn't about to swear off sancta just because he'd screwed up once.

And so Leo told one more lie.

"You're right. I'll stay away from those things from now on."



The Secret Party

“What in the world is going on?!” Riviere asked when I arrived at the shop that day. Her mouth quivered, and she uttered a series of disbelieving pronouncements: “Impossible. Ridiculous. I can’t believe this.”

It was unusual to see Riviere at a loss. So I just tilted my head, gave her my best puzzled look, and said, “What in the world is what?”

In response to this simple question from her loving, kindhearted employee, Riviere’s eyes opened wide, and she announced, “A bunch of the money from the safe is missing!”

Well! That was trouble. “Sounds serious,” I remarked, trying as hard as I could to look surprised.

I must not have been doing a very good job, because Riviere puffed out her cheeks and grumbled, “You don’t sound very worried.”

I averted my eyes. “Yeah, uh, gee, gosh,” I said. My gaze settled on some unfamiliar objects, and although I felt bad changing the subject so abruptly, I asked, “Say, uh, Miss Riviere, what are those?” I pointed to the objects.

Upset though she was, Riviere had obviously been waiting for me to ask. “Hoo hoo, you noticed those, huh?” Now she looked almost happy. “Those are some new sancta.”

“New sancta?”

The neatly ordered row contained a burly suit of armor, an unmistakably expensive necklace, a vase, a pocket watch, and a few other things. I didn't remember any of them having been there before last weekend.

"I did a little shopping over the weekend," Riviere informed me.

"A little shopping," I repeated. I looked at the price tags and felt the color drain from my face at the numbers I saw. *Yow!*

"Some very fine purchases, if I do say so myself," said Riviere.

"And priced to match, I see," I choked out.

"Yes, but that money gets you some *serious* effects!"

"Ahh..."

Who was ever going to buy these things? Millionaires?

"Hrm. I just *can't* understand where all the money in the safe went," Riviere said.

"I think I've got an inkling," I said.

"It's a *mystery*."

"I think the real mystery here is your train of thought."

"Here are the facts: Over the weekend, a chunk of our financial resources vanished, almost like they got up and walked away on their own. This is a case that demands our attention, MacMillia."

"Sounds serious."

"You don't sound very worried."

"Maybe because we've had this conversation already."

"Anyway, we need to turn a profit, and fast!"

Riviere looked like she genuinely meant it—I guess the circumstances had forced her hand. It was of course my duty as her employee to help my boss resolve any crises, but given the nature of this particular disaster, it was hard to muster the motivation. Besides, you couldn't just snap your fingers and make some money.

“Unless a nice, rich job falls right in our lap, I don’t think a fast profit is in the cards,” I said. In an effort to talk Riviere down, I suggested we should just take business at our usual restrained pace.

Right at that moment, though, someone flung the door open with an almighty slam. Who could it be?

“Looks like you’ve got a problem,” the newcomer said. It was Elaina.

“Yay! Elaina,” I said.

“Oh. Elaina,” Riviere said at the same time.

“I heard all about it. You’re hurting for cash,” the witch said, and then she laughed a very discomfiting laugh. The expression on her face said: *Let me tell you about a way to make hella money.*

“Hoo hoo,” she said. “I happen to know a great way for you to make money...”

She said it! She actually said it! But I still couldn’t shake the sense that something smelled fishy about this.

So I said, “Something smells fishy about this.” I was giving her my least convinced look. What else could you do?

“Oh, it’s fine. It’s nothing shady. Well, nothing *illegal*, anyway.”

Bringing up the legality of the activity right off the bat didn’t inspire confidence.

“At least hear me out,” Elaina said, and then, ignoring my continued suspicion, she ushered another woman into the store. The woman was dressed in an outfit that was *très chic* and told us her name was Merriluna.

She worked, she claimed, at one of the ritziest hotels in the land of prayer.



“You see, my manager has been acting funny lately...”

Merriluna said the place she worked was the *crème de la crème* of the country’s hotels, where some of the most elite people in Cururunelvia spent their vacations. It all sort of went over the head of us common folk, but if a

place could sustain itself by claiming to be the top hotel in a country with a pretty anemic tourism industry, there must have been some sort of demand.

“Funny how?” asked Riviere, tilting her head. The kerfuffle earlier seemed to be completely forgotten; she was as serious as could be. Maybe it helped that I’d brewed a cup of her favorite tea for her when she sat down on the sofa.

“Well...” Merriluna said, her expression turning grim. She looked down at her teacup, which she held in both hands. “Actually, a bit back, my manager took up a habit of collecting sancta. But they all seem sort of...strange.”

“Could you elaborate?” Riviere asked.

“Sure. For example, there was this sword from the east—I think they call it a katana? And some kind of armor, and a spear, and an axe. A lot of dangerous stuff like that, but my manager would buy it all up.”

“Most sancta are quite old, and there certainly are collectors who specialize in weapons and armor. I don’t think it’s all that strange.”

“But each of these sancta costs a fortune!”

“How much, exactly?”

Quietly, hesitantly, Merriluna mentioned a number. It was in the millions of lain—and, coincidentally, roughly the same amount Riviere had spent over the weekend.

“I see. Yes, that is rather unusual.” Riviere nodded soberly. I wished she would at least think of what she’d bought last weekend before doing that. Then again, as she’d said herself earlier... “Expensive sancta usually have commensurately awesome powers. Maybe this person simply became interested in collecting rare sancta.”

“But all of those purchases have gone into storage at the hotel!”

The manager had bought all these things at tremendous expense, and they weren’t even being displayed—just stuffed in storage. At the buyer’s workplace, no less.

What in the world for?

“I’m pretty sure this manager is planning something. Something no good!”

From her place beside Merrilluna, Elaina took out a photograph and shoved it toward us. It showed an ornate hotel hallway and a dandyish middle-aged man, wearing the same uniform as Merrilluna, shaking hands with another man.

It looked to me like a photograph of someone having a perfectly ordinary, pleasant time. Or at least it would have, if the man shaking hands with Merrilluna's manager had been a normal-looking person.

"Wow! That *is* sketchy!" I blurted out.

Oops! I know you're not supposed to judge people by their looks. But this guy, dressed in black from head to toe, definitely didn't look like an elite patron of a top hotel.

He was on the tall side, so he looked down at the manager as they shook hands. He was so muscular that his arms bulged even under his black outfit, and his hands were gigantic. From the look of his face, I guessed he was in his mid-thirties. And on his back was a giant sword.

A giant sword!

"What the heck is this?!" I exclaimed. He looked ready to go to war, not kick back in a plush hotel room. Was he actually going into battle? (Incidentally, Merrilluna herself was the photographer behind this picture.)

"I'd thought my manager was acting strange for a while now, but then yesterday I happened across *this* in the hallway," Merrilluna said. She'd snapped the picture on impulse. "That man shaking hands with the manager? I've heard he's a criminal."

A criminal!

Suddenly the scale of this problem seemed a lot bigger, and I felt a lot less sure what to do about it.

Merriluna wasn't paying attention to my misgivings, though. She went on to explain in more detail how she had come to take this picture. She said she'd overheard a conversation between the two men, who were just within earshot.

The man in black had laughed. "So you know how to handle the party in a couple days, right?"

Merriluna's manager had laughed, too. "Sure I do. You just do what you always do. Wring the money out of 'em."

"You got it. Hey, what kinda food will there be at this little shindig?"

"Only the very best."

"Guess I'll get myself a plate before we start the operation."

"Ha-ha-ha! Help yourself. There'll be plenty of people going in and out once the party gets underway. No one will notice you and yours."

"Perfect. That's what I like to hear."

"I'll give the signal about an hour after the party starts. I'll make sure none of the hotel staff go in the storage room after that. You can go down there to get your weapons, then begin the operation."

"All right. Sounds like a plan to me."

"Pleasure working with you."

Then they shook hands.

That conversation was all Merrilluna needed to connect the dots. Since this took place yesterday, "a couple days from now" would be tomorrow—when there would be a party with some of the richest people in Cururunelvia in attendance.

"So your manager is conspiring with the man in black and his compatriots to attack this party full of millionaires?" Riviere said, summarizing. It would certainly explain why he had accumulated a storage room full of weapons. He wanted them on hand for the assault.

Merriluna nodded somberly.

"Hmm..." Riviere, meanwhile, looked disquieted. "I think that's a problem for the police, not for an antiques shop like this one."

So true! I nodded vigorously. "We aren't equipped to fight criminals in open combat," I said.

Well, maybe Riviere could. But me, I was just an ordinary commoner, okay? I didn't want people expecting too much of me...

Riviere and I looked at each other, but Merrilluna looked at both of us and said, “The truth is...that’s not all there is to this story.”

“Oh, no?” Riviere asked, narrowing her eyes. “Perhaps you’d care to explain, then?”

“I didn’t know this myself until just recently, but my hotel... It turns out that some of our guests are rich people with families who use the hotel to meet secretly with other people of the opposite sex...”

“Oh. They’re using your place to cheat?”

“Stop that, MacMillia,” Riviere said immediately. “You’re not supposed to say the quiet part out loud.”

I’d wondered how a hotel got along in a country with minimal tourism. I guess a high-class place like that could be counted on to have good security. Perfect for a secret tryst.

Elaina nodded and said, “It sounds like the manager is conspiring with the man in black to take all these people’s money. If these people were all in compromising situations, they couldn’t even go to the police about it.”

“That’s what happens when everyone involved is human trash.”

“Stop that, MacMillia.”

Merriluna looked like she was no more interested than anyone else in making this uglier than it had to be. Yes, some of the guests at her hotel might have questionable motives, but it was still *her* hotel, and it was still top-class.

“If word of this gets out, the reputation our hotel has built so carefully over all these years will be ruined! I only just started working there, and the whole reason I signed up was because I love the place so much!”

She didn’t want to lose the job she had just gotten—and that was what had brought her to Riviere Antiques.

“Please, please do something! You must have some way to stop what’s going to happen tomorrow!” She bowed to us.

Riviere and I looked at each other again, no hesitation in our eyes. We knew what we had to say. So we nodded, in perfect step.

There was one thing I wondered about, though. All right, so some people used the hotel to commit adultery. “But what exactly is this party tomorrow?” I asked.

Merriluna raised her head and looked at me. “A mixer.”

“And all the participants are human garbage.”

“*Stop* that!”

In any event, we agreed to go to Merrilluna’s fancy hotel the next day.



So it was that Riviere and I arrived at the hotel, posing as guests. For the record, Elaina was watching the shop.

“I’ll be rooting for you!” she’d said with a little wave. “Don’t you worry about a thing. The store’s in good hands with me.” She said this from the sofa, where she was already kicked back. I started to have serious doubts about what she thought it meant to watch the shop for us.

But anyway, Riviere and I arrived at the hotel. Riviere always walked around like she owned the place no matter where she was, but me, I was feeling a little intimidated.

I remembered a moment before we’d gotten here.

“Miss MacMillia, um, I’m afraid... Well, your outfit is a bit... Anyway, I found something more appropriate, if you’d come this way?” Merrilluna had said.

Translation: *You’ve gotta do something about those clothes! You look like the exact opposite of a high roller!*

With much hesitation, Merrilluna offered me a new set of clothes. And not cheap ones.

“Oh my gosh! A tuxedo!” I said.

Did I mention they were men’s clothes?

“It’ll look great on you!” Merrilluna said.

Riviere, who had changed into a red dress, put a hand on my shoulder and

said, “My condolences.”

When I told Merrilluna in the gentlest possible terms that I was a girl, her eyes went wide and she exclaimed, “What? Really?! Gosh, the way you talk had me so convinced you were a young man...” Forget the way I talked; I knew even the way I dressed was enough to invite confusion.

“Let’s roll with it,” Riviere said. “It can’t hurt for us to look like we’ve come as a couple. It’ll help us focus on work.”

Well, fair enough.

“Wouldn’t it have been better to get us some uniforms?” I said. Surely that would have made it easier to sneak into the hotel than pretending to be rich folk out for a good time. Plus, it would have given us free run of the building.

“I don’t think it would have been that easy,” Merrilluna said, hesitant again. “Our hotel only hires people from the richest and most important families...”

That was an even more fatal comment than the last one!

Do I give off poor-person vibes that badly?! Can I have a quick cry before work?

“Oh! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean that as an insult. All I meant was, a lot of the employees know each other, and have for a long time. The community of rich folk is surprisingly insular. New faces would raise suspicions.”

“So you come from money, then?” Riviere said with a *hmm*.

“Er, well... Yes. And it would be such trouble for my parents if word got out that the hotel where their only daughter works was involved in something below-board...”

Ahh. So the manager wasn’t the only one who might not want this story to go public.

“Also...and I’m not quite sure whether I should say this...” Merrilluna stopped short.

“Yees?” Riviere prompted.

“The truth is,” Merrilluna whispered, “I’m, er, in bit of an inappropriate

relationship with the manager in that photo...”

I cocked my head. “An inappropriate relationship?” What did that mean?

“He’s married.”

Long pause.

“Stop that, MacMillia.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

At least that bombshell explained why she’d been so eager to help us sneak into the hotel. Getting through the door went nice and smooth, thanks to a few strings Merrilluna had pulled.

“Take my arm,” Riviere said, and then she grabbed my elbow and we walked into the lobby.

I learned later that some of the “couples” at this party (or dating event or whatever) were actually husbands and wives looking for some new stimulation. I really, really didn’t understand this world, but it let us get inside without being suspected, so, hey, awesome!

“Oh, geez. Look at this place!” I said when we were shown to the vast room on the top floor that served as the party venue. A gorgeous carpet covered the entire floor, while a glance upward revealed a strange pattern on the ceiling and chandeliers hanging there nonchalantly. I was almost overwhelmed. To be blunt, it was so wildly luxurious that if I’d shown up in my normal clothes, I might’ve dropped dead on the spot from sheer being-out-of-place-ness.



I stopped and goggled, but Riviere tugged on my arm and said, “Let’s keep going.” Even as she dragged me away, I kept staring.

The two of us had already agreed on our plan of action once we were inside. We would walk around like any other couple until the party actually started. There were tables here and there around the room, and you were just supposed to stand around and eat, so Riviere and I picked a spot in a corner and stood there with drinks in our hands, trying not to look too interested in anything in particular.

Once everyone was there, there was a toast, and then the party started. The guests began wandering around and mingling, while the hotel staff set about bringing food. Riviere and I would tuck ourselves in among the crowds of people, taking advantage of the opportunity to sneak out of the party and head for the storage room.

It was brilliant in its simplicity.

So at that moment I stood, gazing at a huge, ostentatious room full of people wearing ostentatious clothes and sipping champagne while they talked and laughed.

It seemed like the right time to get out of there to me.

“Miss Riviere, I think we should get going,” I whispered, offering her my arm.

This was the part where she was supposed to take it so we could walk out.

I waited and waited, though, and nobody took my arm. Huh? Riviere?

I turned to where she should have been standing, only to be reminded that this was, after all, a dating event.

“What a beautiful woman! I’ve never known a woman as beautiful as you!”

“Miss Riviere, won’t you come over here and chat with me?”

“Where do you live?”

“Whatever do you do for work? I may not look it, you know, but I run my own business and make fifty million lains a year—”

“Oh, where do you live, miss?”

“Pipe down, you!”

A substantial contingent of the party’s male participants had gathered around Riviere. In spite of the mundane banter, they looked like animals circling their prey.

I guess I forget sometimes because I work with her, but Riviere is pretty enough to get anyone’s attention. I shouldn’t have been surprised that a bunch of men who’d come here hoping for a happy ending would want to talk to her.

But this was bad news! As Riviere’s assigned date, my tuxedo and I quickly moved to rescue her, trying to break into the crowd. It was an employee’s duty to help her boss out of a pinch, after all.

It was as I was pushing through the crowd that I remembered something else: I knew that this woman, Riviere, could be pretty oblivious to what seemed like common sense, that she was fascinated by sancta, and that—to show you how strange she was—the first time I met her, she said good evening to me while holding a cleaver.

In spite of the crowd of fawning men, Riviere looked almost detached. “I own a shop called Riviere Antiques,” she said. “You must know about sancta, right? You can’t live in this country and not be familiar with them. My business is dealing with such objects...”

Ah, Riviere. So dedicated to her work that she was prepared to launch into a lecture about her business on the spot.

“You might be interested to know that last week I made us some major investments. My clerk didn’t like it, but I’ve obtained some new and highly effective sancta...”

She went on and on, the words coming easily to her. The men acted interested—in her, if not in her business chatter—at first, but about the time she got to “Say, would any of you like to buy a vase? It’s not cheap, but it’s a very, very good one,” I saw a few of them make their exit. I didn’t blame them.

That was when I managed to grab Riviere’s hand and extricate her from the group. “We’re on the job here, Miss Riviere,” I said, trying to make sure I looked angry.

“Aww, but I had such a good talk going.”

She was probably the only one who thought that.

Whatever. I guided us into the crowd, trying to look like everything was normal. Perfect: No one suspected a thing.

Or so I thought, until a shady-looking man grabbed my hand.

“Heh-heh-heh.” He grinned at me. He was actually pretty good-looking, but he had the world’s creepiest laugh. Was this guy after Riviere, too?

“I’m escorting this woman outside,” I said, opening my eyes wide at the man with a look that I hoped said *Hands off!*

How very manly I was!

But the man just laughed again—“Heh-heh-heh!”—and didn’t let go of me. “Hey, don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not into that red-haired chick there.”

“Oh, you were talking to me? Please, pardon my misunderstanding—hm?”

I looked at the guy. He was definitely a guy.

Then I looked at my outfit. Which was definitely *guy-ish*.

Uh...huh?

“Hey, no, I’m, uh... I mean, you see!”

“Tryin’ to say you’re a man?”

“Yeah! Yes, thank you.”

“Liar.”

I caught my breath. Had we been found out?

I felt myself break out in a cold sweat, and I gave a panicked “Pyeeek!”

“Heh-heh,” the man said. “You can play dress-up if you want, but those who know, know!”

H-he had found us out!

Who could have seen this coming?!

I turned. “Miss Riviere! Did you hear that? He thinks I’m a girl!”

“I thought you were a girl, too, from the moment I met you.”

“Why are people suddenly competing for me?!”

“Oh, don’t you fret.” Riviere took a step forward so she was standing in front of the guy. “I’m sorry, but I’d like to get a little alone time with my friend here. If you’d be so kind?” Then she linked her arm with mine and started walking. We left the party venue much the same way we had entered it.

Incidentally, I could hear the guy Riviere had brushed off behind us; he looked up at the ceiling and muttered, “Heh! Two girls... That’s hot.” Whatever he meant by that. I just sighed.

“Are *all* rich people complete freakazoids?”

“Stop that, MacMillia.”

Freakazoids or not, we managed to successfully slip out of the room.



The room with the weapons was straight down the hall from the party. It was the door with the AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY sign on it.

Once the party got going, the staff were busy getting the food and wine ready and seeing to the guests’ every need, so there wasn’t another soul out here. That gave us the perfect opportunity to slip unnoticed into the storage room, where we could confiscate the sancta. When the man in black and his friends showed up, we (well, Riviere) would put them under arrest.

Anyway, that was the plan we’d agreed on before coming here.

“You really think this is gonna work?” I asked, nervous now that we were facing the big moment.

“I had a look while we were in the main hall,” replied Riviere, scanning the area. “The man in black from the photo was having a drink. There were a few big brutes around him with the same fashion sense. Probably enjoying the hospitality until their little ‘operation’ starts, just like they planned.”

“Wow, that was some good scouting,” I said. These guys didn’t sound very on-point, though.

“Well, their laxity is our opportunity. We’ll take these sancta and stop their attack before it starts.”

If we stole their weapons, those men would be as good as helpless. Riviere by herself would be more than enough to overpower them.

By this point in our conversation, we had reached the storage room. We pushed the door open—and froze.

“Hrm? Say, you’re not staff. What are you doing here?”

There in the storage room was a hotel employee, a bald guy. Not the manager we’d seen in the photo—probably just someone who’d come in here in the course of his ordinary duties. He was holding something that looked heavy.

I stood, struck dumb by this sudden and completely unanticipated development.

Okay! Pop quiz.

Which of the following things did Riviere do at this moment?

1. Try to reason with the guy. Give him puppy dog eyes and say, “Please don’t tell anyone you saw us here.” This is Cute-n-Friendly Riviere.

2. Try to confuse the guy. Just say, “My friend and I are about to get up to something *very* naughty in here,” and hope Baldy is so surprised he just leaves us alone. Call this Charmingly Frank Riviere.

3. Get physical. Say something dry-cool and witty, like “We can’t have you telling anyone we’re here. Time for you to take a little nap,” and then stab him with a needle that happens to be a sancta whose prayer is to put anyone to sleep with one jab.

“Gagh! B-but why...?”

The correct answer is: all of the above.

The man hit the floor with a *thump*.

“Wow!”

She’d gotten close to him with her patter, then jabbed him with the needle. Just plain criminal activity.

“Heh-heh! A true professional leaves no evidence,” Riviere said proudly as she put the needle away. Apparently the unconscious staff member at her feet didn’t count as “evidence” in her mind.

“I think this just got out of hand,” I said.

“Oh, don’t worry. A jab from my needle should put him to sleep for at least an hour.”

“Not what I meant.”

My problem was that we’d just involved somebody innocent in our activities.

“They won’t miss one little employee, will they?” Riviere asked, gazing into the distance. She was avoiding reality...

“All right, well, we’d better hide this guy,” I said. And then we could go collect those sancta! I began to drag the unconscious body across the floor when—
“Hey, come on!”

—the door to the storage room opened again.

“How long’s it take to get one little...”

Another man entered, dressed in the same uniform as the guy we’d just sent to dreamland. He looked as angry as he sounded; he must be Baldy’s manager.

In fact, he was a dandyish middle-aged guy—Merriluna’s manager, the one we had seen in the photo. He obviously thought Baldy was taking too long to do whatever it was and had come to check on him. Maybe he even thought the poor guy was trying to sneak in some slacking off in the storage room. Or maybe he was just worried about anyone spending too long in here, given that this was where the weapons were stashed.

“Hey!”

What he definitely didn’t expect to see was me stuffing Baldy into a closet full of cleaning supplies.

“Shoot!” I said.

Okay, next question. How did things develop after that?

1. I used my quick wits to come up with a lie and talk our way out of the

situation. “You should’ve seen this guy! I thought he was gonna attack us!” I would put on my best *poor-me* face and try to elicit the manager’s sympathy.

“U-unbelievable! How dare he!” the manager would exclaim in astonishment.

2. I pressed the matter, trying to get Mr. Manager to keep his mouth shut. “Imagine what would happen if people knew a housekeeper had tried to attack guests at your hotel. It wouldn’t be pretty, would it?” I’d say.

“N-no... Not pretty at all,” the manager would agree, shaken.

3. Riviere took this opportunity to stab the guy with the needle. “Yah!” she’d shout, and Mr. Manager would hit the floor like a sack of bricks.

“Phew! That was a close one,” she said.

If you guessed “all of the above”...you’re right.

I started to cry. “No! What are you doing, Miss Riviere?!” I’d almost managed to talk our way out of it!

“Oh... Well, I figured that if one person’s disappearance didn’t make much of a difference, two people wouldn’t make that much *more* difference...”

“You’re thinking like an actual criminal!”

“Well, this is the guy who’s involved with those awful men, isn’t he? Who cares what happens to him?” Riviere said easily.

Okay, so there was some truth to that...

It took me a second, but I was accepting her logic. Then, though, I remembered something Merriluna had told us yesterday about the conversation between the guys in black and this manager.

“I’ll give the signal about an hour after the party starts. I’ll make sure none of the hotel staff go in the storage room after that. You can go down there to get your weapons, then begin the operation.”

Or something like that.

I paused for a long moment.

Let’s go over the important part again.

“I’ll give the signal about an hour after the party starts.”

“I’ll give the signal.”

“I will...”

“...give the signal...”

“...about an hour...”

I looked down at my feet. Down at the man who, thanks to Riviere’s needle, wouldn’t be waking up for an hour.

“Um, Miss Riviere?” I said. “How is he going to give the signal like this?”



We found the weapons, and Riviere confiscated them on the spot. If we could hide out and wait for the men in black to come get the goods, that would have been perfect—but things had taken an unexpected turn.

Riviere and I should have had a nice, easy ambush—but instead we had fallen into something of a trap of our own making. We wouldn’t be able to catch the men in black at this rate.

“Yes, I see.” My own boss, Riviere, looked cool as a cucumber in spite of the crisis. “Well, it’s nothing I didn’t expect. Yes, all part of the plan. This is fine.”

“What, for real?” I said, giving her a look. I thought I detected a hint of flop sweat on her otherwise unworried face.

“Heh-heh! I brought *this* sancta today just in case something like this should happen.” She grinned at me with genuine self-confidence. She gestured at me with the needle in one hand, then she reached into a bag she was carrying and pulled out a small plush toy, an adorable bear about the size of her palm.

“Uh... What’s that?” I asked.

She stuck the needle in the bear’s head while she spoke. “It actually comes as a set with the needle. The needle by itself functions to put your enemies to sleep, but that’s not what it was originally for.”

She buried the needle deep in the bear’s brain, but it didn’t seem to do

anything. I gave her another questioning look. She said, “Maybe you’ll understand if I do this.” Then she took one of the bear’s little paws and pushed it at me like it was punching.

Wordlessly, the manager lying at my feet punched a fist toward the ceiling. Almost like he was imitating the bear.

“Does this mean...?!”

There was really only one thing it *could* mean.

“Hoo-hoo-hoo! Yes! People who have been stabbed by this needle perform exactly the same actions as the bear.”

She told me that this would be true only so long as they were asleep. In other words, we could control the manager for about the next hour.

“Incidentally, the bear does have some drawbacks,” Riviere said.

“Yeah. Somehow I sort of figured.” I looked at the closet. Each time Riviere punched out with the bear’s paw, there was a distinct *bang!* against the closet door. Like someone was punching it from the inside. “Everyone you stabbed with the needle performs the same actions, don’t they?” I said.

Not exactly what you would call ideal.

“The point is, with this bear, we can get this guy back to the party, even if he’s asleep.”

There really wasn’t any way to wake the manager up, so Riviere’s suggestion was that the next best thing would be to control him like a puppet in his sleep. The overall plan, in which Riviere would wait here to ambush the men in black and take them out, hadn’t changed. The one teensy little modification was that instead of the manager leading them to the storage room, it would now be *the manager with me as puppeteer* who would do it.

“All right. I guess we can make that work... Somehow.”

“I’m counting on you!” Riviere said with a little nod. “Any questions before we get going?” She thrust out the bear’s tiny paws. The manager punched the air with both fists. Simultaneously, there was a *bam bam* from the closet.

I said, “Think we could let Baldy out before I get going?”

One, two. One, two.

I walked along, gently moving the bear's legs as I went. The manager sleepwalked his way back toward the party—unsteadily, but he made it.

I must have looked suspicious as hell, but somehow nobody seemed to notice. Once we were through the door and back in the party, nobody talked to the manager.

Maybe we were lucky that today's "mixer" included alcohol. By the time I got back, plenty of people were already three sheets to the wind, and they probably thought the manager was just another drunk.

I looked at the clock. It was almost an hour since the party had started.

"Now I just need to get Mr. Manager to signal the guys in black," I muttered. But what kind of signal should I give? I pondered the question while trying to keep a low profile in one corner.

Signal, signal... Raising his hand would be a pretty good signal, right?

"Yah!" I grunted, lifting the bear's paw into the air. The manager pointed up at the chandeliers...but nothing much else happened.

"Okay, got it," I said. Message received: The signal wasn't as simple as that.

Next I tried waving. The manager swung his hand back and forth in a perfect imitation of what I did with the stuffed toy. After our whole trip from the storage room, I was starting to get pretty good at "piloting" the bear (or, I guess, the manager). I could make him spin in a circle or dance if I wanted. Everyone, look what a great plushie pilot I am!

As I was playing around, trying out different things, a man finally put his hand on the manager's shoulder. It was the other man from the photo—the leader of the guys in black. "Hey, you. We're ready to go here. Should we still wait on the storage room or what? Where's the damn signal?"

Yikes! He'd come over to talk. Time was up, and I guess he was tired of waiting.

I had to get this guy over to Riviere before he started to think anything was wrong. I began to panic, just a little bit. Without much thought about exactly what I was doing, I turned the bear around and started walking the manager back toward the storage room.

“Argh! Who needs a signal now? Just get going!” I groaned. Growing increasingly concerned, and resorting to a bit of force, I slapped the leader on the back, pointed toward the storage room, and tried to shove Leader Guy in that direction.

No dice.

“Hey, what’s goin’ on? Give the signal, or I ain’t movin’!”

Stupid, stubborn—!

Oblivious to me glaring at him from the corner, the man said, “Give the signal, and give it right. What’re you, half-asleep?”

He wasn’t half-asleep. He was *all* asleep.

The two of them had obviously worked out a very specific cue, and all I was doing with my flailing was making the other guy more and more confused.

Just shut up and go with him! I willed Leader Guy from my corner. I was wasting time, standing around playing with my bear and watching these two.

I guess I looked pretty suspicious that way.

Two men stepped in front of me, blocking my view. “Hey, you,” one of them said.

“What’s your deal?” the other asked. “You got business with them two?”

Both of them were taller than me, and also better built. I know you shouldn’t judge people by appearances, but they didn’t strike me as rich folk just here for a good time. I was definitely getting danger vibes off them. Just like I was from the leader of the men in black, who was starting to give Mr. Manager a real funny look.

Crap! I had to make a split-second decision. I hid the stuffed bear behind my back. If they realized I was controlling the sleepwalking manager, everything we’d done would be for nothing. I just knew it.

But even a split second was too long.

“Hey, did you just hide something behind your back?”

“What is it? What’re you hidin’? Show us!”

The men’s gazes grew hard. I could see the moment suspicion became certainty.

“O-oh, no, I... Are you sure it wasn’t your imagination? I’m not really, uh, hiding anything. I mean it.”

Please, please, just take the signal! I begged silently, working the bear behind my back. Unfortunately, reality doesn’t always go the way you want it to.

Leader Guy just grunted, “Huh?” and looked at the manager. Then the two guys in front of me spoke up again.

“I know you’re hiding something!”

“Yeah, we can tell. Fess up!”

They were looking less forgiving by the minute. They shoved their faces up to mine until they were all I could see.

“L-look, you’ve got it all wrong! I’m definitely not hiding anything!” I said, but it was all I could do to look away from them.

“Liar!” one of the men shouted. “You definitely *are* hiding something! Make with the goods!”

Somebody help me!

And believe it or not, somebody did.

“Hold it right there!” said a man, rushing up. A very handsome man!

Wait...who was he?

I cocked my head at the interloper. Did they all know each other?

The men turned, and their faces froze. “Whoa! Y-you’re...the hotel owner!”

Oh. So he was the hotel owner. Of course.

Not that I had ever met him before.

“Hoo-hoo-hoo...”

Oh, wait. Yes I had.

Now that I got a better look at him, I saw that it was the guy who had accosted us on our way to the storage room—the one with the pretty face but the super creepy laugh.

So he was the hotel owner, huh?

“Now, now, boys, do be nice to our guests,” he drawled, as he strode closer to the men. “Yes, she’s obviously hiding something from you. But so what?”

Wait... Was he talking about my gender?

“Everyone’s different, and everyone’s okay. Don’t you agree?”

“I think you’ve got the wrong idea,” one of the men said.

“Yeah, that’s not why we stopped her. She—”

“Shaddup!” *Bam!* The owner gave the guy a merciless slap with his open palm. “I don’t have the self-control to watch a couple of guys try to force an innocent young woman to show them what she’s hiding! What the hell is it to you if she’s hiding it?!”

He *was* talking about my gender, right?

“Sir...”

“This isn’t about her being a girl...”

“I said, pipe down!”

Bam!

(Choked silence from one of the men.)

“Sir, I keep trying to tell you—”

“Not another word!”

Bam!

(Choked silence from both men.)

“Shut up already!”

Bam!

One of the men went down under the hail of brutal blows. The owner turned toward the remaining guy and coolly put a hand on his shoulder. “Doesn’t matter if they’re a boy or a girl. What’s important is to love everyone the same. Don’t you think so?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Good man! Now get the hell outta here,” the owner said, giving him a shove on the back. The two men promptly made themselves scarce. Then the owner turned to me. “Threat eliminated, it looks like,” he said.

“Yeah, it does.” Personally, I thought the biggest threat might still be standing in front of me, but I couldn’t say that. “Hey, uh, thanks for saving me.”

“Hoo-hoo-hoo...”

Yikes!

Behind the chuckling owner’s back, the manager was still dancing around in front of the leader of the men in black. I still hadn’t managed to hit on their signal. Darn.

In the midst of my disappointment, the manager reached out a hand. “If there’s still anything wrong, just say the word. I’ll do whatever I can to help you.” He seemed to be looking for a handshake.

“Er, right.” I thanked him again and took his hand.

Then I had a thought.

The manager and the man in black were shaking hands in that photo Merriluna took.

Could it be?

Slowly, hesitantly, I reached out with the plush bear’s paw.

Leader Guy’s eyes opened, and he caught his breath. “Finally! The signal! Ugh, you had me going for a minute there!”

He happily took the manager’s hand, then looked at his companions—the two men who had been harrying me—and set off toward the storage room.

The rest would be up to Riviere.

“It... It’s over!” I said, putting a hand to my chest in relief. It would take more than a few guys to give Riviere any trouble, I figured; I wasn’t especially worried about her. Instead, I looked around the party. Not a lot was happening to speak of. It was just rich folks mingling and smiling at each other.

A few minutes later, Riviere returned from the storage room. She peeked in through the door, and when she spotted me hanging out nonchalantly in a corner, she gave me a smile, a wink, and a peace sign.

I took that as the signal that everything had gone as planned.



Let me say a few words about what happened after that.

While the party went on, all unawares, Riviere corralled the men in black and left them in police custody. The weapons the manager had been collecting went into Riviere’s storage room at the antiques shop as possible evidence. I think she’s going to disenchant them over time.

As for the manager’s misdeeds, after the party was over, Riviere, Merrilluna, and I got in touch with him. Word is that he ended up at the police station, too, and was given the same sentence as the guys in black. Naturally, he was also fired from the hotel.

Just as Merrilluna had hoped, the incident passed without causing a major commotion, and the hotel carried on the very next day as if nothing had happened.

If anything changed on account of the case, it was that our safe was no longer empty.

“Hoo-hoo... A safe isn’t a real safe until it’s got some money in it, you know what I mean?” said Riviere as she sipped her tea and smiled at the cash resting in the safe, which now contained the compensation Merrilluna had given us for helping her. It wasn’t a small amount, either—she was a rich family’s daughter, all right.

“Don’t go blowing it all again,” I said.

“O-of course not. I know that,” Riviere said, although she wouldn’t quite meet my eyes.

Yes, there was cash in the safe again, but still not as much as there had been before, and I wished Riviere would try to remember how hard it was to get by without any money and not use it all up again!

I gazed out the window of our store, which was once more peaceful. “I have to admit, I could never have predicted any of the stuff that happened,” I said. You could almost feel the melancholy rolling off me.

“Hm?” Riviere asked. “What do you mean?”

I turned back to her. “You’re always so cool and collected, Miss Riviere, but when it comes to sancta, you sort of lose your head. I don’t think I would have expected that.”

Although admittedly, I’d always thought she was a bit of a strange person.

“What? What are you talking about? I’m just like I always am.”

“Oh yeah?” I giggled. If I told her that these little fits were a bit unexpected, too, I was sure she would just puff out her cheeks and pout.



The Right Way to Use a Mirror

Cururunelvia, the land of prayer.

The grand avenue bustled as the weekday sun set upon it. Owners of fruit and vegetable stands stood by their stalls, hawking their fresh-picked wares. Not far down the street from them was a bakery giving off enticing aromas. Not far past that was a park where children played.

The city scenery seemed to change every time you walked by, but it was always idyllic. Maybe this was just an average day for this city.

"Hmm, hmm."

On this peaceful street in this peaceful city there stood a lovely young woman, contemplating a curio shop with a serious look on her face. Her hair was gray, her eyes azure. Her face was adorable, cute, and other words that mean "lovely."

"What do you think, young lady? Anything grab your attention?"

"Yeah..." She nodded and pointed. "That mirror..."

Incidentally, who was it there in that mirror?

Yes, that's right. It was me.

"Ahh, young lady, I see you have an excellent eye! Of all the things in this shop, that's one of the most valuable."

“Is it really?”

“Heh-heh-heh! Now, why would that be?”

Kind of a silly question. The shopkeeper, an older gentleman, was full of them. Pestering a young woman he’d only just met—*bah!* Maybe he was bored. Unfortunately for him, there was no reason I should know what made his mirror so special.

“Is it because it’s a sancta?” I said.

“What? Aww, you already knew?” the old guy asked, crestfallen.

I didn’t *know*, exactly. It was just... “Most of the curio shops in this country, the most important items they have are sancta. So it was the first thing that came to mind. That’s all.”

Riviere, the owner of the antiques shop I worked with, said you could find sancta all over this land. Antiques shops, naturally—they specialized in sancta—but also at curio stores, restaurants, regular people’s houses, and sometimes sitting right on the roadside. In fact, one of the jobs I did for Riviere Antiques was to collect those sancta when and where necessary.

“What does this sancta do, anyway?” I asked.

“Heh-heh! It’s an interesting story...”

By *interesting*, I assumed he meant *long*. I frowned, feeling a touch of fatigue. But at that moment...

“Oh, oh! That’s not pretty, not pretty at all,” said a pitying voice. It came from smack between me and the shopkeeper—in other words, from the mirror. *“If you wish to know my powers, allow me to tell you! I am the Truth-Reflecting Mirror. As my name implies, I tell the truth of whatever is reflected within me!”*

I wasn’t remotely surprised that the mirror was talking. The shopkeeper was surprised that I wasn’t surprised, but me, I had enough experience with talking objects that this wasn’t really anything shocking.

But what did it mean for the mirror to tell the truth of whatever appeared within it?

I tilted my head and asked my question.

Mirror, mirror, give me your answer...

"I call lovely things lovely, and unlovely things unlovely—clear and simple. As a mirror, that is my power."

"What I'm hearing is that you've got no tact."

"Which is how I ended up as the marquee product of a dusty old curio shop."

"Ah."

I glanced at the shopkeeper, who only sighed and said, "That mirror's a bit of a funny one."

To me, it sounded less like a sancta with extraordinary powers and more like a mirror that had gained common sentience. But maybe, I thought, I should give its claim to telling the truth a little test.

"Tell me, mirror, what do you think when you look at me? Do you sense anything?"

I spun around in place and gave the mirror a smile.

The mirror only said, *"I sense you have a bad attitude."*

"Excuse me?"

"I sense you have a black heart. That you're rotten to the core."

"Oh, really?" Aren't those all just ways of saying the same thing?

"That's what your appearance says to me."

"I see, I see."

I picked up the mirror.

"Please, don't, young lady! I can hear it starting to crack!"

Oops. I picked it up a little too hard. My bad.

No sooner had I set it back down than it chirped, *"So, what do you think? Want to buy me, young lady?"* It had some nerve, asking that after what it had just said...

"You're such a cute young woman, I'll even give you a little discount," the shopkeeper said.

"I'm pretty sure the mirror just confirmed I'm *not* cute," I replied, annoyed. But then I started to think. I thought about the job I'd been given by Riviere's shop. In my mind's eye, I recalled a moment not long after I had arrived in this country.

"I want you to take a tour of our land, and collect sancta when it seems appropriate," Riviere had said. She wanted me to see the city, chat with people, check out what was for sale, gather up any sancta I found, and bring them back to Riviere Antiques. And if those sancta looked potentially dangerous, I should do it as quick as possible. If they didn't look dangerous and had no owners, I should only do it if I thought it was necessary. If the sancta was for sale, I should take the price and value into account.

There were some sancta out there that were useful but also potentially dangerous, and Riviere probably wanted to make sure they wouldn't hurt anyone. I, of course, had no reason to refuse, so I agreed.

My thoughts turned to how things would go if I brought her this mirror.

"How lovely!" it would say. *"My dear Riviere, I give you a hundred points out of a hundred!"*

And then:

"Compared to you, Elaina here... Sigh! Well, whatever little beauty she has is even more eclipsed by your presence, Riviere!"

That's how it would go. That much was obvious. I was already starting to get angry.

"Stop, miss! You can hear it's about to crack! Please, don't!" cried the shopkeeper, trying to talk me down. I guess I'd unconsciously grabbed the mirror again. Gosh! Silly me.

Then the old gentleman asked, "So... Do you want it? Or no?"

"I'd better not. I think it's a bit much for me to handle." I shook my head and set the mirror down with a thump.

The shopkeeper's shoulders slumped. He was obviously deeply disappointed. "No? No, of course not..."

He told me that of all the curiosities in his shop, he'd had the mirror the longest—which was another way of saying he couldn't sell it. The dumb thing talked itself out of every potential customer. The shopkeeper didn't know what to do with it anymore. He said he always showed it to his customers as one of his most valuable items, but it always turned out...well, like it did this time.

"Not just that, but customers have started actively avoiding my shop because of this mirror," he said.

"Understandable. Nobody wants to be around a disgusting, twisted thing like that."

"Hey, look over here and say that, ya little..."

Look at the mirror? I thought not. In fact, I pointedly looked the other way.

"I just don't know what to do," the man mumbled.

Even as the words reached my ears, I was thinking about my conversation with Riviere again. She'd asked me to do one other thing for her as well.

"If there's someone who just doesn't know what to do, bring them to my shop, won't you?"

It didn't matter if their problems were related to sancta, or if it was ordinary difficult circumstances. I guess she just wanted to help people.

"If we can do something for them, I'll give you a reward."

"Yippee!"

So it was that she and I forged an agreement, if a somewhat informal one. And now here I was, with someone who needed help right in front of me—and a sancta to boot. My chance at a reward had come at last!

"Sir..." I said. I was about to tell him that if he was really in trouble, I knew a place that might be able to help him. But then I heard a voice whispering in my mind.

"Elaina!" it said. *"Elaina! Are you sure about this?"* The gentle words came from Angel Elaina, dressed in a pure, angelic outfit. She said, *"Stop and think before you reach out to this gentleman. Are you sure it's really the right thing to do?"*

Say what? What a strange thing for an angel to say. I cocked my head. What was she getting at?

“This man, I’m afraid, is presently enraptured by the potential profit that’s right before his eyes. You must not set him on the path to freedom like this!” Angel Elaina urged. *“Take a moment and imagine... Imagine what will happen if you do this...”*

Okay, suppose I take this old guy to Riviere’s place. What would happen at Riviere Antiques then? I pictured Riviere standing in front of me and this guy, and the guy explaining his situation.

She would probably say, “What? Just sell the mirror to us, then.”

And then...

“How lovely! My dear Riviere, I give you a hundred points out of a hundred!”

Ahh. It ends up just the same. Yes, I see now.

That won’t do. That won’t do at all.

“I see you understand,” Angel Elaina said, nodding vigorously. *“You see, you won’t solve the fundamental problem. And I don’t believe that’s what’s best for either of you...”*

All right, then, I said to my angel self. What *should* I do?

At that, she floated up and whispered in my ear: *“Look, anyway... Galumphing all over creation trying to hunt down people who are having a tough time—is it kind of a pain in the neck?”*

Gee, that sounded more like something a *devil* would say.

“Wouldn’t it be so much easier if you could get people with problems to come to you?”

Get them to come to me?

Was that even possible? People with problems weren’t that easy to find. It wasn’t like, you know, an illness or a grievous injury—you couldn’t always see when people were dealing with something.

I must not have looked very convinced.

“What are you talking about, Elaina?” asked Angel Elaina, once again whispering in my ear. *“You have the perfect thing to help you find troubled souls right here...”*

Then Angel Elaina looked toward one particular object.

A mirror, showing a reflection of myself with a very, very sour look on my face.

“Say, sir,” I said. Then I told him that I had a highly profitable proposition for him—if he was interested.



When I walked past the curio shop a week later, there was a line that went out the door. At the front of it was a twentysomething woman, standing in front of the mirror and looking uneasy.



“I see the truth,” the mirror said portentously. *“You’re worried about something, aren’t you?”*

I saw the woman’s reflection jump. The mirror was right.

“I am the mirror that reflects the truth! Nothing is hidden from me! Now, speak!”

“W-well, actually...” the woman began hesitantly, and then the words started to come.

She said she’d been suffering from insomnia, and that she’d purchased a crystal ball at a cost of several million lain that was supposedly a sancta that you could put under your bed to cure sleeplessness. But the thing wasn’t helping at all, and she was starting to wonder if it was even a real sancta.

My, my. Yes, that was quite a problem. I got the distinct feeling that she’d been had.

The shopkeeper spotted me having a little listen to the woman and the mirror. “Hullo, young lady! Thank you! Thanks to you, I’ve got a new source of income!” He was grinning like a schoolboy.

“Oh, don’t thank me,” I said, shaking my head. It wasn’t modesty; I really hadn’t done anything to speak of. I’d simply suggested that he should have the mirror listen to people’s problems. “Even I never imagined it would be so popular,” I said.

Word had spread that there was a very interesting mirror around, and people started coming to see it. Some came to unveil their deepest secrets, yes, but some just had time to kill and came to shoot the breeze. So the shop had customers again and the mirror had a use. A happy ending all around.

And the solution had a benefit for me, too.

“I see...” It was a few weeks later when a new customer came flitting into Riviere Antiques. “You want me to check whether this crystal ball you’re putting under your bed has any effect, is that right?”

The woman sitting across from Riviere on the sofa nodded, looking a little abashed.

Yes, that was her—the woman who'd shared her problem with the mirror at the curio shop. After I'd overheard her concerns, I'd approached her and brought her to Riviere's place.

"All right. I'll be happy to do it right away," Riviere said, standing up. She even offered to contact the police if it turned out to be a swindle.

"Th-thank you so much!" the woman said, and then she and Riviere left the store. Riviere said that MacMillia and I didn't have to come—she was pretty sure this was a con. So MacMillia and I stayed behind at the shop. It would be just the two of us with time to kill until Riviere got back.

"You know, Miss Riviere was saying some pretty nice things about you earlier, Elaina," MacMillia said as she cleaned up the tea she'd put out for their visitor.

Oh really?

"Like what?" I asked.

"She's really happy that you're bringing in new customers." Then MacMillia gave me a puzzled look. "You're really good at finding people who need help, aren't you, Elaina? You've brought in all kinds of folks just since I started working here. Like that girl who was keen on the occult that you brought in the other day." MacMillia's eyes were shining, and she sounded genuinely impressed. How, she wanted to know, did I do it so consistently?

I giggled and answered simply, "Heh-heh! Wouldn't you like to know?!"



CHAPTER 6

An Ideal Story

A woman sat alone on the bench in the plaza, rocking back and forth and humming to herself as the early summer breeze blew sweetly. Her longish brown hair caught the sunlight and glittered each time she moved.

It was beautiful weather, the sun shining in the sky. There could hardly have been a lovelier way to spend a lazy afternoon off. Work, life, and everything must have been going great for this young woman.

“I know! I’ll write in my diary!” she said, clapping her hands. She couldn’t wait to write about how wonderful life was. She just knew that she would look back on these days and love them even more.

She reached for the bag sitting beside her and pulled out a diary with an adorable design on the cover. She’d brought it just the other day.

She’d also adorned the cover with a name: Patra. Her name.

She flipped through the datebook, right from the beginning. She’d only bought it in the middle of the year, so many of the pages were blank. She’d only started recording her wonderful days about two weeks ago.

She kept flipping, until she got to the page with today’s date. An old fountain pen was tucked between the pages as if waiting just for her.

Her fingers caressed the blank page, and then she took up the pen. She’d gotten that recently, too, yet she felt as much affection for it as for a lover of

many years. For it was this fountain pen that had brought her these glorious days.

She looked up as if posing a silent question to the beautiful weather. Only for a few seconds, though. Then she started writing, whispering as she went, almost like a prayer.

May today be just as good as yesterday.



The police force was supposed to help protect the townspeople in Cururunelvia, the land of prayer. They arrested criminals, stopped lawbreakers, and kept a watchful eye on every kind of shady character. The black uniform of the police officers was simple, a sign of those who watched over the city from the shadows.

Henri, with his dark green hair, wore that uniform. He was one of those who bore the burden of ensuring the townspeople's safety.

That afternoon, he was on the main thoroughfare. He hid, literally among the shadows, peeking out at the road. No one going by saw him. He kept his sharp gaze on one woman in particular.

She was young, maybe in her mid-twenties. She had brown hair, longish, and wore a summery dress. She wasn't doing anything in particular, just sitting on a bench and writing something. At first glance, she looked like nothing more sinister than a young woman sitting in the afternoon sun enjoying the idle hours.

Henri, however, had turned his watchful eye on her.

This is a minor digression, but Henri had an exceptional record within the police force; he'd cracked case after case ever since his rookie days. He was one of the elite. His specialty was cases involving sancta. The fact that he even worked well with the force's occasionally prickly advisor, Riviere of Riviere Antiques, was a sign of how good-natured he was.

But the gaze he turned up on this young woman was a baleful one.

Maybe he knew something about her that the average person didn't.

Finally Henri, watching his suspect from the shadows, murmured, “Sh-she’s so pretty...”

Yes, watching his suspect from the shadows...

“I wish I could talk to her. Would it be rude just to walk right up to her? No, I could...”

Ahem.

Let’s revise that.

He was the suspicious one, watching a woman from the shadows.

“What are you doing here?”

As Henri stood there, watching a woman at noon...I came up behind him and jabbed him with my finger.

“Yikes!” he cried. He wheeled on me, a shocked look on his face. “O-oh, it’s you. The new girl at Riviere’s place.”

“MacMillia.”

It wasn’t the first time I’d introduced myself. But, you know, we’d only met a few times, and who remembers someone’s name after just a few meetings, right? *Sigh*... And when I remembered Henri’s name!

“Oh, MacMillia, yes. Of course. So, uh, what are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the very same question.”

This was Riviere Antiques’ regular day off. Or anyway, that’s what Riviere was calling it; what it really meant was she couldn’t bring herself to do her work, so she closed up shop for the day instead. I was wandering around town with nothing much to do.

As I was walking around, I’d just happened to spot a suspicious character watching a young woman from the shadows.

“I’m sorry? Who do you think I am? A member of our city’s proud police force would never stoop to acting like a criminal!”

“I might have said the same thing right up until I saw you, you know, here.” If watching a young woman from the shadows in the middle of the day wasn’t

criminal activity, I didn't know what was. "Oh, how our land's mighty police force has grown rotten," I remarked.

"Please don't look at me like that. The *I'm-looking-at-trash* eyes!"

"You know, I always thought you seemed too mature to resort to stalking."

"I'll have you know I'm rather young yet."

"How young are you, exactly?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Wow! I did think you were older than that." I would have sworn he was in his thirties. "Anyway, you won't mind if I tell Riviere what you were up to, will you, Mr. Twenty-Seven-Year-Old Henri?"

I gave him a friendly wave and started to walk away.

"W-w-wait! No!" He started after me. "Just hear me out!"

His desperation reminded me of a guy who'd been shot down by his romantic interest. He was in such dire straits, in fact, that he grabbed my wrist.

Eek!

"S-stop that! I'll call the police!" I said.

"Um... I'm a police officer, remember."

"Stupid, rotten police force!"

If the police, to whom I otherwise would have turned for help in an emergency, were so corrupt, who could I trust? How could I go on?!

I stood there with a dead look in my eyes. Henri let go of my hand and sighed. "Listen, there's a reason I was watching that woman."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yes!" He nodded, looking very official.

Well, sure. Of course there was, right? A person dedicated to serving his land would never do anything *wrong*, would he?

"Were you watching her because you thought she might commit some sort of crime?" I asked.

“No, not that.”

“Why, then?”

“Because I fell in love with her at first sight!”

“I’m definitely reporting you.”

“No, no, no wait!”

This time he grabbed my shoulder, which is when I remembered that he was exactly the guy I would have gone to in order to report him. How many more times were we going to go through this?

“There’s a very, very deep reason here,” Henri said—although then he told me he wasn’t eager to say it. He sighed again and leaned against a wall. Then he turned his gaze toward the young woman, who was still sitting by herself on the bench in the plaza, looking like she was having the time of her life as she scribbled in what appeared to be a notebook. I almost thought I could hear her humming from where I stood, this nameless woman full of joy.

“Her name is Patra,” Henri said.

I guess I knew her name now.

Yikes!

“No, no, no wait! It’s not... I didn’t learn her name by stalking her!” Henri said as I moved to run away again.

He told me the story, albeit grudgingly, and it turned out that he and Patra already knew each other. They’d first met about a week ago. He had stopped by a bookstore on his way home to pick up a book he wanted. He walked through the packed shelves, scanning for the title he was looking for.

“Ah! There it is.”

It was easy enough to find the book, and there was one copy left on the shelf. What luck! He smiled and reached for it. But just as his fingers brushed the spine...

“What...?”

He heard a clear, distinct, and beautiful voice. There was another hand

reaching for the book that Henri wanted. He followed the slim, pale fingers with his eyes until he found himself looking at a lovely young woman with brown hair standing beside him.

She was looking at him, too.

That was how Henri and Patra first met.

“Geez. That sounds like something out of a romance novel from at least a generation ago. Does stuff like that actually happen?” I asked. Should have expected it from a guy who reads so much—that was my basic opinion.

“Yeah, well,” said Henri, scratching his cheek with embarrassment. He actually sort of seemed to agree with me. “If only things went as well in real life as they do in stories. I let her have the book and went home. I didn’t even know her name then. She was just a stranger who’d happened to want the same book as me.”

It was two days later that they’d seen each other again. Henri was walking the city streets, patrolling as usual, when he heard:

“Eeeek!”

As a professional matter, Henri was more sensitive than the average person to screams, shouts, and cries. When he heard one right nearby, he whipped around to look.

Apples and oranges littered the street, while a woman with a paper bag scrambled to collect them. It was obvious at a glance what had happened. She’d clearly tripped and scattered her groceries.

Another cliché romance novel plot development.

Henri didn’t have time to think about that, though; he had already jumped into action and started helping the woman pick up the fruit.

“I’m so sorry. Thank you very much,” the woman said. It was then that Henri realized she was the same young woman he’d met in the bookstore. She must’ve noticed, too, because she said, “Oh!” and her face lit up. “Would you happen to be...?”

What a coincidence that they should bump into each other in town not once,

but twice. Given their previous acquaintance with each other (even if it was just a couple days before), they spent a few minutes chatting. Her name was Patra. She worked at a company nearby and loved books.

Henri told her a bit about himself as well: He was a police officer and loved books.

The conversation blossomed in a way you would never have expected from two people who had only met a couple of times. They went from one subject to the next like old friends reunited after a long time apart.

“But that day, I was called away on urgent police business. I couldn’t even find out how to contact her before I had to leave,” Henri told me.

“Hoh...”

Okay. Yeah. I was starting to get the story.

“I’d love to see her again and talk some more if I could. I keep thinking about it, but you know how it is. When you start to want something, suddenly it won’t come to you. I haven’t run into her again since that day.”

“*Until now,*” he added softly, looking down the street. Patra was still sitting on her bench, writing.

“I was just on patrol when I saw her there,” he said with another sigh. “But I just... She’s right there, but I don’t know what to say to her!”

“Which is why you were skulking around like a criminal.”

“Er... Yeah, I guess. Pretty much.”

“I think I get it,” I said, nodding. “You’re hoping that a reunion leads to you leaving a good impression on her, leads to you getting to go out with her... Does that sound right?”

“W-well... I guess, if you want to put it bluntly... Yes? I’m a little embarrassed to put it like that, though.”

“Yeah, I definitely get it,” I said, nodding harder. Oh, boy, did I ever get it! “It looks like it’s my time to shine.”

“What?”

I ignored the *what-are-you-talking-about* look Henri gave me and clapped him on the shoulder. “Just leave it to me, Henri. Once I get to work, I’ll twist this plot so that you and Patra are dating in no time!”

“Why, uh, exactly are you so interested in this all of a sudden?”

“Don’t sweat the details, my friend,” I said, giving him what I hoped was a very confident look. “Incidentally, you might be interested to know that I was once the editor of a women’s magazine.”

“Uh...huh.” He looked at me, clearly wondering what relevance that had.

I whispered to him, “We did this survey, you see. About exactly what kinds of events and plot twists young ladies are into these days...”

“What? Really?!”

“Heh-heh-heh! Do you see what I’m saying?”

With me stage-managing everything, he and Patra would bump into each other again like *that*!

So it was that I declared with confidence, “Henri, henceforth you may address me as Mentor.”

If he did, I told him, I promised to bring him and Patra together.



Right. First things first. Before I could reunite Henri and Patra, we had to devise a strategy.

“Girls these days go wild for twists that make their heart flutter,” I declared.

“Flutter?” Henri repeated, looking a bit like he was eating something that didn’t quite taste good no matter how long he chewed it. He didn’t seem to be on board. “Uh, MacMillia, may I ask you something?”

“N-O! No! Call me Mentor! And you will speak to me politely!”

Hadn’t I told him?!

“Er... Right. Then, uh, Mentor...” He glanced down, not thrilled. “Is what we’re doing here... Will this somehow make her heart flutter? I mean, respectfully?”

He was looking at the object in his hands, which I had rushed off to buy: a bouquet of flowers.

“Of course it will! A bouquet of flowers is the very *essence* of making a woman’s heart leap!”

“Hm...”

“All right. I will now present you with everything you should do next, starting from the simplest point.” I slapped him on the back and urged him to listen closely.

Then I launched into my lecture.

First, the absolutely essential ingredient to getting their first conversation in several days going smoothly was a topic. But no ordinary topic would do! What would happen if Henri stuck to normal chitchat? Clearly, it would go like this:

“Heh-heh... Hey, b-been awhile, huh? I guess... I mean, maybe you don’t remember me...”

“Huh? Ugh!”

Yes, that was the plot development that awaited him in that scenario. Without question. And that would never do.

So what *would*? The answer was simplicity itself!

He would say:

“Do you like flowers?”

And then, *shwip*! Suave as anything, he would present her with his bouquet. Patra would gaze at him, and she would see Henri looking debonair and handsome.

With that, it was fair to say the victory would be as good as his!

“Oh, what a gentleman you are!” Patra would exclaim. No question about it.

“You just give her these flowers, and her heart is yours. I guarantee it!”

“Are you sure about that?” Henri asked, not as convinced as I was.

“Sure I’m sure, Henri! Just do exactly what I say, and Patra’s heart will flutter right off into the sky! Now, let’s practice!”

“I don’t know about this...”

The real key to something like this was enthusiasm. So I turned on Impassioned Teacher mode and started instructing Henri on the spot. “All right! Pretend I’m Patra and go for it!”

“L-like this?” he asked, shuffling forward and kneeling down before presenting me with the bouquet. Precisely as scripted.

“Excellent! Now you ask me: ‘Do you like flowers?’ Try it!”

“Ahem, um, MacMi—I mean, Mentor... Is that line really going to send her heart racing?”

“Believe me, it will. I guarantee it. How do I know? Because I’m a love expert!”

“I kind of can’t help feeling like you’re just a gawker who wants to stick her nose into someone else’s love life...”

“I told you not to sweat the details!”

What, you think I was just intrigued because this seemed like it could get interesting? Not at all. Not even a bit. Seriously, not me.

“Enough questions. Except for the one I told you to ask! Ask me the question! *Do you like flowers?* Okay, your turn!”

“D...do you like flowers...?”

“Hrm! Nope! That will never do. My heart isn’t fluttering! That was a no-flutter moment!”

“‘No-flutter’...?”

“Make it sound like you’re really *asking* me!”

“Do you like flowers...?”

“That’s an improvement! One more step!”

“Do you like flowers?”

“Good, that was good! Got a nice flutter there!”

“I don’t think I understand women these days,” Henri sighed, looking into the distance. But I knelt down in front of him, slapped him on the shoulder, and assured him that he’d done it right just now.

“If you can do it just like that when you ask Patra, I’m sure her heart will leap!”

“You... You really think so?” He looked at me, not quite believing. But it would be fine! I gave him a push, gently but firmly chasing him out onto the street.

From there, his gaze settled on Patra. He instinctively straightened up and hid the flowers behind his back.

Patra must have just finished her writing, because she stood up from her bench and gave a quick stretch.

“Henri! You’re out of time!” I said urgently from the shadows.

“And whose fault is that?” he muttered, but he started slowly toward Patra just the same, step by step, as if making sure the street wouldn’t give way underneath him.

He didn’t have far to go to reach Patra, but he was creeping along. I could see the anxiety radiating off him with every step.

At last he was standing in front of her.

He knelt down and produced the flowers from behind his back.

“Do you like flowers?” he asked, exactly the way we had practiced. The lovely bouquet bobbed between them, and beyond it, a young woman who remained stunningly beautiful no matter how many times he saw her.



Her mouth hung open for a long, silent moment, and then...

“Hee... Hee! Hee-hee-hee!” She hid her mouth like a demure young lady and her shoulders began to shake. It was clear she was trying not to laugh too hard, but she couldn’t hold it back for long. “Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The laughter burst out of her, the young woman who had seemed so reserved and refined giving great belly laughs of unbridled hilarity. Well, this was unexpected. Henri was shocked but continued to look up at her.

“I’m... I’m sorry,” she managed. “I didn’t mean to laugh...” It must have been really funny to her, though, because tears were forming at the corners of her eyes. She wiped them away with a pale finger, then looked at Henri. “It’s just... I saw you over there, practicing your heart out!”

Henri turned beet red and shot me a withering look.

Eep. Scary!

I looked away, trying and failing to whistle innocently.

Still, I thought it had gone pretty well. Because while Henri was busy glaring at me, I’d caught a glimpse of Patra’s face—and her expression was unmistakably that of a young woman in love.



After that day with the flowers, the two of them grew closer. Since they had been reunited, as it were, Henri invited Patra to a coffee shop, where they talked about their favorite books. They’d had an inkling ever since the day they’d met, but now they knew—their interests went very well together. The hours seemed to melt away as they named their favorite authors and waxed poetic about their work.

When it came time to say good-bye, Henri looked shyly at Patra and handed her a sheet of paper. “Ahem, here’s... Er, I mean, this is... It’s my address. If you want it...”

Patra found it charming that Henri, who hadn’t hesitated to present her with a bouquet of flowers, was so tongue-tied trying to give her a simple piece of

paper.

“Thank you very much,” she said, and took the paper respectfully, with both hands, adding that she’d be sure to write to him. Then she smiled.

After that, they each began to check their mail every single day, talking every evening without ever having to speak. They talked about work, about their hobbies, about what they would do on their days off. There was an invitation to see each other next weekend, if they were free. The days passed like something out of a romance novel.

Come the weekend, Patra spent longer than usual in front of the mirror before she went out.

They would meet at the bench where Henri had given her the flowers. It had quickly become a touchstone for the two of them. Patra got there a full thirty minutes before the agreed-upon time and sat down to wait, trying to look nonchalant.

Then she heard someone say, “Hey, miss. You by yourself?”

She looked up to find a loose-looking man she didn’t recognize standing in front of her. Patra, who had gone out of her way to look extra beautiful today, was bound to stand out—and here was another standard turn in any romance story.

The man grinned and said that if she was free, maybe she’d like to come hang out with him for a while. Before she knew what was happening, he had taken her hand and pulled her to her feet. Patra looked around for help, but nobody came to her aid. Maybe the two of them just looked like they were holding hands.

That day, for the first time, Patra learned why the heroines of those romance novels don’t just run away the moment these things happen.

“C’mon, what’s the problem?”

With the unknown man badgering her, Patra was simply too scared to run. Her mind went blank.

“N-no, stop, p-please!” she squeaked, looking at the ground. It was the most

she could manage. In her heart, she cried out for someone to help her.

Her prayer was answered by a familiar voice that said, “Hold it right there.” She looked up to discover Henri standing behind her assailant.

“Huh?” the man said, turning. “Whadda *you* want?”

As he turned, he let go of Patra’s hand—and then his face contorted in agony. Patra couldn’t see it, but Henri had twisted the man’s arm behind his back. Now he walked him back a few steps, dragging him away from Patra.

“I’m with the police,” Henri said. “I would be within my rights to arrest you for harassing this young woman. I could drag you right down to the station.”

As it happened, he had no intention of doing either of those things, but at the word *police*, the blood drained from the man’s face.

“I’ll let you go this time, *if* you agree to get out of here immediately. Your choice.” Henri fixed the man with a piercing glare, then gave him an extra twist of his arm to get him to hurry up and answer.

The man nodded vigorously, obviously convinced.

“Good choice. You’re free to go.” Henri let go of the man’s arm, pushing him away.

The man took a few unsteady steps, then spared one look back at Patra. “Huh! Waitin’ for your boyfriend, were ya?” he spat, then hurried out of there.

Boyfriend? Henri? No... Right?

Patra looked back to Henri as if to ask what they were to each other, but he didn’t seem to have heard the man. He smiled gently at her but looked puzzled at her gaze. “Sorry I’m a little late,” he said. “Did you wait long?”

Their watches showed it was still twenty minutes until the promised meeting time.

Patra hardly ever laughed aloud most of the time—which was part of why she started to feel like some new self had inhabited her days since she had met Henri.

“Do you like flowers?”

Henri would present Patra with little bouquets from time to time—on the weekends, on her way home from work. Bouquets of bright blue roses. He always had the gentlest of smiles—but at these times when he reenacted the moment that had brought them together, he would go out of his way to look very serious. It was so boyish and sweet that Patra couldn’t help but laugh again.

“You’re silly,” she said, smiling, and then Henri would belatedly give a shy grin.

The rose petals drifted down between them, aromatic and lovely. It was a sancta, a rose whose petals dropped away in the sunlight. Henri had gotten it from an antiques shop specifically in order to meet Patra.

“You know, I’m told the flowers revive at night,” Henri said, delicately wrapping the petal-less roses in their packaging.

“Why would you go out of your way to buy a sancta like that?” Patra asked.

“Oh, you know...” Henri said, although he couldn’t quite meet her gaze. “I was just thinking... If it made you laugh, that would be worth it.”

That was why? That was what had moved him to buy the roses?

So Patra laughed. “You’re silly.”

In the days since she had met Henri, Patra felt like she had laughed enough to make up for all the laughter she’d missed in the rest of her life. Her days overflowed with happiness.

They were boyfriend and girlfriend in no time at all.

When Patra got home, she flipped through her diary, which was full of blank spaces.

She’d had many more things to write down since meeting Henri. On this day, they were going to have dinner at a restaurant that was on her way home. On this day, they would wander around Cururunelvia’s city in the evening together.

On this day, they were going to see a play based on a book they both liked.

Simple days full of simple pleasures.

“I think I’ll write in my diary,” Patra said, taking up her pen with a smile. She didn’t have to pray to know that tomorrow would be just as wonderful as today.



“I think I did a pretty good thing there, if I do say so myself.”

It was around sundown, and I was at Riviere Antiques, a cup of tea in one hand and a magazine open in the other, as relaxed as if I were in my own house. I was thinking back on the good deed I’d done a little while ago, drunk on my own altruism.

“And what are you grinning about?” Riviere asked, cocking an eyebrow at me from across her desk and adding that I was creeping her out.

I was feeling too good to be put off. I only chuckled and held up the magazine. “Oh, nothing. I was just remembering how I helped someone out the other day.”

This time giving me an expression of genuine puzzlement, Riviere looked at the magazine. I had opened to a page with an article headlined *The Latest Way to Get a Girl’s Heart Fluttering!*

Riviere looked even more puzzled, which was when I remembered that I hadn’t told her what had happened with Henri and Patra. “Wait till you hear this,” I said. Then I warned her that it was just between us, and told Riviere the story—in a whisper, even though there was no one else around to hear.

“See, I bumped into Henri in town a while back. Then I might or might not have helped him win a girl’s heart. I guess he’s gotten into the dating game, you know? I think I might have helped a beautiful love affair blossom.”

And so on and so forth.

Riviere, confronted with this top-secret information, had a very simple reaction:

“Huh.”

Disinterest much?!

I thought she would be surprised! But I was the one who was caught off guard by her response.

“Is that it? Don’t you have anything else to say?” I asked.

“Well it’s not that shocking, is it?” Riviere replied, sounding like she meant what she said. “When he came in and bought that bouquet sancta a little while ago, he said it was for a girl.”

“What? That’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

“You weren’t there.”

“Well, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because he insisted I not tell anyone.”

“You and your tight lips!”

“Tighter than yours.” Riviere giggled. “It just means he’s got someone on his mind. What’s wrong with that? I’ve known him since his rookie days, so I couldn’t be happier for him.”

“Aren’t you curious what kind of girl he’s with?”

“Hm? Not especially.”

“Maybe just a little?”

“Not especially.”

“I’ve only seen her from a distance, but she’s super cute, and she and Henri make a great couple.”

“Huh.”

“Curious yet?”

“Not especially.”

What, really?! We were talking about an old friend’s new girlfriend! If I were in Riviere’s shoes, I would be dying to know about her.

“It’s his choice who he wants to go out with. If they’re getting along, then that’s wonderful.” Riviere made it sound so...obvious.

Meanwhile, I was looking out the window. It wasn’t that I was ignoring my employer—by no means. It was just that something more interesting than what she was saying happened to be passing by the shop at that exact moment.

“Oh, it’s Henri!” I said. I wasn’t sure if he was on his way home from work, or if he’d taken another day off, but it looked like he was on his way to something that made his heart dance. He wasn’t in uniform, but he was definitely dressed up. He’d combed his hair more carefully than he did for work, and there was a pleasant look on his face.

Why, he looked like a man on his way to a date.

No sooner was Henri out of sight than I heard a rustling behind me. I turned to find Riviere holding her umbrella and bag.

Well, now.

“Are you going out?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. I need to do some shopping.”

“Um, it’s going to be dark soon.”

“Yes, but I just remembered.”

“If you really need to do some shopping, then let me go. As part of the staff, it’s only right.”

“No, no, that won’t be necessary.”

“Yes, yes, it will.” I paused, then said, “Are you *sure* you’re not curious?”

“Not...*especially*.” Riviere refused to meet my eyes. I couldn’t help thinking what a poor liar she was.



Henri arrived, alone, at a corner restaurant downtown. He was seated on the terrace, where he perused the menu and savored the smells that wafted from the kitchen on the fresh early-summer breeze. This restaurant was famous for

its steak.

“You’d think he’d pick somewhere a little classier for a date,” I said from where we watched from the shadows some distance away. Knowing Henri, he must have some pretty fair savings put away—surely he could afford to lavish a little more money on his girlfriend?

“I think it’s a plan on his part,” Riviere said knowingly from beside me. Beside me in the shadows, let it be said. “He’s deliberately chosen a place that’s not too fancy so that this girl can relax.”

“Oh, I get it! What a smooth operator.”

“Or maybe he wants to find out what she values.”

“How do you mean?”

“He wants to see if she only values dates at expensive restaurants. By choosing this place, he can find out if her values match up with his.”

“Oh! Who knew he was thinking so far ahead when he picked this place?”

“I’d expect no less from a member of the police force.”

“I’m not sure, though. I don’t feel like a guy who had that sort of appraising approach to women would be able to get many girlfriends.”

“Well, maybe that explains why Henri has never had one before.”

“Speaking of which, Miss Riviere, have you ever dated anyone?”

Long, sad silence from her.

Long, sad silence from me.

It was just then that we heard Henri say to himself, “So this is that restaurant Patra recommended...”

Another pause.

“Miss Riviere, I’m starting to think Henri didn’t choose this restaurant.”

“Well, you can’t expect *me* to know everything about Henri’s love life.”

“You’re pouting.”

Nonetheless, it made me think that things between Henri and his girlfriend,

Patra, were going better than I'd even known. One look at his face was enough to tell you how attached he was to this young woman.

"I wish we could get a better look," I said. Even I hadn't seen Patra up close yet.

"Live with it," Riviere replied. "If we get too close, they'll notice us."

The two of us, huddling together and muttering about the guy we were watching, were the very picture of shady characters. We could hardly have complained if someone had, well, called the police on us. In other words, we couldn't let anyone see us.

"You know, don't we have a sancta at the shop that makes you invisible?" I said.

"Why would you think of that now?"

"Oh, no reason."

"Well, I just disenchanting it this morning. It's just a normal blanket now."

"Really? Oh."

"Even if we still had it, that would be a violation of privacy."

"This is already a violation of privacy..."

Riviere regularly disenchanting objects in the shop's storage room—meaning she removed the prayer that made them sancta and returned them to being ordinary, everyday objects. She must have decided that was better than the risk that things like that blanket might fall into the wrong hands.

"Oh!"

Still, it felt like a waste somehow.

While we were talking, Henri's date arrived. There was the brown, longish hair. Patra, looking as lovely as ever. If only we'd had that blanket, we could have turned invisible and gotten a proper look at her.

"Oh, Patra! I'm so glad you're here," Henri said, smiling at her. She smiled back at him. They were the picture of two young people in love. You could *feel* it between them. The pleasant look on Patra's face never shifted as she

brandished the knife in her hand and stabbed Henri.



It was about a month ago now. A young woman stopped by a boutique somewhere along the street. She glanced in the display window, her long, brown hair rippling as she turned her head.

Several mannequins stood there, dressed in fresh, early-summer looks. It was almost overwhelming. She looked up at the faceless dolls and sighed.

Patra.

That was her name.

When she saw herself reflected in the window glass, what she saw was a young woman so despondent that she looked like she might disappear at any moment. Thick, dark-rimmed glasses; a dowdy blouse; a long skirt. A comfortingly familiar outfit—but “stylish” was the last thing it could be called. Yet she didn’t have the courage to dress like those mannequins.

Instead she stood there, envious of what she couldn’t have—the same way she felt every time she looked in that window when the seasons changed. If she could just bring herself not to look, maybe she wouldn’t have to feel this way, but it had almost unconsciously become a habit, and now each turn of the seasons brought her fresh gloom.

Patra’s days had been shrouded in darkness for a long time now.

She was in her sixth year as a secretary at her company. It was the same work every day. When she’d first joined the company, she’d been regarded as a diligent worker, but somewhere along the line people had started to regard her as boring, even if they didn’t say so to her face. Still she came in every day and did her job.

She lived alone. She had few friends. Her daily life furnished her with few subjects to chat about anyway. No hobbies to speak of. She felt herself to be uninteresting. Yet she didn’t have the energy to want to try something new. It was just the same day over and over again, walking the same streets, going to work, then coming back to her house where there was no one else. Over and

over. Day after day in a gloomy haze.

She was alive, but that was all.

Breathing, but that was all.

Until one day...

“Wha?”

She was confused.

She was on her way to work, just like always. In front of the boutique window, just like always. But the Patra she saw reflected there had tears in her eyes.

Why was she crying? She didn't know. She wiped the tears from her cheeks, but more replaced them. Finally she found she couldn't even stand up; she collapsed to the ground and sobbed.

Only then, at last, did she realize that she had been keeping a lid on her own feelings. Only then did she discover how much she resented her empty days.

She saw that she'd been hoping somebody would come to her rescue. She sat there on the street, lost, wiping away tears of grief that threatened never to end.

Only one person reached out to her as she wept.

“Are you all right?” they asked.

“Wha...?”

Patra felt a gentle hand on her shoulder.

It was a lovely young woman dressed in a black outfit, as if she were in mourning. Her eyes were as dark as her clothes, like the lightless depths of the sea.

She said her name was Carredura.

“My, my. That sounds terrible,” said Carredura, sitting across the table from Patra. She'd taken Patra to a nearby café and was patiently listening to her relate her sorrows. “I know your pain. I know it all too well.” Somehow, those

were the words Patra had been waiting to hear. “How cruel those people around you are. You’re exhausted, and yet they don’t spare you a thought.”

Carredura took Patra’s hand and assured her that she was doing well just to carry on. She was working so much harder than everyone else around her.

It was the strangest feeling. Patra had never opened up to anyone like this before. She felt like she could talk to Carredura about anything, even though they had only just met.

She talked about how pointless her days felt. How her life held no color or interest. How she detested everyone around her. She told Carredura everything, surprising even herself—and to each of her complaints, Carredura only nodded sympathetically.

Finally she said, “If it’s simply too much for you to bear, perhaps you’d let me help you?” Seeing that Patra was puzzled by her offer, Carredura handed her a business card. “I happen to run a little shop.”

The card was, well, minimalist—it bore only the name of the establishment, printed on black stock.

“Antiques...Carredura?” Patra read the card aloud, but she was no less confused.

“Yes, and per the name, I am the owner, Carredura.” The woman smiled as she spoke. Antiques Carredura maintained no regular storefront; instead the owner herself went around town, looking for people who appeared to be in trouble and offering them sancta, she explained. And now Patra was one of her potential customers.

At no point did Carredura seem unpleasant or dangerous. Why should she? She’d given Patra what she had wanted and needed.

“I think this would be just the thing for what ails you, my dear Patra.” Carredura placed a weathered old fountain pen on the table. “This is called the Ideal-Realizing Fountain Pen. It’s a sancta and does exactly what its name says.”

All she had to do was write out a wish using the pen, and it would become reality.

For example, she could write that she wanted to find money on her way to work. Or that she wanted something fun to happen at her workplace. Or that she wanted to meet the perfect man.

And they would all come true.

That, Carredura claimed, was the power of this sancta.

“Now, I should warn you, the pen can’t grant *any* and *all* wishes. It’s limited to things that are within the powers of its owner.”

It couldn’t change the weather, for example, or bring a dead person back to life. It couldn’t do things that were physically impossible. But that was just another way of saying that it could do *most* things. It was certainly capable of making a wish as simple as Patra’s come to pass.

“That’s incredible,” Patra breathed as she took the fountain pen. Carredura smiled at her.

And then she spoke. Of Patra’s empty days, of her colorless life, of the unpleasant people all around her, she said:

“All can be as you wish. And will.”

So she urged Patra to write her ideal story. To write with the pen and never stop.

Write her ideal story?

When Patra heard that, the first thing she thought of was a diary. If the fountain pen could really do what Carredura said, then she should be able to write about having a wonderful day in her diary, date it the next day, and then live it.

“I wonder what kind of day I’d like,” Patra said to herself as she sat at her desk that night. She’d bought the fountain pen, although she still wasn’t quite sure she believed Carredura’s claims.

A few minutes later, she started writing. The story she came up with was well-trodden, hardly original. In it, on her way to work, Patra found an elderly person

in trouble. Almost without thinking about it, she helped the elderly person, who asked her to at least tell them her name—but Patra, in a hurry to get to work, had to leave.

Later, Patra learned that the person she had helped was the president of a major client. They told everyone what a great human being Patra was, and she began to get some real attention at her company.

An obvious plot, right?

“This is silly,” Patra said, putting down the pen and looking at her little fantasy, which sprawled across an entire page. It was all so...*convenient*. Things just didn’t happen that way.

Or so she thought.

The next day, on her way to work, she bumped into an elderly person who looked like they were in trouble. She asked if they needed help, and they told her they were lost. Their destination wasn’t far from Patra’s workplace, so she walked there with them.

Then, later, the same person visited her office. It all happened exactly as she had written.

Her colleagues were effusive:

“You’re amazing, Patra!”

“I was wrong about you!”

Also just like she had imagined.

The sancta’s power was real. Patra went home, hardly able to contain her excitement, and began to write the next day’s entry.

Maybe she would buy that outfit she’d always wanted and really turn some heads. Maybe just cutting her hair would be enough to get the guys to talk to her.

Again, all very common stories.

She felt like she could do anything now—all the things she’d been too embarrassed to do before, too aware of all the eyes around her to attempt.

Each day was ablaze with joyous experiences. She started looking forward to tomorrow. Patra felt reborn as she wrote day after beautiful day in her diary.

Then, about a week after she'd bought the fountain pen from Carredura, she started to think: *Maybe it's about time I met that perfect guy.* She looked up at the moon in the night sky and let herself dream. How should she meet this man of destiny?

The first thing she thought of was a scene she'd read in many a story: A man and woman reach for the same book. Their hands touch. They discover that they share a common interest, and it brings them together. Perfectly ordinary. But for Patra, who had spent her life in the shade, such a meeting with the man of her dreams seemed unthinkable.

"Oh!"

It was the next day that her fingers brushed those of a man with dark green hair. He said his name was Henri, and from the day Patra saw him, she knew he was the one for her. A few days later, she wrote a diary entry about bumping into Henri in town, and so she did. He helped pick up some fruits she had dropped. Seeing his devoted, serious face up close only made her more infatuated with him.

The third time, Henri came to say hello to her as she was sitting on a bench, just as she'd written. He blushed furiously and gave her a bouquet of flowers. She couldn't have been more charmed.

From that day forward, every entry in Patra's diary had to do with Henri.

She hoped, she prayed, that they could spend their lives together.



Riviere shoved her bag at me and said only one thing before she raced up to the two of them: "That young woman is cursed."

Henri stared vacantly at his abdomen, then he looked at Patra—and then he crumpled to the ground. He looked like a toy someone had dropped on the terrace. People started screaming. Patra's hand, still holding the knife, was slick with blood.

She kept repeating the same words: “I have to finish it... I have to finish the story...” It almost sounded like something was controlling her. Even when Riviere came up to her, she just stood there with the knife, muttering to herself. She didn’t look like she was in any state for a conversation.

“I have to finish it... I have to finish it...”

The knife was pointed at Riviere now, but she just took her umbrella and gently hooked the handle around Patra’s arm, guiding it away from her. Then she turned to me. “MacMillia,” she said, as calm as ever. “There are bandages in my bag. Use them to give Henri some first aid.”

“Oh, r-right!”

This was no time to be standing and watching. I rushed over to Henri and opened the bag, where I found Riviere’s wallet and a few other important belongings along with the bandages and some gauze. She was well-prepared.

“I have to start by getting the knife away from this girl,” Riviere said. She turned toward Patra and advanced on her step by step. When Patra swung the knife at her, Riviere backed up, then resumed moving forward. It almost looked like she was the one on the attack. Maybe she was trying to get Patra away from Henri so she couldn’t do him any more harm.

Thankfully, that let me focus on helping him. “Henri! Are you okay?!” I said. I sat him up, and although he groaned and grimaced, he managed to look at me.

“Guess I don’t look...very valiant right now,” he grunted. But he was alive.

“You’ve got it in you to crack a joke. I’ll take it,” I said. I pressed gauze against his wound, then wrapped it with bandages. It was the absolute minimum of first aid, but it was something. “What the heck happened?” I asked. Patra looked nothing like the last time I’d seen her. There was no vitality in her face, and she was still brandishing the knife at Riviere even as she tried to avoid jabs from Riviere’s umbrella.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Henri said, pressing on the gauze. We could see blood seeping through it. And even then he sounded sad as he said, “It’s like she’s not herself.”

That young woman is cursed.

That was how Riviere had described her. The effect of a sancta must have changed her somehow.

Then I heard Riviere say, “Time to end this,” followed by a loud *clack* of metal. A second after that, there was some groaning. We looked over just in time to see Riviere pin Patra on the ground.

Even when she was being driven into the terrace, Patra tried to fight back, scrabbling for the knife she’d dropped with her free hand.

“I have to finish it! I have to finish the story!” she cried like a woman possessed.

Riviere couldn’t dispel the curse if Patra was going to fight her the whole time. I went over to help hold her down.

“I have to finish it...”

Riviere had continued to look at ease holding Patra down, but it actually took a lot of effort to keep her pinned. Her strength belied her delicate looks; I felt like I was trying to hold down a wild animal. “How is she so strong?” I groaned.

“It’s because of the curse. She’s lost all control,” Riviere replied. She reached for the bag hanging from Patra’s shoulder. She already seem to have some idea what sancta she was looking for. “Henri, have you seen her with these before?” she asked, reaching into the bag and, in one smooth motion, pulling out an old fountain pen and a book.

“I have,” Henri grunted; he nodded and got to his feet. “She often writes in it while she waits for me.” He stumbled over, holding his stomach as he went.

“Do you know what she writes in it?”

“No. Even a boyfriend has to respect his girlfriend’s privacy.”

“Mm.” Riviere nodded—but she showed no compunction about opening the book. The pages were covered in pretty letters presumably written with the fountain pen. One page a day.

Riviere started flipping through them and nodded. “I see.” Each page was filled with careful, attractive handwriting. But as she went on, the writing became shakier and harder to read. Some of the pages seemed to have been

written in a violent rush, and the pages after that were even more disheveled.

Finally, she arrived at the page with today's date.

"I know what made her like this," Riviere said.

On the page was a single sentence, barely legible:

I will end the story.

The same thing the young woman currently pinned underneath me was repeating like a mantra.



"Wha...?"

Patra first noticed the strange feeling the evening after one of her many dates with Henri. She suddenly discovered she was done writing about the next day in her diary, but she didn't remember what she had written. Only by reading it back over did she find out. It was all very ordinary. But it bothered her not to remember writing anything.

For that matter, what had happened today? She racked her brain, but she couldn't recall a single thing she had done that day.

She turned to her diary for help. Today's entry was full of pleasant memories with Henri. Finally, she remembered her lovely day. Only, it didn't feel like it had happened to *her*. She had the distinct, unsettling sense that she was snooping in someone else's diary.

A whole day, and she hardly remembered any of it.

"What's going on?"

Was it simply because every day was perfect now?

No. No...

"Wha—? Wait. Why...?"

Patra blinked, and suddenly the hands on her clock jumped back an hour. That's what it looked like, at least. But then she looked down at the diary in her hands, and discovered a page scrawled with vicious-looking letters she had no

memory of writing.

Time hadn't gone back an hour. It had gone forward, by almost an entire day.

"What... What happened to my day? What's happening to *me*?"

Patra's pulse quickened. Then, immediately, there was another diary entry.

Another day had passed.

Time rushed on, leaving her behind, and confused. Day after day of which she had no memory appeared, described in her diary.

"Could it be...*because* I'm keeping the diary?" Patra asked herself. She looked at the old fountain pen in her hand. Her life had started to change when she'd begun writing with it in this diary.

Well, she just wouldn't write anymore, then.

Patra stood up and flung the fountain pen out the window. Then she dropped the diary in the trash. Finally, she went to her bed and buried herself under the covers as if fleeing from the terror of time that passed without her knowledge. When she came to again, she was sitting at her desk with the fountain pen in her hand.

Another day gone.

"No..."

The pen and the diary were both filthy. She knew she had thrown them away! Hadn't she? Her mind began to roil with questions and with fear, but somewhere amid it all was a dim memory of herself going to pick up the pen.

A voice spoke from behind her: "Throwing away my fountain pen? How perfectly awful of you."

Patra spun around to find a woman standing there, dressed in black as if she were in mourning. It was Carredura.

"You... But why? How?"

"Hm? Don't you remember? You invited me to your house."

Carredura chuckled: "You say the strangest things!" Patra didn't remember inviting the other woman to her house. She was sure she didn't—and yet,

somewhere in the corner of her mind there was a recollection of asking Carredura here. And in fact, in the diary on her desk was a scribbled line: *I'll invite Carredura to my house.*

At this point, though, Patra didn't care about any of that.

"Okay...wait!" Patra's confusion was overwhelmed by a burning anger that had nowhere to go. "You listen to me, Miss Carredura! I want you to tell me what you did to me!"

"What I did? To you?" Carredura chuckled again, a taunting sound.

"Things have turned strange ever since I got that pen!"

The messy entries she didn't remember writing in the diary, for example.

Carredura looked at it, then smiled, clearly elated. "My goodness! You're writing a story in the diary? What a clever idea! How very romantic!"

No, no. That wasn't what Patra was asking about.

"I don't *remember* writing any of it!" Patra glowered at Carredura. "Did you do this to me somehow?"

"Me? Heavens, no. You wrote all that yourself, didn't you? I'll thank you not to blame me for it."

"But..."

"You say you don't remember? Well, of course not." Carredura's smile never faltered as she spoke. "Because the one writing those entries is you, but not you."

"Me, but...not me?"

Patra was dumbfounded. That didn't make any sense.

"Let me explain more clearly, then," Carredura said, putting her hands together and smiling. "You bought the fountain pen from me and then began writing your ideal story in the diary one day at a time, didn't you?"

Patra didn't say anything; there was nothing she *could* say.

"Just as you wrote, you've become the hero of a wonderful story. You could say that you became like a puppet, following your own ideal." Carredura still

had that eerie smile on her face. “And once you had finished playing out your beautiful story exactly as written in the diary, you wrote out the next one. And even then, you were like a marionette on its strings.”

The one writing the diary was you, but not you.

The words had been only a simple statement of fact.

A marionette.

“So it was that a puppet created another puppet, and *that* puppet created another after it, each of them playing out your ideal story... An endless chain of puppets, we might say. Is it so surprising that in the course of page after page, your sense of self might begin to break down?”

“I...broke?”

“Oh, you must forgive me. You yourself were riddled with flaws from the beginning.”

It was only now that Patra realized she’d been tricked. Carredura had known perfectly well what the fountain pen would do and had seen in Patra a young woman with a weakness that could be exploited. She hadn’t hesitated to put the pen in her hand.

Yet Patra found she didn’t even feel anger anymore. What good would it do, getting enraged? She’d been too weak-hearted all along; it was her fault for dancing to Carredura’s tune just because the woman had said a few kind words to her.

“How can I... How can I go back to...to normal?” Patra asked. Tears welled up in her eyes, tears of boundless grief like those she had cried on the day she’d first met Carredura.

She saw now that blissful days with a wonderful man like Henri were too good for her. She would relinquish her hopes and dreams, if she could only go back to the life she’d had. She pled with Carredura, tears coursing down her cheeks.

“You want to go back? Oh, it’s very simple.”

Patra looked up when she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Carredura looked down at her and whispered: *“End it.”*

Patra didn't remember what she wrote after that. All she remembered was Carredura laughing with her lightless eyes, proclaiming, "What a wonderful ending!"



"This fountain pen is a sancta that draws in not only the person who writes with it, but those around them. People the user writes about become obliged to act as the writer describes."

Riviere was telling me about the curse on this fountain pen, which had been created ages ago by the prayer of someone now forgotten.

"If a person uses it even once, they become trapped in an endless chain of curses, forced to continue writing until their sense of self shatters. That's the nature of this sancta."

There was the first entry in the diary, in prim, lovely letters.

And the last one, in a violent scrawl.

Maybe Patra had been about to reach the end of this chain of curses. Certainly the woman pinned under me at that moment didn't seem like someone you could talk rationally to.

"Who in the world would give her something like that?" I asked, but even as I spoke the name *Carredura* flitted through my mind. At that exact moment, though, it didn't really matter who was to blame. "Isn't there a way to put Patra back to normal?"

"If you mean by using a sancta, then no." Riviere shook her head and sighed softly.

It was impossible to undo the facts that the fountain pen had written into existence, even by using a different sancta. Nor could we use the pen itself to unwrite what had happened.

"But there might be another way," Riviere said. She took off her glove and brushed the diary with her fingers. "If I disenchant this book, she might go back to normal."

“Okay. Let’s do that,” I said.

Riviere had the power to erase the prayer within a sancta literally in her hand. She simply had to hold the object, just like she had when she’d turned the invisibility blanket back into a normal piece of cloth, or when she’d neutralized the effect of the perfume that had been affecting me when we met.

And she thought this would put Patra back to normal.

She must have seen the hope in my eyes, because she said, “It’s not as easy as that this time, MacMillia.” She looked down and touched the diary again. “The effect of the perfume you were wearing was simply to amplify people’s emotions, and it was easy to end that effect by breaking the curse. But this fountain pen controls a person’s consciousness from the moment they begin to write with it. If I break the curse on this pen, the memory of everything she did and everything that happened while she was under its control will vanish.”

“But... But that means it will be like she and Henri never met, won’t it?” I asked.

Riviere nodded silently. The fountain pen had driven Patra insane—but it had brought her and Henri together. That meeting, their relationship, everything to this point...

All their memories of it would be gone.

“That’s awful...”

Wasn’t there something Riviere could do? I looked at her, pleading, but she shook her head. In the faintest of whispers, she said, “I’m afraid that’s beyond my control.”

“No... No!”

Me, I knew. I knew Henri had been so drawn to Patra that he’d pushed through his embarrassment to offer her the bouquet of flowers. And I knew Patra was so drawn to Henri that she took them.

“It’s all right. Please, do it.”

I looked up at the voice to find Henri gazing at me and Riviere. His tone was calm, even though this must’ve been incredibly painful for him.

“You’re certain?” Riviere asked, and he simply nodded.

“I’m a member of the police force. I have a duty to protect common citizens like her.” He said that if remembering her relationship with him would cause her pain, then Riviere should erase it. There was no hesitation in his eyes.

“I see.” Riviere nodded again, just once, and cast her eyes down. She didn’t speak to him again.

Instead a pale bluish light floated over Patra’s diary. Riviere had begun to disenchant it. Everything inscribed there by the fountain pen, everything that it had caused, would be erased from people’s memories.

While the light was still shimmering I heard a voice from just near me. “Henri...”

I didn’t know if it was because the disenchantment was taking effect—but Patra looked like her old self again, the beautiful young woman we’d seen on that bench. I felt her hand relax where I had it pinned, so I helped her stand up. She rose slowly, unsteadily, and when she met my eyes she was weeping.

“I’m sorry. I... I...”

“It’s all right.” Even as he held a hand to his stab wound, Henri hugged her with his free arm. Patra shook and clung to him as tightly as she could, apologizing over and over. She looked like she might collapse again at any moment; Henri put his hand on her back to hold her up. And then, giving her a gentle smile of reassurance, he said, “It’s all right. I’m sure we’ll remember.”

He had no proof of that. No way to know. But I saw that he was trying to do what he could, to make her feel better at least.

Patra stopped shaking, and when she looked at Henri again, her expression was one of deep sadness—but also, unmistakably, of a young woman in love.



“You look like you think you did something wrong,” Riviere said, placing a cup of tea in front of me where I sat on the sofa. The sun had just sunk below the horizon.

I looked up at her and found that she was smiling at me with more kindness in her expression than usual. Or maybe she was just smiling her normal smile, and it looked especially kind to me because I was feeling depressed. I wasn't sure.

While I was still trying to think of what to say to her, she went on, "You're thinking that if you'd never encouraged Henri and Patra, none of this would have happened."

It took me another long moment to respond—it was like she'd seen straight through me. "Well, uh... Yeah. Pretty much." I nodded. It was a fact that the one who had given Henri the push to get involved with Patra when he was just watching her from afar had been me. Yeah, maybe there was a sancta involved somehow, but it didn't change the reality.

Now that I knew the story's unhappy ending, I couldn't help ruing my decision. If I'd just butted out, maybe the two of them could have had a better outcome.

But Riviere said firmly, "It's exactly the opposite" and put her hand on my shoulder. "*Because* you got involved, I was able to put a stop to things before Henri got killed."

She said I should hold my head up a little higher.

Her compassionate words pierced me to the heart. "Y-yeah, but..." My voice was shaking. I guess I was about to cry. "But it's also my fault that the two of them met for nothing. It's just too tragic!"

I know, I know. Getting all upset about it now wouldn't change anything. Henri and Patra wouldn't get back their days together; now, they were strangers to each other. I could introduce them, tell them, "You used to date this person," and they would just think I was a total freak. There was nothing I could do for them.

All I wanted was for them to be happy.

"I'm not so sure," Riviere said. Unlike me, she was as cool as they come. She sat down next to me, just looking a little tired, and said, "It's true that they effectively never met each other, but..."

That doesn't mean anything and everything is gone.

And with that, she smiled at me again.



“Owww...”

Henri was puzzled. Most strangely, someone seemed to have stabbed him yesterday.

As a member of the police force, he was more than familiar with being in dangerous situations. He’d sustained countless blows and wounds since his rookie days, in fact.

Yet somehow, Henri couldn’t for the life of him remember how he’d acquired this stab wound to his gut. Had it happened in the line of duty? But he didn’t remember being on any potentially dangerous cases. He was fairly certain he’d gotten off work and gone home as usual yesterday.

“Did somebody jump me?” he asked himself. It was the only thing he could think of that might have gotten him stabbed in the course of his daily life. But no matter how he tried, he couldn’t remember anything about the incident.

“Maybe you played fast and loose with a girl and she got you back for it,” one of his subordinates joked, but Henri had absolutely no recollection of having been close with a woman in his private life recently. Certainly not of doing anything that might make one angry enough to stab him.

Eventually, Henri had to get back to work. He did his job as usual and went home like he always did. Other than the mild ache in his abdomen, it was a perfectly ordinary day.

When he got home, he looked in the postbox—always his habit.

“Huh?”

Henri was surprised by a wave of disappointment when he saw that the box was empty. He had the distinct sense that he’d been waiting for something—but what it was, he had no idea. He went in the house, still confused.

He peered around from just inside the front door. There was his place, looking like it always did. Nothing different, nothing changed—and yet he couldn’t

shake the sense that something *was* different.

Finally, Henri's gaze settled on the window. The sun had just gone down, and the world was cloaked in the darkness of night.

There on the sill, he caught sight of a bouquet of blue roses that he didn't recognize. He gave them a long, thoughtful look, but he simply didn't know what they were for.

Henri moved toward the window, consumed by the sense that he was forgetting something important. Slowly but steadily he went, as if guided by the oddly familiar smell of the roses.



"Huh?"

Boy, I really must be tired, Patra thought. She suddenly realized she had no memory of the last several weeks. She struggled and struggled to recall something, but all that came to mind were the familiar memories of her repetitious, empty days.

When she stopped in front of the boutique in the gold-tinted city night, she discovered her face was no longer that of the woman who had spent every day wishing she were dead. Reflected beside the mannequins wearing breezy summer outfits was a fashionable woman dressed much like they were. It was as if Patra wasn't the person from her own memories.

"When did I start dressing like this?" she asked herself, turning in a circle and thinking about it.

She didn't remember.

Maybe she was just too tired from work?

"But everyone at my workplace is so nice..."

It was the strangest thing. In her memories, the people at her company were cold and rude to her. But all day today, her coworkers had been nothing but kind, and had obviously valued her contributions.

Like she was a different person.

Or they were.

Or both.

None of it made any sense. Patra wandered through town in a sort of daze, until she found herself in an open plaza in front of a bench.

Where was this? Why had she come here?

She couldn't remember.

All she knew was that she felt like she'd come here for some important purpose.

"What's going *on*?" Patra said.

She sat down on the bench in the hopes of collecting her confused thoughts. She stared vacantly into space. Something felt wrong. Something was missing. Her hands felt...lonely. At last Patra reached into her bag and took out a notepad and a pen. She gripped them firmly. But she wasn't sure what to write.

She sat there, just staring as time passed. She probably looked pretty conspicuous.

"Um... Excuse me?" a voice said. A man's voice.

She stood and turned and saw a man with dark green hair. Probably in his late twenties, although his face might have passed for thirtysomething. His expression, though, was stiff; he seemed nervous.

"Yes? Can I help you?" Patra asked, watching him carefully. A man talking to a young woman by herself at night—who wouldn't feel a bit on edge? She was worried he might be trouble.

"Oh, er, I just... That is..."

It didn't take Patra long to decide that this man probably wasn't some kind of villain. He obviously wasn't sure how to handle himself around a woman. Even in the golden light, she could see the flush in his cheeks.

"Look, I'm sorry... I just had this feeling like I had to come here today."

It sounded like a cheesy excuse, but even as he spoke, he still couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye. She even found it strangely charming. It made

her want to tease him a little.

“You mean so you could chat me up?” she asked with a giggle. She kept her gaze on him, and just for a second she met the man’s gaze.

He looked away quickly. “No! I mean... No, not really. I felt like there was something I had to give to... I mean, uh... Shoot, I hardly know what to say.”

His attention seem to be on something he was holding behind his back. Hiding there. Curious, Patra tried to get a look at it. “What have you got there?” She looked at him again.

“Um, well...”

Their eyes met again. She still didn’t know his name.

This time, though, his gaze didn’t flee from hers.

He took a breath, then held out his hands.

“D-do you like flowers?” he asked.

He was holding a bouquet of blue roses.

Patra was struck dumb. A man whose name she didn’t know had appeared and given her flowers. The roses bobbed gently between the two of them. They smelled lovely. And, she thought, oddly familiar. Across the flowers from her, the man was blushing furiously. Then, suddenly, Patra couldn’t see his face so clearly. Tears blurred her vision.

She felt like she knew what to say, what she had to say at this moment.

Wiping away the tears, she spoke the first words that came into her mind.

“You’re so silly.”



The Doll Exhibition

The cathedral at noon stood quiet.

When she came in, she put down the two things she was carrying and knelt before the statue of Cururunelvia.

“Please, I beg of you...”

When going to the cathedral, it was not necessary to bring an object that you wished to be imbued with a prayer. Even so, she had brought two of them, as a sign of her loyalty to the statue of Cururunelvia—even though she didn’t know whether it saw her with those stone eyes.

Beside her were two dolls, both crafted to look like young girls, preteens. Their faces were identical, as if they were twins.

They each had a name: the one with white hair was named Shirona, while the one with black hair was Kuroe. She had named them herself.

“I beg of you, please grant my wish.”

Even as she voiced her prayer, her heart brimmed with regrets. She hadn’t wanted to resort to prayer. All throughout her life, when she had hit a wall, she’d climbed it with her own strength. Her life might not be everything she’d imagined, but it was fulfilling in its own way, and she saw that as a product of her own effort.

“Please... Please!”

Finally, however, confronted with a regret she could not get rid of, she chose to genuflect before the statue. Desperately, again and again.

“Please, stay on the right path ...”

She offered up her prayer.

The two dolls watched her, silent and still.

The Cururunelvia statute granted her wish.

Granted volition, the two dolls, Kuroe and Shirona, awoke. They shook their heads and opened and closed their hands as if to feel what it meant to have a body. Then they looked at each other.

“Well, this is just not good,” the black-haired Kuroe said, looking at Shirona.

“I was thinking much the same thing,” Shirona nodded, her white hair bobbing.

They were in a curio shop of long standing—and they each had a price tag hanging around their necks. A distressingly cheap price tag.

They looked and looked, but they saw no sign of the woman who had prayed on their behalf.



“Huh?”

Wasn’t the antiques shop supposed to be closed today?

The thought only occurred to me after I was already standing in front of it.

Usually, the shop was closed the day after Riviere had disenchanted a sancta. Since she’d done it not once but twice yesterday, it had seemed pretty obvious that the shop would be closed today. But my body was on autopilot; it completely forgot about that. Instead it woke up at the usual time and took me right out of the house and to the store. Before I knew it, there I was, living the sad fate of the obedient worker drone.

And to think, I'd had today off! Talk about a waste of my time.

But no sooner had these thoughts run through my head than I said, "Wait, what?" and gave the shop a puzzled look. The lights were on. When I pressed my ear to the door, I could hear rustling inside. Someone was obviously in there. Riviere?

I suddenly wasn't sure if the shop was closed or not. If Riviere was working, maybe I should pop in and say hello. I'd shown up today expecting to work anyway, and I didn't mind.



So I opened the door and trotted in looking as innocent as I could. “Good morning!” I chirped. The bell over the door jingled.

Immediately I heard an “Eek!” from somewhere in the store. That was Riviere. I looked around, but strangely, I didn’t see her anywhere.

“Miss Riviere?” I asked the seemingly empty shop. The state of her desk suggested that she’d been doing paperwork until just before I came in. So she *was* here to work. “Aw, Miss Riviere. If you were gonna work today, you should have told me. I thought for sure it would be a day off.”

I closed the door and flipped the sign over so it said OPEN. Then I set down my stuff and got ready for a normal day’s work. I.e., I started to brew some tea.

“Would you like some tea?” I asked.

There was a bit of a pause before I heard Riviere say, “Um, MacMillia, I think we’ll take the day off today. You can go home.”

“Oh, please. You’re obviously working. Let me help you!”

“No, I’ll just be a second. Really, it’s okay.”

This was getting stranger and stranger. “Miss Riviere,” I said, “you don’t quite sound like yourself today.”

It was like her voice was...maybe a bit higher pitched than usual. Younger, almost. I sort of felt like I was talking to a preteen girl. It didn’t help that no matter where I looked, I couldn’t see her.

What was going on?

“Oh, um, I’m j-just not feeling so well. Maybe a touch of a cold?”

The voice was clearly coming from the other side of the desk. She must be hiding down there. But why? And...a cold? What?

“Well, that’s all the more reason for you to take a rest! Gosh. You go get some sleep, I’ll finish whatever you’re working on.”

It was an employee’s duty to support her employer! This deeply held conviction moved me to action. This was no time to be brewing tea! I trotted over to the desk.

“Oh! W-wait! Don’t come over here!” Riviere said from behind it, panicked.

“Oh, don’t be like that. Here, now, what is it? Which of these do you need help with?”

I peeked behind the desk where I assumed she was hiding, friendly as could be.

“Hm...?”

I was right: She was down there. Crouched under the desk with a sheaf of papers clutched in her hands, doing her best to face away from me.

“I thought I said not to come over here,” she said and sighed. I saw those ultramarine eyes peek over the bundle of papers. “Before... Before you say anything, I want you to hear me out.”

She looked just like she always did...and yet, somehow not quite.

What made her seem different? She wore the same red dress as always—but I couldn’t shake the sense that the details of the design weren’t quite the same as they usually were. Her hair looked pretty normal. In fact, there were a lot of things about her that seemed perfectly ordinary.

And yet at the same time, she just seemed a little...small?

Her face looked uncommonly youthful, and as she crawled out from beneath the desk, heaving herself to her feet with a “*Hup!*” she turned out to be not much taller than me.

What the heck was going on?

“Yikes! You’re a shrimp!” I exclaimed, astonished.

My employer, Riviere (age: indeterminate) suddenly looked like she was about twelve years old.



“I think you probably already realized this, but I have a somewhat unique physiology.”

Riviere sat on the sofa, her legs dangling and her cheeks puffed out in

annoyance. She appeared to be no more than a pouting child, but inside she was still the same Riviere.

“I have the ability to disenchant objects—to remove the prayers they’ve been imbued with, right? As far as I know right now, I’m the only person in this country who can do that. But any power that helpful has a price, especially if you overuse it. That’s all.” She gave a flick of her hair, like a girl desperately trying to look more grown-up.

“So basically, you used your power too much and ended up like this?” I said. I was starting to see why she took the next day off every time she disenchanted a sancta. She’d probably planned to do some paperwork and then kick back and relax today—if I hadn’t shown up.

“To disenchant an object means taking the prayer upon it into my body. But if I take in too much at once, my body can’t process it all, and it gets like this.” She gestured at herself with her cute little hands. Aw, my li’l Riviere. Oops! I mean, Miss Riviere. She went on, “It doesn’t help that I’ve been disenchanting a lot of things recently—and then after what happened with Henri, I broke two curses in one day yesterday. Looks like it all hit me at once.”

She sighed and complained that she could hardly even do paperwork in this state.

I asked her if she’d like me to do it for her and she nodded and said, “Yes, please.” Now that she didn’t have anything to hide anymore, I guess there was no reason for her to refuse.

“But you’re feeling all right?” I asked.

“Yes, perfectly fine. The picture of health. I just won’t be able to disenchant any sancta. If anything, though, my body’s gotten so young that I’m absolutely bursting with energy! I hardly know what to do with it all.”

“Oh yeah?”

“My problem is that at this height, everyone looks down on me. I mean physically.”

“Oh. Yeah...”

“I wish I could hurry and grow up...” Riviere looked into the distance, ennui written on her face. Totally like a girl trying to act grown-up.

There wasn’t actually that much work left to do. I helped put papers back in high places (that she couldn’t reach in her current state), and generally meandered around the store. By the time Riviere was done with her tea, I was already almost finished.

I was feeling pretty accomplished, if I may say so, but Riviere looked like she still had something on her mind. Me, I was practically beaming, but she looked gloomy.

“I can’t imagine what Elaina would say if she saw me like this,” Riviere said.

Oh... Yeah, that was true. I was just agreeing that Elaina would probably give her plenty of grief when I remembered: I’d turned the shop’s sign to the OPEN side. When we were supposed to be closed today.

“Was somebody looking for me?” Elaina said, the bell jingling again as she came in right on cue. It was enough to make me wonder if she had some kind of sancta that caused her to appear when somebody said her name. Today, she had a customer with her.

The moment she saw us, though—well, the moment she saw *Riviere*—she said: “Yikes! You’re a shrimp!”

Riviere stared at her from the sofa with an expression devoid of emotion, as if to say *I just don’t care anymore*. Now, that wasn’t a face you’d normally see from a preteen.

I gave Elaina the short version of what I had just learned from Riviere.

She *hmm*ed and nodded, and then she said, “Well, anyway, putting that aside,” dismissing the great, grand secret of the effect of Riviere’s power with less than a wave of her hand. “Are you open for business today or what? Are you closed? Which is it?”

As calm and composed as she looked, there was an air of urgency to her words. “Is something going on?” Riviere asked.

“I’ve gotten a bit of an emergency request.” Maybe we could at least hear

what they had to say? Elaina took a step aside from the door and gestured to the customer to come inside. Or rather, customers.

Riviere and I looked at each other.

“Hello there,” said the first customer.

“Good day,” said the second.

From behind Elaina appeared two girls who looked about as old as Riviere did at that moment. They introduced themselves as Kuroe and Shirona. They were as beautiful as dolls.

“We are dolls,” Kuroe told us.

“Dolls are we,” Shirona added.

Scratch that. They *were* dolls.

Wait... What did that mean?

Riviere and I both gave the trio confused looks. We still hadn’t fully digested the situation when Elaina asked, “Does this shop take requests *from* sancta?”

Whether or not we did, Riviere was clearly interested in hearing what this was all about. She calmly stood up from the couch and sat down beside me instead, then urged the two dolls—no, girls? girl-dolls?—Kuroe and Shirona to sit across from us.



It was painful. Agonizing. *Somebody, help.*

She must have fallen asleep at work again. Every time she woke up, Sophie was brutally reminded that she couldn’t escape from reality.

Before her stood a clockwork doll, staring vacantly into space. If she could just complete this one, all would be ready.

She rubbed her eyes and looked at her watch. It was early morning. It was all right; she would be done in time, she was sure of it. Or at least, so she kept telling herself as she closed her ears to her body’s screams and, still sitting where she had woken up, reached out to the doll.

She had to work. She couldn't run; she had to fight. That was how she had overcome so many trials in her life. She would do it again.

She was still repeating this mantra to herself when, moments later, a work colleague showed up at her factory. He was a man in his early thirties, about ten years older than Sophie, wearing a fitted suit. "Ah, Sophie, you're awake. How's things?"

She smiled to see the familiar face, then bowed. "Oh, Mr. Raul. I'm fine, thank you. I appreciate your concern."

"I wasn't talking about you. I meant *this*." He pointed at the clockwork doll standing in front of Sophie. "The presentation is today. I trust you'll be finished by then?"

"Yes... Of course. Yes, I think it will be all right."

"I need you to do better than *think*." Raul took a few slow strides until he was standing in front of Sophie. "You listen to me. This presentation could not be more important for us. This is our opportunity for all our effort, everything we've done, to pay off."

He knelt beside her and placed a hand on her shoulder. Sophie felt a shock of disgust run through her entire body. Still, she said nothing, could say nothing; she only looked at the ground. And hated herself for it.

"Imagine it! Your dolls could be a ray of hope for the people of Cururunelvia, the land of prayer. Doesn't the thought make your heart race?"

Sophie owed Raul so much. There was no way she could ever defy him. It was only with him that she had achieved notice as a designer of clockwork dolls. It wouldn't have been going too far to say that the Sophie who existed today, existed because of Raul.

"Why, with your dolls, no one will ever need a sancta again, nor fear a beastkin's terrible strength or a criminal's plotting. A fact you and I will demonstrate this very day."

As he spoke, Raul gazed at the wall. The hands of the clock there marched slowly but inexorably forward. Beneath the clock was a poster: *Doll Exhibition*. It had been held once every five years for the last quarter century. It was a

chance for independent doll makers to show off their work, as well as potentially sell to large companies.

“Your clockwork dolls will change history. Everyone else at that exhibition makes dolls as toys, playthings. Everyone but us. All the attention, and all the glory, will be ours.”

Sophie didn't say anything.

“To make the very best clockwork doll—wasn't that what you wanted?” Raul smiled: that wish was on the cusp of coming true.

This mechanical doll was a weapon.

That was what Sophie was working on at this moment. Even though she had no wish to make weapons. All she wanted was to create automatons that could help people in their daily lives.

“I'll do my very best,” she told Raul with an ambiguous smile, and nodded.

It hurt. It was agony.

She wished someone would help her.

She prayed fervently in her heart, knowing her prayer would never reach anyone.



“The doll exhibition is taking place today in the south of town,” said the black-haired girl, Kuroe, showing us a flyer. “We've got to help a woman who's taking part in it.”

The white-haired girl, Shirona, slammed two more pieces of paper down on the table. One was another flyer for the exhibition—but the other was a magazine clipping. It was an interview with a woman who had blonde hair and a tired look. Her name was Sophie. The article described her success as one of the foremost creators of clockwork dolls.

The little girl beside me—by which I mean Riviere—perused the article with interest. “Clockwork dolls! Are...what? MacMillia?”

I almost patted her on the head and burst out in praise—*Look at you, reading that big, difficult article!* Oops. I had to be careful. She might be tiny, but she was still just Riviere.

“In the simplest terms, they’re dolls built to help people with minor chores. There was a lot of excitement about them a while back—everyone thought they would make life better, no prayers necessary.”

“No prayers necessary, huh? Well, that’s a good thing,” Riviere said, and she did look happy about it. But the two girls sitting across from her (and looking the same age she did) shook their heads.

“I’m afraid not,” said Kuroe.

“Not at all,” said Shirona.

But why not? When I asked them, Kuroe responded, “We’re the products of a prayer offered to bring Sophie back to the right path when she’s on the wrong one.”

“That is us,” concurred Shirona.

The prayer appeared to have taken effect with a time delay. The girls had “woken up” a few days before. The fact that they’d been given consciousness suggested that Sophie had in fact made a serious mistake and was looking for help.

When the two of them had come to, they hadn’t been with Sophie, as they might have expected. They’d been in a curiosity shop in town. As soon as they discovered they were able to move, they started doing everything they could to understand what was going on.

It turned out to be easy to find out where Sophie was—her name was on the list of presenters for the doll exhibition. Kuroe and Shirona worked their way to the exhibition hall, which was still being set up. They didn’t see any sign of Sophie, but they saw someone from her work, a man named Raul, hanging around.

They’d seen Raul with Sophie, back when they were just dolls. At the exhibition venue, they overheard him talking with his own colleagues, saying, “Sophie’s created a new kind of clockwork doll that will change history!” He

sounded as pleased as if he had come up with the device himself.

So it was that they discovered that Sophie seemingly spent her days as a well-regarded and successful maker of clockwork dolls.

Kuroe and Shirona looked at each other: If she was so successful and fulfilled, why would she be so desperate for help? Why had the two of them been granted consciousness?

They were both puzzled.

“Tell us about these dolls! What are they?” one of Raul’s friends asked him.

The answer came back in just one word: “Weapons.”

Sophie was creating clockwork dolls that could serve as weapons so powerful that sancta would no longer be necessary.

Raul’s face as he described this invention was overflowing with...hope.

Kuroe and Shirona looked at each other again.

Suddenly it was very clear why they were there.

“That’s where I come in,” Elaina piped up. “I found them wandering around town and brought them here. They said they want to get Sophie away from that man Raul.”

“Sophie was desperate for help because Raul is forcing her to make weapons,” Shirona said.

“We have to destroy the weapon and get her out of there,” Kuroe added.

“Can’t you help?” asked Elaina.

“That’s a tough one,” Riviere said, knitting her brow. “I do have a few weapons of my own, but...”

She crossed her arms and made a thoughtful sound. Luckily (I think), we had the sancta we’d confiscated from the men in black at the fancy hotel the other day—they were all stashed in our storage room. Those might at least allow us to fight a doll. But that wasn’t our only concern.

“Right now I’m...well, you see. I don’t think I’m in any shape to wield a weapon.” Riviere sighed. I mentally reviewed what we had in storage that might

work as a weapon. A mallet that could break steel. A shield that deflected anything that hit it. A boomerang that always struck its mark. Then there was the bow that never ran out of arrows. And a bunch of other things, too. Those guys had come up with just about every way you might attack a group of rich folk.

Without anyone to handle them, though, the sancta didn't have much to do; they just sat in our storage room, where they had been since we confiscated them.

"That's fine. The prayer made us pretty agile," said Kuroe.

"And strong as anything!" said Shirona.

They both cheered and flashed peace signs.

Kuroe: "You can leave destroying the clockwork doll to us, Miss Antiques Dealer. You just lend us the weapons!"

Shirona: "Give us arms!"

Of course, the best outcome would be if there was no need for weapons, but if it came to a fight, we would be doomed if we went in unarmed. It couldn't hurt to be prepared.

Even so, Riviere naturally felt some resistance to handing out weapons; she went "Hrrm..." in a way that betrayed her youthful looks. "I have to say, I'm not eager to give you fighting implements. Dangerous items usually stay in that back room."

Although it seemed unlikely, it was always possible that Kuroe and Shirona were bad people (dolls?) trying to trick us into giving them weapons. Even if they were telling the truth, what if the weapons got lost somewhere? It was almost too terrible to think about.

I was starting to see that Riviere took the business of sancta very seriously, like she had when she gave me the whip to use.

"But wouldn't you feel awful just sending them on their way?" I asked.

"That's right! We'd be going empty-handed onto the battlefield," Kuroe said.

"Like lambs to the slaughter," Shirona added.

I had to admit, they sounded a bit scripted as they begged for help.

Personally, I would have loved to do something for them, but it was ultimately Riviere who owned the sancta around here. We would just have to wait and see what she said. I was sure that she would want to do something for these girls if she could.

Finally, she nodded. “I’m not saying there’s *nothing* I can do. I would be willing to lend you some weapons, as long as we can go with you to keep an eye on things.”

Ah, of course!

“We’d...go with them?” I asked.

“That’s what I said.”

“Hah, yes, I see.”

Which was to say, in other words, that we would go to the exhibition hall with the twins. That was fine by me, but then I looked at Riviere, sitting beside me. No matter how you sliced it, she looked like she was barely into her teens.

“I know, I know. It means I’ll have to go outside looking like this...” She heaved a sigh.

She still looked like nothing so much as a little girl trying to act adult.



Sophie had been surrounded by dolls since she was little.

“I’m sorry, Sophie. Your mother is working right now. Go play over there.”

She had hardly any memories of playing with her mother when she was young—only with dolls. Sophie’s only really constant companion had been loneliness.

Her mother ran a business, so even when she was at home, she was usually working. Sophie tried to tell herself that her mother was busy, that she was working hard to support Sophie, and that as long as she had her dolls, she wasn’t really lonely. Maybe it was long days with only her dolls for friends that gave her such an interest in dolls with clockwork contraptions.

She built her first mechanical doll out of a sheer desire to make her mother turn away from her work for just one moment. And her mother did praise her for her efforts, but soon she went right back to work.

As Sophie grew older, conversation in the house became less and less frequent. The less response she got from her mother, the more Sophie threw herself into creating her mechanical beings.

Sophie's mother seemed not to notice her talents but, ten years ago now, Raul had. Sophie had been just twenty at the time.

"Wonderful! Did you make this?" Raul asked, astonished by a doll Sophie had created.

Never had someone given Sophie such kind words. For that matter, never had anyone acknowledged her abilities this way.

"I could...show you some of the others. If you'd like," Sophie had said.

From that moment, despite the difference in their ages, Sophie and Raul had become fast friends. The garrulous Raul was a perfect cure for Sophie's isolation. He had big dreams, but the fact that so many different races—humans and beastkin and elves and more—all coexisted on the island of Cururunelvia concerned him. He could often be heard to say, "Of everyone in this land, humans have by far the shortest lifespan and are physically the weakest."

He went on: "I want humans to be able to live freely in this country."

In Raul's eyes, humans came out the worst in every comparison to the other races, whether physical ability or lifespan. He felt that humans needed much support if they were to live on even footing with the other inhabitants of Cururunelvia.

"Your clockwork dolls are exactly what we humans need. I can feel it!" He looked straight at Sophie as he spoke.

He was her first friend. He obtained the materials, and Sophie built. That was how they would create clockwork dolls that could make human lives better. Eventually she found she shared his dream.

“Quit your stupid fantasies! You’re going to take over the family business!”

She’d had, as ever, no discussion with her mother. Four years ago, Sophie learned for the first time that it was her mother’s wish that Sophie take over her business. It was when she had graduated from school and was preparing to leave home.

“I didn’t raise my daughter to do...*this!*”

As Sophie left, she heard her mother shout, “Please! Think about what you’re doing!”

Sophie turned and saw her mother’s face for the first time in so long. She looked tired, older than before. Had she always been so small?

Sophie sighed and looked away again. “Don’t start trying to be my mother now. Not after you’ve spent my entire life ignoring me for your work.”

Her mother passed away two years later. The company that she’d taken such diligent care of was absorbed by a firm owned by Raul. He told Sophie that her mother had died suddenly, of illness, and had left no will.

Even now, Sophie’s heart ached every time she remembered that last glimpse of her mother. She hadn’t meant to hurt her so deeply. She’d just felt she was answering in kind.

Your clockwork dolls are exactly what humans need.

She had joined Raul in his dream because those words reminded her of when she had been a little girl. And yet after she joined him, she had been charged with making mechanical dolls armed with weapons. Eventually she realized Raul was only using her for her talents, and she deeply regretted leaving her mother.

She wished she could apologize. But she no longer had a home to go back to. Raul had bought up everything her mother had left her.

“Am I really okay with this?” Sophie asked herself as she looked at the mechanical doll at the exhibition hall. In its back, it had a self-winding spring—a *sancta* Raul had produced seemingly out of the blue during development. Thanks to that, the device would work for half an eternity before it needed to be replaced. It also greatly increased Sophie’s design freedom. She loved the

doll before her like her own child; she had raised it, built it up into her magnum opus.

And yet in each hand were hidden weapons.

She hadn't wanted to raise a child like this...

"Please, have a look. This is our company's newest product." She heard Raul behind her, sounding noticeably more gentle than usual. Sophie turned and found him smiling at a young woman, on his face a placid expression that looked every bit as manufactured as her doll.

Who was this woman? When Raul saw Sophie watching them, he came over to her, still smiling. "Sophie, let me introduce you to one of our investors."

Investors.

One of the people who gave them money so the company could run. One of the people who had agreed with Raul's plan to put weapons in Sophie's creation. Sophie looked at the woman with a burning hatred.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," said the woman with a smile. She was dressed all in black, as if she were in mourning. A very strange woman indeed.

She said her name was Carredura.



A doll exhibition: a celebration of technology held in the south of town. When we got there, we found ourselves sucked into an absolute sea of people. Maybe it was the only-held-once-every-five-years thing.

My goodness! We might get separated in this massive crowd. "Do you want me to hold your hand?" I offered graciously, but Riviere said, "Wha—? Don't make me send you flying," and went through the door in a huff. But I'd been asking the two girls...

"Dolls, dolls everywhere!" Kuroe said.

"Yes, a veritable panoply of them," Shirona said. They did take my hands as they stared around the exhibition hall in open-mouthed amazement.

There were human-shaped things everywhere you looked, from small dolls that a child could hold to larger creations with vividly realized facial features. Some of them looked like they were just straight-up suits of armor. That's why we didn't stand out too much even as we walked around with our bag full of weapons.

"I feel a little funny with all these dolls around," I said with a sigh. The constant sense that I was being watched left me exhausted. "There can't be many of them that are conscious like you two, right?"

"That's true. We're not really in the same situation as other dolls," agreed Kuroe.

"We are just not like ordinary dolls," Shirona said. They seemed inordinately proud of it.

It was an undeniable fact that the two of them, animated by a prayer, were decisively different from the other dolls here. Some of the dolls on display were able to perform simple actions—there were other clockwork creations around here—but none of them could move and act freely of their own volition like Kuroe and Shirona. In that way, they were fundamentally different.

Take, for example, something we saw when we approached one of the many crowds in the exhibition hall.

"Behold! My doll can perform music!" proclaimed a man with his arms spread wide. Behind him, a clockwork doll was sitting quietly at a piano. Then it jerkily raised its arms and started playing. I couldn't tell what the song was, because it was drowned out by the audience's applause.

We drifted along to another area and discovered another crowd.

"Just look at this—the newest mechanical doll! It can serve you tea!"

We watched a single, spring-powered doll creak and clack its way through pouring some tea from a pot it was holding, to much cheering and applause.

Simple activities like that were enough to get most people's attention and admiration.

"Oh! It's wonderful!" said one very impressed little girl as she watched the

doll slowly pour the tea. “I knew dark tea was the hallmark of the coming era! It should be legally required for every household to keep one of these around.” The girl took a sip of the tea and said, “Note the exquisite flavor...” She was starting in on a whole lecture.

When I took a better look, I realized the girl had red hair and a red outfit, and the air of someone who adored dark tea more than anything.

It was... It was Riviere.

“Miss Riviere? What are you doing?” I said.

She flinched and stood up. “D-don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not like I got caught up in the moment—not at all!”

“I, uh, didn’t say that. Or anything else.”

I tried to be encouraging, telling her that with the festival atmosphere at the exhibition, there was nothing wrong with having some fun.

“Hrk! The humiliation...” Riviere looked stricken. Oh, yeah. She’d mentioned something about having a bunch of excess energy now that she was looking younger. Children loved a good celebration. Who could blame her for losing herself in the moment? Why, I could hardly help grinning at the thought!

“Don’t you make that face,” Riviere said, puffing out her cheeks.

“What face?” I asked.

“Like you’re here with some sweet little child.” It was rude, she added, pouting. Oops. Sorry, Miss Riviere. My mistake.

Anyway, no matter how much fun we were having, we had to remember that we were here on business. “Try not to get lost, okay?” I said.

“I’m not a little kid. Don’t treat me like one,” Riviere said, smacking me somewhere in the vicinity of my shoulder.

We set off through the exhibition hall again. I was told Sophie’s display would be at the very back, so there was nothing to do but force our way through the crowds.

On the way, of course, we saw all the other displays. It wasn’t just dolls who

could do useful tasks; there was one sancta doll that would whisper “Give me your sooooull...” in its owner’s ear every night, and another that wielded a cleaver and exclaimed “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!” each displayed in a glass case.

“I guess not all of them are made to do helpful stuff,” I said, weirdly impressed.

Beside me, Riviere nodded. “It’s a doll exhibition. Of course there’s all different kinds.”

We walked as we talked, passing by a doll imbued with a prayer that made it a baker. You might be wondering: Why a baker? What a silly question! This is a doll exhibition, and naturally there are all kinds of dolls here.

“Would you like to try a bit of my doll’s bread?” a man asked a passerby as the doll worked behind him, kneading dough faster than the eye could see.

The passerby didn’t stuff the bread into her mouth but took a slice carefully in both hands and held it up, feeling it under her fingers. Then she took a deep breath, savoring the scent. Very refined behavior, almost like she was showing politeness to the bread.

Finally she took a bite. “My, how delicious! This is quite wonderful. Truly, the age of automatically kneaded bread is upon us. I wish every household could have one of these dolls.”

When I got a better look, I realized the passerby was a young woman with ashen hair and azure eyes. In fact, it was Elaina.

“What are you doing?” I asked. I realized I hadn’t seen her since earlier—and here she was eating bread.

“Oh, hey, Miss Riviere. Hey, everybody.” She waved to us. “Try a slice?”

“Really, now. This is not the time,” Riviere said, puffing out her cheeks at Elaina’s patent lack of urgency. “Need I remind you that we’re here on business? If you want to play games, do it on your own time.”

“Oops. Right, right. Sorry.” Elaina was smiling at Riviere with the expression of someone looking at an adorable girl. “By the way, Miss Riviere...”

“Yes, what?”

“Why are you eating bread right next to me?”

What we have to keep remembering is that Riviere today was more energetic than usual, and she was more susceptible to her own curiosity than normal. So, over the course of this conversation, and even as she scolded Elaina, she’d sat down right next to her and was having some bread. I guess part of the reason her cheeks were puffed out was because they were full of food. Talk about your red herrings.

“No! The humiliation!” Tears brimmed in Riviere’s eyes.

Gee, I felt sorry for her...

“Are you sure you don’t want to hold my hand?” I asked again and was rewarded with another smack on the shoulder.

It really did make me think of a growing girl.



“Madame Carredura heard what our firm is doing and has offered us her support,” Raul said, pointing to the doll’s back and adding that the spring was something he’d bought at her shop. It must have just run out of power, because a big winding key was turning by itself in the automaton’s back, *creak, creak, creak*.

Carredura gazed at it, bobbing her head. When the spring had wound and began to pump again, though, she turned to Sophie, perplexed.

Because the doll didn’t move at all.

“Whatever is going on?” she asked, pointing. “Is it broken?” She knitted her brow in a somewhat exaggerated expression of disappointment.

Sophie shook her head. After a moment, she said, “My mechanical dolls are designed to help people in their daily lives. You can make it move by giving it simple instructions with a remote control.”

She wasn’t a great explainer, at least not in public. She picked up a controller connected to the doll by a wire and showed how it worked.

Cleaning, laundry, cooking: Ordinary tasks such as these could be initiated

simply by sending instructions to the machine. When Sophie saw the doll move in response to her inputs, she was deeply touched. It was like watching her child take its first steps.

“This is not what we discussed, Raul,” Carredura said, shaking her head and looking distinctly unimpressed. “What happened to the weapons? Were they not supposed to activate autonomously? I didn’t pour all that money into your company to produce toys that can do a few household chores.”

Carredura looked at Raul, already having lost most of her interest in what was going on. She almost looked disappointed.

“I’m sorry! I can’t apologize enough!” Raul snatched the remote from Sophie and began working it himself. “We have, of course, equipped the device with every manner of weapon, just as you asked. In both hands, in the chest! Observe!”

Behind Raul, the doll began deploying all of its hidden weapons. The smile instantly returned to Carredura’s face.

“Now, that’s what I wanted to see. Excellent work.” She applauded lightly. “As promised, then, allow me to guide you to the completion of this clockwork doll.”

Guide them to completion?

The words sounded so strange to Sophie. The doll standing there *was* complete; she’d finished it that morning. There was nothing more that needed to be done to it.

Yet of the three people standing there, only Sophie seemed to be at a loss for what Carredura meant. Raul said, “Thank you so much!” and shook the woman’s hand vigorously. Clearly, they had made some sort of agreement without Sophie’s knowledge.

“Take these,” Carredura said, still smiling, and handed Raul two slips of paper. Again, only Sophie seemed to fail to understand what they were. Raul stuck one on his chest as if it were the most natural thing in the world, then stuck the other on Sophie’s doll.

“What are you...”

...doing?

She didn't even get the question out of her mouth before the wire connecting the remote control to the doll snapped—severed by the automaton's own hand.

Almost as if by its own volition.

“Wha...?” Sophie stared dumbfounded at the wire.

This wasn't possible. A clockwork doll couldn't gain consciousness. Not without a sancta of some kind...

“Yes! What a wonderful power! I knew I could trust you, Lady Carredura. This sancta is exactly what I hoped for!” Raul applauded as, in front of him, the doll brandished its weapons.

It almost looked like a living person.

“When one of those seals is stuck to a person and the other to a doll, it begins to behave precisely as the owner wishes.” Carredura looked indulgent, like a parent watching an excited child. “In other words,” she said to Sophie, “this clockwork thing that you created can be controlled by *his* will.”

Wonderful, is it not?

Sophie only glowered at Carredura. “I built my mechanical doll to help people lead better lives,” she said. Not for this.

“Oh, you and I share the same ideals, my dear Sophie,” Carredura said with a chuckle. Her smile, though, looked somehow contemptuous. “I use sancta to create a society with no inequalities.”

Even as they conversed, the automaton began walking around the show floor as Raul willed. Carredura looked over at it right when it had the weapons in both hands raised. The muzzles of its guns were pointed directly at another exhibitor's doll.

“Let me ask you a question, my dear Sophie. What's the quickest way to eliminate war from the world?” Without waiting for an answer, she went on, “It's to get rid of every single person with a weapon.”

She almost sounded like she had been waiting for this exact moment.

Sophie heard a sound like a thunderclap and felt a shock. She realized before anyone else that it was a gunshot—she knew the sound well, because they had done so many tests while developing the doll. That was why she was also the first to look up, and despair.

The bullet, fired from the very doll she had created, had pierced the neck of the other exhibitor's doll.

As confused people murmured to each other, Sophie heard an astonished Raul say, “Wha—? What... What happened?”

Sophie's machine was already setting its sights on another doll.

“A-ahem, Lady Carredura, how do I get it to...to stop doing that?” Raul asked, touching the slip of paper. He pulled at it, but it wouldn't come off. He tried the one on the doll, but it was stuck fast, too.

“Stop?” Carredura asked with a puzzled look. “What need is there to stop what you yourself willed?”

Was this not the power he had wished for? Carredura laughed again, and this time it was nothing like the carefully crafted smiles and chuckles she had offered before. This time she laughed from the heart, joyously.

There was another *crack* of the gun.

No. The pain. It hurt. Somebody, help. Sophie crumpled and cried out, but no one heard her.



“Run! There's a shooter!” people were shouting. The cries swallowed the exhibition hall, and the attendees scattered. We could tell where the gunshots had come from—the very back of the hall.

And we knew what was waiting there.

“I sure didn't see this coming,” said Kuroe, who was holding one of my hands.

“It's too soon,” said Shirona, holding the other. Then they each took a weapon out of our bag. Kuroe had the shield that could repel any projectile. Shirona took the mallet that could crush steel. A couple of sancta we'd brought

along just in case.

“When you say you didn’t see this coming, does that mean your friend is even farther off the path of righteousness than you’d expected?” asked Elaina, who was pushing against the onrushing crowd and looking into the distance, where we could see a large mechanical doll stumbling slowly around and firing almost at random with its gun. “I have to admit, I didn’t think we were going to be facing someone who would fire a weapon in a place like this.”

She sighed: most unexpected.

“We can’t be sure about that. I think it’s possible the doll has gone rogue,” Riviere said calmly, likewise keeping a watchful eye on the automaton. Incidentally, she was standing on a chair to help bolster her height so she could see. Not very ladylike.

She went on, “I see a man near the doll who looks like he’s panicking. I’m guessing this is a rampage he wasn’t counting on.”

“Either way, we’re in for a real fight now,” said Elaina.

“That would seem to be the case.”

They sounded so relaxed about it. Me, I was behind them, feeling like my absolute desire not to get anywhere near that thing must be written all over my face—and body language. The conversation was punctuated by more gunshots from the far end of the exhibition hall, while the screaming voices of the fleeing crowd got farther away in the other direction.

You know, I was feeling remarkably calm myself despite the danger of the situation. “Kuroe, Shirona, listen to me. You two don’t have to fight!” I said, puffing out my chest as best I could.

They looked at me, surprised, and I made a show of holding up my own weapon, another of the sancta we’d brought—the boomerang that never missed its target. “I’ll take out that mechanical doll with this sancta. You don’t have to worry.”

I was an adult experienced in the ways of combat. I would take the lead and protect the two of them! In the handful of months since I’d started working at Riviere Antiques, I’d found myself in battles big and small. What did I have to

fear from a clockwork doll firing a gun that was still way over there?

“You just watch.” I took up a stance, then flung the boomerang with all my strength. “Yaaah!”

It went flying, slicing through the air, twirling at an incredible rate. It made a beeline for the rogue doll, almost as if drawn to it, and struck it square in the head.

Then it broke.

I mean the boomerang.

...Long pause on my part.

Maybe my strength had been too much for the boomerang to withstand, or maybe the clockwork doll was just too solid; I wasn't sure. Whichever it was, the boomerang snapped in half and clattered to the floor. Some tools just don't want to finish what they start!

“Looks like that was a bust.”

“So it would appear.”

The twins just shook their heads at me.

That wasn't supposed to happen! Worse, the clockwork doll looked like it hadn't even noticed my attack. It just kept firing away. That made me *really* angry. It could have afforded to at least look annoyed or something.

“*Sigh!* Looks like I'll have to handle this,” said Elaina when she witnessed my abject failure. She took out a sancta of her own: the bow that never ran out of arrows. “An eye for an eye. A ranged weapon for a ranged weapon. I think it's time for a bow attack.”

“A bow? That's what you're going to use?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Elaina was already training her gaze on the doll, as sober and serious as it was possible to be.

She drew the bow back and let it loose. The arrow flew straight past the gunfire and hit the automaton in the head. We could hear a little *smack*.

Just for an instant, the doll looked in our direction. I could almost hear it

saying, “Huh? Was that a mosquito?”

Without missing a beat, Elaina fired another arrow. She was probably angry.

Smack. Still not very loud.

Sancta really were something else, though—just like the name said, these arrows never ran out. Elaina fired several more in quick succession, each one pinging off the doll’s head. Finally she threw down the bow. “Doesn’t look like it’s helping,” she said.

We knew now that neither the boomerang nor the arrows were going to do us any good. That doll was tough stuff; it was going to take some force to smash it.

Kuroe and Shirona, who had been watching us, seemed to have reached the same conclusion. They stepped up in front of us.

“Thanks, both of you,” Kuroe said.

“It is our turn now,” said Shirona.

They bowed respectfully to us, and as they stood up again I thought I saw the slightest of smiles on their faces. The expressions bore a striking resemblance to the ones they wore when we first met.

“Are you sure about this? It’s dangerous out there,” I said, stepping forward, but they shook their heads.

“We’re created things ourselves. Much better suited to attacking it directly than you soft meatbags,” said Kuroe.

“This was always our job,” Shirona said.

Thanks but no thanks, huh?

The two of them waved to us and set off at a brisk pace through the exhibition hall.

Straight toward the gunshots.

Almost as if they wanted to get away before we could stop them.

Maybe they *were* the most suited for this job; maybe they’d come here knowing they were going to get in a fight with that automaton. But still...

“We’ve seen them this far. I wish we could help them to the very end,” Riviere, still looking like a little girl, said as if she had read my mind. “We didn’t come here today just to enjoy the show.”

That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it? She peered at me.

“Is it that obvious?” I said.

“It’s the sort of thing you would think at a moment like this.” Riviere giggled.

If she knew that, I was sure she also knew what I wanted to do.

“Do you have any other sancta with you?” I asked.

“I just might.” Riviere nodded and reached into her bag. “Just be aware that this thing is going to exact a price when you use it.”

The most helpful powers always came with a cost.

So saying, Riviere took my hand.

The rampaging clockwork doll seemed set on destroying others of its kind—other dolls and mechanical creations. Almost like it was trying to get rid of any interlopers, or at least make itself the most noticeable thing in the exhibition hall. It worked its way along, annihilating every doll it came across.

“P-please! Stop! I’m begging you! Ahhhh...” a man was shouting, but the automaton ignored him, continuing to point its guns forward. It was aiming at one small doll—a doll holding a shield.

I knew that shield. It was a sancta that could protect the user from any attack.

And boy, did it ever. The gunshots rained down on it, but behind the shield, the doll stood utterly calm, no matter how close the automaton got.

“Hup!”

The doll didn’t even look perturbed as she jumped into the air, flying straight over the mechanical doll’s head. Even then, the bullets wouldn’t penetrate her defense.

The automaton reflexively fired toward the shield anyway.

With both its arms raised into the air, it was obviously wide open. I'm sure it figured that didn't matter; there was just one little doll coming at it. It wasn't worried.

Until the moment the mallet smashed into its head.

"You are *not* very smart," said Shirona as she buried the mallet in the mechanical creature's head. It had been too busy firing heedlessly to bother with her.

Kuroe had gotten close to the automaton head-on, protecting herself with the shield. But Shirona had been waiting in the wings to jump on it the moment its attention was distracted. A perfect combo assault.

For the first time since they had started, the gunshots that had sent the exhibition hall into chaos stopped. The automaton slumped, its arms still pointed over its head. What goes up must come down, and Kuroe, shield and all, came crashing on top of it, knocking it to the ground.

If they'd been fighting a human, that would have been the end of things for sure.

But they weren't.

"Wha—?"

The automaton shambled to its feet again. Its head was smashed, but that was all. Not looking very concerned, it pointed its arms—its guns—at the two girls.

They must have been shocked. But not just because the enemy hadn't fallen.

In the instant before the mechanical creation blew off their heads, a whip came cracking in from the side, wrapping itself around the doll's arms. Then, with a good tug, it tore them clean off.

Now bereft of its weapons, the mechanical doll crashed to the floor again, and this time, it stayed there.

"Are you both all right?!" I shouted, throwing aside the stolen arms and rushing over to the girls.

They looked at me in astonishment. "Is that you, Lady MacMillia?" Kuroe

asked.

“But how?” asked Shirona.

They knew as well as I did that that doll wasn’t so fragile that a whip should’ve been able to pull off its arms. They looked at me in amazement, shaking their heads.

I puffed out my chest again. “An antiques shop that takes on a job is an antiques shop that sees a job through,” I said. I held up my hand, on which I was wearing a ring—one that drastically increased the wearer’s physical power. Riviere had used it before.

We sure hadn’t come here just to enjoy the show.

“You... It’s you!”

Just past the toppled doll, a woman with golden hair lay on the floor. She was looking at Kuroe and Shirona with wonder. That had to be Sophie.

“We found you!” said Kuroe.

“Finally,” said Shirona.

The twins looked at each other, then dodged around the mechanical doll and headed over to Sophie. She, however, looked completely confused. “How can you...move?”

Weren’t they just dolls?

They shouldn’t have been able to move.

Not unless there was a prayer upon them.

Not unless someone had prayed for them.

But Sophie had never prayed at the cathedral.

“We’re here to rescue you, Sophie!” Kuroe said.

“That is the prayer imbued in us,” added Shirona.

Then, slowly, the two of them sat down in front of Sophie.

It must have been really hard on them when they gained consciousness—after all, it had been years since the prayer had been offered. And the one who

had offered it was long dead.



The first thing Kuroe and Shirona saw was a girl, maybe ten or twelve years old. She was a quiet child named Helica. She was, however, extremely good with her hands; she had built the twins, these dolls, in her spare time. She gave them the names Kuroe and Shirona, and they shared her life as her friends.

Making dolls was Helica's one way to escape her loneliness—so she lost herself in it more and more. The twins observed her as she spent every day, silent, with her dolls.

Time passed, and when Helica was in her late teens, she brought a man home. From their conversations, the twins learned that this man was an entrepreneur strongly attracted by Helica's talents. Even the twins could see how well the two suited each other.

Eventually Helica went into business with the man, making dolls as her job. She spent her time joyfully building, the days swathed in warmth and light.

The twins sat in their corner of the room and prayed that these days might go on forever. But their prayer was not heard.

Their happiness lasted a scant few months.

The man was a con man. Most of the money he'd borrowed to start their company was gone, as if it had never existed. All that remained was a tremendous amount of debt—and the new life growing in Helica's belly.

Helica took to talking to the two of them frequently. *I never deserved such happiness*, she would say. *It's much better for me to work quietly by myself*. At night, the tears would pour from her eyes.

The twins wished they could jump up and give her a hug. They wanted to shout at her to forget that swindler.

But no prayer had been given to them, and they couldn't so much as nod their heads, let alone speak. They could only sit and gaze at the ground as the tears rolled on.

Eventually, Helica's child was born, a healthy baby girl. Helica named her Sophie.

While raising her child, Helica built dolls as a job to pay off her debts. The days were busy, and Helica's work tools lay around the house. So it was that Sophie grew up with dolls from her earliest days.

Whenever Helica could find a spare moment between housework and jobs, she would play with Sophie. But that meant she got only the barest minimum of sleep. Much as she tried to spend every moment she could with Sophie, by necessity the vast majority of each day was dedicated to work.

"I'm sorry, Sophie. Mommy's working. Go play somewhere else."

For as long as Sophie could remember, there had been a gulf between them. A chasm never to be bridged. As Sophie grew older, she came to speak to her mother less and less.

The last time they had talked was just before Sophie left home. Her mother had noticed Sophie falling under the influence of a shady man. Yet Helica had spoken to her daughter far too rarely to stop her; they didn't have that history of conversation.

After an exchange almost too painful to remember, Sophie had left home.

It was that night that Helica had gone to the cathedral.

"I beg of you, please grant my wish."

With the two dolls in tow, she offered her prayer.

"Please, stay on the right path..."

She prayed that her beloved daughter Sophie wouldn't make the same mistakes she had.

If it ever seemed that she would walk the same road as her mother, Helica prayed that these two dolls would help her.

"Gracious. What a terrible thing to say to your mother, isn't that right?" Helica said.

Thanks to the prayer that had been bestowed upon them, Kuroe and Shirona could understand human words—and they would offer a hand if Sophie was going to stray from the right path. To that end, they remembered everything Helica said, everything from their first meeting until this moment.

The first thing they recalled was these words, which she had said to them the day after the prayer had taken effect.

“Don’t you agree, Kuroe? Shirona?”

Helica knew full well that the prayer had been bestowed upon the dolls because of the pale light that had shone around them in the cathedral. Now she chatted with them pleasantly, almost as if she was leaving a message for her daughter. So the two listened carefully, making sure to catch every word.

“It’s all right. I do understand. I know you weren’t speaking from your heart of hearts.”

Even when they were far apart, even when much time had passed, Helica’s love for Sophie didn’t change.

“I went a little too far myself, and for that I’m sorry. I just didn’t want you to end up like me. Tricked by some fool, unhappy... That wasn’t the life I wanted for you.” Helica gazed at the dolls, who looked back silently, and her expression was one of calm. She didn’t even know where her daughter was now, or what she was doing. “Sophie. My Sophie...”

It didn’t change, even after Helica grew ill and weak. She kept talking.

“Don’t push yourself too hard, will you?”

Her face was peaceful as she spoke.

“You don’t have to be like me... Not the bad parts, at least.”

All the words Helica had spoken, Shirona and Kuroe conveyed to Sophie. Although they didn’t know whether she would take from them what her mother had hoped.

Sophie shook and sobbed, looking at the ground, as they spoke; she didn’t seem to be in a state of mind to really hear what they were saying.

When Sophie finally looked up, her face was as tear-stained as a little girl’s.

She remembered her mother, the way she had always appeared to Sophie—turned away from her. When Sophie was little, she'd thought her mother was a cold woman, only focused on her work. But now, looking back after having fled her home, what she saw was a parent working desperately to support her daughter.

She saw her mother, who took every small opportunity she had to turn back and smile.

Sophie saw that she was the one who hadn't been willing to face her mother squarely.

By the time she had realized that, the chance to see her mother again had gone forever. She had taken the wrong path.

"What..." Sophie asked, wiping away the tears with both sleeves, "What did my mother look like at the end?"

Kuroe and Shirona turned to each other. They remembered that very clearly.

"She looked just like she always did," Kuroe said.

"Peaceful and beautiful," Shirona said.

Helica looked just like she had when, as a young girl, she'd finished building Shirona and Kuroe and had gazed upon them with limpid, innocent eyes. She worried about nothing, had no cares in her heart.

Until the very end, Helica had been concerned for her daughter—and at the same time, confident of her safety.

To the end of her life, Helica knew that Sophie hadn't gone off the right path. The two dolls who stood silently by her sickbed, listening to her speak, were the proof.



For a while, naturally enough, the incident at the doll exhibition dominated the front page of the newspapers. From the perspective of the exhibitors, who had been hoping to get attention by creating highly capable clockwork dolls, there couldn't have been a greater irony.

A clockwork doll had gone on a rampage at a celebration held once every five years. People naturally asked a lot of questions about a doll mounted with weapons, and from there it was only a matter of time until nasty stories started coming out about Raul, the president of the company where Sophie had worked.

It turned out he had been lying about the cost of materials, using strange sancta of dubious origins, and more. “More,” by the way, included embezzlement, workplace bullying, and pretty much every other unpleasant thing you can think of. Needless to say, he was arrested. He was going to spend a pretty good stint in jail—if he liked conflict, he was going to get it.

With the man who’d been behind it all now behind bars, things finally settled down. When I picked up the newspaper a week after the incident, I didn’t see any more articles about the doll exhibition. All the headlines were mundane, unremarkable news items.

“Looks like life might finally be a little more peaceful again,” I said.

I studied all the stories on the front page, but none of them were about dolls. The only one that caught my eye was something that seemed to have nothing to do with the subject. *Famous entrepreneur abruptly turns himself in*, it said. *Admits he formerly committed marriage fraud*. The only relation between this story and any of the recent excitement was that, according to police, the man claimed his life was being threatened by dolls, and he wanted to be put in jail in order to keep himself safe.

“Ha-ha-ha! Dolls, threaten people?”

“Some people do say the strangest things.”

The twins chuckled as they scanned the article from where they sat beside me.

Wait... Their eyes didn’t look like they were laughing...

I looked up from the newspaper and glanced around. While I’d been reading, preparations had been coming right along. The rows of chairs were gradually being filled; everywhere I looked, I saw reporters sitting with memo pads or cameras at the ready.

“We’ll be starting soon,” Riviere said from the seat beside me. She was back in her familiar grown-up form, looking calm and collected as she peered up at the stage.

A single clockwork doll stood upon it, covered by a white sheet.

A week since the events at the exhibition, we were at a certain mansion on the outskirts of town, where we were going to reveal a new clockwork doll created by the engineer who had worked for Raul. Riviere, the twins, and I were there as the special guests of the host of this event.

“Thank you all for your patience.” The host, Sophie, climbed up on stage and stood beside the covered object. She took a deep breath, then she made a slow bow to us and the assembled press. “First, please let me apologize for last week’s terrible events.”

It was well understood that Sophie was one of Raul’s victims, that he had used her, and many people had spoken up in support of her. Still, as an engineer, she had been part of what Raul was doing, and I guess she felt a responsibility for that. Even the invitations she had sent to us and the reporters had included words of apology.

“Now I’d like to show you what I *truly* wished to build.”

Not something to hurt people, but something to help people. That, she told us, was her true aim. She sounded so gentle as she spoke. Her fingers brushed the white cloth. In that moment, I was sure that she had simply been taken advantage of by that villain. In truth, she possessed tremendous skill and deep convictions.

She pulled the cloth away, revealing a clockwork doll of such exquisite craftsmanship that it was hard to believe she’d completed it in just a week.

It was made to look like a woman sitting in a chair.

“Allow me to explain the function of this doll,” Sophie said. As I watched her, I smacked the newspaper. I remembered something from a week before, something that had happened just after the incident.

“Looks like it’s over, huh?” Elaina had said, appearing behind me with Riviere as if out of thin air. The mechanical doll was slumped on the ground, robbed of

both its arms. Behind it, Sophie was embracing Kuroe and Shirona.

Yeah, it did seem like everything was all over.

"I expected no less," Riviere said, looking at the toppled machine with pride.

I nodded in complete agreement. "The whip and the ring both did exactly what they were supposed to," I said.

"I was talking about *you*," Riviere said. *Dummy*. She gave me a gentle smack with her undersized hand. "I'm glad I trusted you. Thank you."

"Aw, it was nothing."

"Also, let's take tomorrow off."

"Don't think you'll be back to your usual size?"

"Oh, I will," Riviere said. Then she pointed to the ring on my finger. "But you're not going to be able to move for a day now that you've used that."

Silently, I looked down at the ring. It made the wearer strong, stronger than any ordinary person, but there was a serious kickback.

"My, uh, muscles are gonna hurt pretty bad, huh?" I said.

"Let's just say if you need to do any shopping, you should do it tonight."

Because you sure won't be doing it tomorrow. Riviere gave me a nasty little grin. It was obvious she spoke from experience.

"Well, the most useful sancta always come with a price," I said glumly.

"If you take something beyond your grasp, you'll have to make up for it somehow. It's only natural," she said. "Even prayer was originally intended for situations that *only* prayer could deal with. But the ease of offering a prayer is why the storage room at the shop is almost full to bursting."

"It's a vicious cycle," I said.

"But I'm actually relieved," replied Riviere.

I looked at her with a question in my eyes. She was gazing straight at Sophie and the twins. She looked...happy. Overjoyed.

"I'm glad to know there are still people who use the cathedral the way it was

intended.”

When Helica had found there was someone she simply couldn't reach, regrets she simply couldn't erase, as a last refuge she had turned to prayer.

That prayer had been heard, and now the two girls who had come to life because of it were embracing the weeping Sophie.

“I'm sorry,” Sophie was saying. “I'm so sorry for being a bad daughter!” A moan escaped her, accompanying a torrent of regret. She wept like a child, howling, heedless of the many eyes around her.

Kuroe stroked her back and said, “It's all right.”

“There's always a chance to try again,” Shirona said, running a hand through her hair.

Any time.

Even right now.

You can always start over.

The twins, who looked so similar, spoke almost in unison; and the expressions on their faces seemed to overflow with the love of a mother watching over her child.

I guess the reason I thought of all that when I saw Sophie talking about her newest creation was because she had the same sort of look on her face at that moment.

“Behold!”

She wound the spring and the doll started moving. Sitting in its chair, it could do simple chores, like knitting a scarf or cleaning. It could take on the housework.

“What I sought from my doll was just to make people's daily lives that little bit easier.”

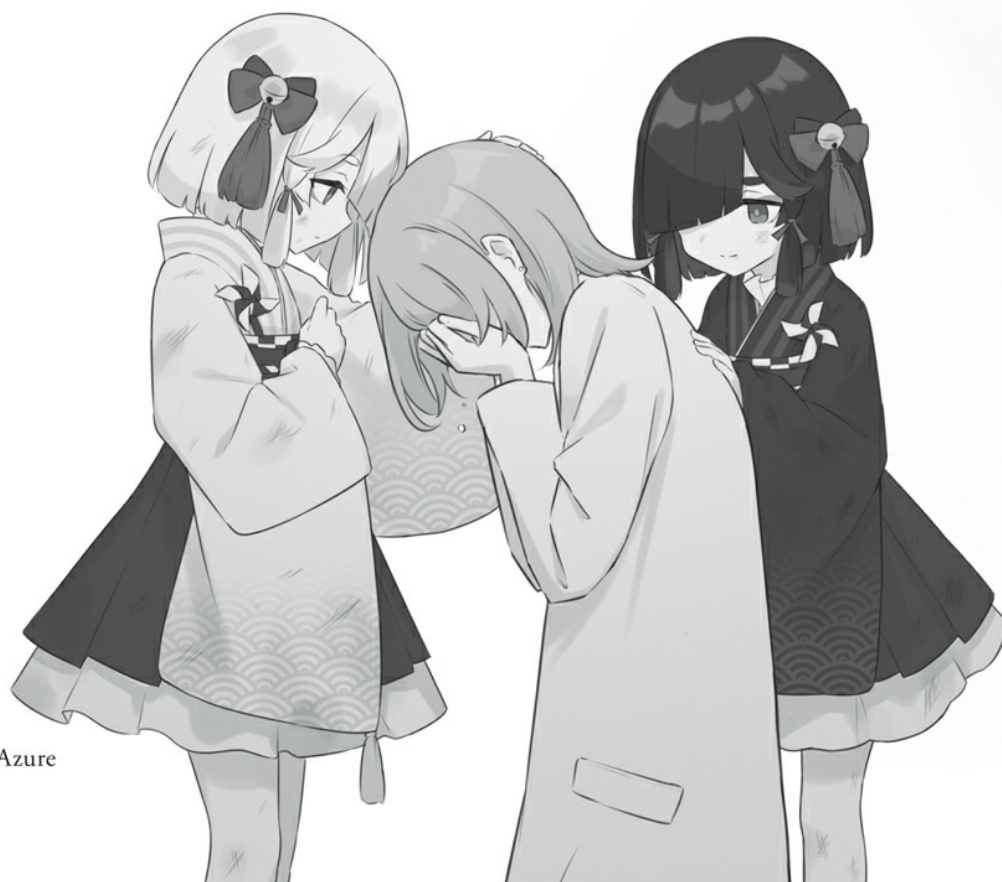
To take the slightest part of the daily burden off their shoulders. That was purpose enough, meaning enough. Sophie's voice was gentle as she spoke.

When she had finished her explanation, one of the reporters raised a hand.

“Do you have a name for this creation?” they asked. A nice, easy question.

Sophie nodded. “But of course.” She set a hand on the beautiful doll’s shoulder and said the name.

It was the name of the one who watched over Sophie, even when she wasn’t there. The name of the one who loved her most.





Welcome to Riviere Antiques! (Reprise)

Riviere Antiques is my shop. I've been running it for quite a long time now. We collect sancta and we sell sancta, but in the majority of cases our customers are upset, angry, or sad on account of sancta. Only a very small percentage of people are grateful for them. No one seems to notice the shop, even though we're right on the main thoroughfare. Sometimes it seems like we're not even there—but we are. You know shops like that, right?

It had always been that way. The view from my desk at the back of the store was always a quiet one.

"Miss Riviere! Miss Riviere! Check this out!"

It started to get a lot livelier a few months ago. About the time MacMillia began working here.

Come to think of it, I feel like we started getting more customers around then, too.

"It's very well done, if I do say so myself," Elaina said proudly. She was another reason we had a lot more customers than before.

They marched up to my desk with a huge pile of photographs.

"What's all this?" I was no judge of photographic quality, but then again, as a general matter I wasn't very tuned into what was popular these days.

That's what I was thinking as I picked up one of the pictures, because all I

could do was squint at it and say, "This is a photograph?"

It was a small square of paper. On it I could see Kuroe and Shirona. The two dolls were facing me and waving.

"Hullo there!" Kuroe said.

"Yay there!" Shirona said.

"We wanted you to know that we've started working in a local restaurant," Kuroe continued.

"We'd love to treat you to a little something if you'll come visit us," added Shirona.

They twirled around to show off their adorable uniforms.

It was a photograph...but they were moving and talking?

"Heh-heh-heh! How about that? Awesome, right? I found this sancta when I was rooting around town the other day," MacMillia said, puffing out her chest.

I flipped to the next one and found a different picture.

"Okay, uh... Uh? MacMillia, is this right?"

It was Freja, the girl who'd started coming by our shop a little while ago.

"Yeah, perfect! You're great! You're adorable!"

"Oh... hee-hee!"

From the photograph, I could clearly hear Freja's conversation with MacMillia, who was presumably holding the camera. What in the world was this?

"It's a camera, but the pictures you take move and talk," Elaina explained at my obvious perplexity. "Looks like we found a sancta even you didn't know about, Miss Riviere."

I was embarrassed to admit it, but she was right. "I didn't know there was such a thing," I said and sighed.

I'd lived in this country a long time now, and I'd started to feel like I had learned everything there was to know about sancta. On some level, I really *hadn't* believed I would ever run across a sancta the likes of which I had never

imagined. I guess you could call that egotism.

Each time I flipped through the pile, I found a new photo.

“Okay, Mackie, here we go!” Linabelle said with a wink, and then she blew a soap bubble through the air toward the camera.

“H-hey, stop that! No taking unauthorized photos of police officers!” That was Henri, bright red and trying to shove the camera away. A woman beside him laughed merrily.

These were all living images of people who had patronized our shop.

“There’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while now,” MacMillia said, looking at me. “I know you’re not great with photographs, Miss Riviere. But I can’t help feeling it’s sort of sad not to have any pictures of you.”

“Sad?”

“Yeah. I mean, when you want to look back and remember something or someone, it’s way better to have a photograph.”

I paused for a long moment. That feeling, that desire to remember things later—when I’d run the shop by myself, I’d never specifically wanted that. So I’d never taken any pictures.

“You don’t seem to like having your picture taken, Miss Riviere, but I thought maybe this would be better. See? You don’t have to press the shutter, you just stand here with the camera going and you get a photograph like the ones I showed you,” MacMillia said, excited.

I still didn’t say anything right away.

Goodness gracious.

I let out a sigh.

“Are you that desperate to have a picture of me?”

“Yeah!” MacMillia answered immediately.

It was obvious that I was going to wind up getting my picture taken, no matter what I said. So I replied, “Fine. Let’s go.”

Better to face the camera head-on than to have them chase me around trying

to get a shot. I stood and looked them both in the eyes.

“That’s what I’ve been waiting to hear!” MacMillia cheered, and then she started setting up the tripod in the middle of the store.

I let the moment play out, watching it all happen. There was a time when I could never have imagined this. Me, deliberately having my picture taken. The shop so lively. Just the fact that I enjoyed *having* someone else in the store was something new.

Maybe it was showing on my face, because Elaina stopped and looked at me, surprised. “Miss Riviere? Everything okay?”

“Oh yes. Everything’s fine.” I gave a little shake of my head and a cough, and then I put on my serious face.

Whatever would I do if the camera caught me looking so happy?



Afterword

It's been about a year since I moved to Tokyo, and when you have this many people in one place, you're bound to run into a few strange ones.

Once when I was standing at a stoplight staring into space, a guy on a bicycle shouted "Congratulations!" as he rode past. At the gym, strangers will come up to me and be like, "Is it okay if I use that machine over there?" And one time, a young woman walking by me on the street abruptly struck a *mie* pose (a thing from traditional kabuki). So, like I said, it takes all kinds.

Then again, I spend my days talking to my cat in a falsetto kitty-talk voice, wandering around my apartment, singing with the cat on my back, and lurking around behind the cat trying to get it to turn around while it's looking out the window—so maybe I'm not in any position to judge. Didn't Nietzsche say something about how when you stare into the weirdo...you're also a weirdo, or something?

Oh! Sidebar! When my cat is looking out the window, the curtains are wide open (by definition), and anyone looking in would probably just see a total freakazoid doing weird stuff by the window. Maybe it's only a matter of time until someone reports me to the police.

I pray and pray no one reports me to the police.

Speaking of praying! Thank you so much for buying Volume 2 of *Riviere and the Land of Prayer*! I'd like to make some comments on the stories in this volume, so make sure you read the book first if you don't want spoilers! All right, ready? Let's go!

A short chapter that serves as this volume's prologue. Freja also gets a moment to show up. I like her. I like those sort of ethereal girls.

Chapter 2: Sentiment Soap

Linabelle gets to be the star here. I think that when you wish for something very convenient, and get it, you have to have the wits to get the most use out of it. All the *stuff* around us is ever-evolving, but I can't shake the sense that that isn't the same thing as human progress.

Chapter 3: A Simple Solution for a Sleepless Night

Several years ago when I was still doing this as a side hustle, I used to mainline energy drinks so I could keep pushing. Then when I started to have stomach problems from lack of sleep, I took digestive medicines to try to get *that* under control... So I know all about living a life where doing one silly thing causes you to do something else silly, which causes you to do something even sillier... Kids, don't try this at home!

Chapter 4: The Secret Party

It turns out there's no part of this story that's just straight comedy, is there? In the mass-market paperback version (the one that came out five years ago, before the reboot), I tried to write in such a way as to conceal MacMillia's gender, but in this newer version, I've been explicit about the fact that she's a girl. That lets me do stories like this one, which are really fun in their own right!

Chapter 5: The Right Way to Use a Mirror

A side story about Elaina earning a little money. I mean, more or less. By the way, the Elaina of *Riviere and the Land of Prayer* is roughly where she is between volumes three and four of *Wandering Witch*.

Chapter 6: An Ideal Story

This one focuses on Henri. When I was roughing out the plot, someone was going to die in this story, but when I finished writing it, I discovered that everyone had survived. Much as with chapter two and the final chapter, this is a kind of story I couldn't write in *Wandering Witch*, so it's a new experience to be able to tackle it here.

Chapter 7: The Doll Exhibition

The famous twins finally appear. They were around in the mass-market paperback version, so readers of that book might have been surprised that “the famous twins” weren't already a part of this story. The reboot gave me a chance to reintroduce them, and I wanted their story to focus on Riviere and MacMillia, so I made it the climax of Volume 2.

Chapter 8: Welcome to Riviere Antiques! (Reprise)

A kind of epilogue to the second volume. Personally, with the twins having now appeared, I think of the first two volumes of *Riviere and the Land of Prayer* as sort of forming a single “book.”

As I keep pointing out, the book you hold in your hands is a reboot of *Riviere and the Land of Prayer* published by GA Bunko five years ago. Although I use the word *reboot*, I redid everything—the story, the world—from the ground up, so you might almost be better off thinking about it as a separate work that happens to pick up the same characters. For me personally, these are all stories I couldn't tell in *Wandering Witch*, so I'm enjoying trying some fresh new things.

What with all this writing and trying new things and so on, we find ourselves past April 2022, and the *Wandering Witch* series is celebrating its sixth anniversary already. That means six years since I made my debut as an author.

A lot has happened in that time!

Wandering Witch has also sold a fair few copies. I hope to keep cranking out series in the future, including *Riviere*, so I hope you'll be there to cheer me on!

By the way—this has already been announced, but one of those series I want to crank out is the upcoming *Wandering Witch Academy*.

Every time I meet with my editor, it's been, "Let's do it! A drama-CD-type thing! Something totally new that has nothing to do with *Wandering Witch*!" And each time, I just go, "Hmm?" (as I stuff my face with *jingisukan*-style grilled lamb). But now that I'm in Tokyo and things have settled down a bit, I started thinking to myself, *You know, a drama-CD-type-thing in novel form would be interesting...* and so it was that my new project, *Five Seconds Before Nana Makes It*, got its start. Jougi Shiraishi, everyone... The man who doesn't listen at all.

Once I started that project, there was talk about doing a *Wandering Witch* special as well, so that's how I started working on *Wandering Witch Academy* at the same time. If you're wondering, I was eating *jingisukan* during that discussion, too. So you can thank the grilled lamb for all of it. Mm, grilled lamb...

I would expect *Five Seconds* to release in early 2023, probably alongside *Wandering Witch*, Volume 20. I think *Wandering Witch Academy* might serve as a special reward for people who buy both books. I expect both of them to be pure comedy, like the *Wandering Witch* drama CD. That's just the plan, mind you. Things could change!

So I've got plenty of plans brewing, but I'm also going to keep pumping out *Riviere and the Land of Prayer*, so I hope you'll keep reading!

Let's share the fun as *Wandering Witch* and *Riviere* both get bigger and better!

What about a *Riviere* drama CD? I'd love to do that...!

Different subject. Now that I've been living in Tokyo for more than a year, I've been challenging myself making lots of different food. Still just the most basic of basic stuff, but it helps remind me how much fun it is to learn to do new things. That stupid ass of an author who confused sake and mirin is gone. Gone!

And if you'll forgive a personal aside, starting in April 2022, I've temporarily become a full-time writer. Was it because making all my deadlines with all these new projects, including *Riviere*, seemed like it was going to be impossible unless I dropped everything else and focused on the writing? Well...that was part of it. But personally, I don't really intend to spend my entire life as a full-time author; this is just a temporary change of profession. I expect to go back to office work after a while. That's just the plan, though. Things could change!

We've covered a lot of bases in this afterword, but so long as I continue to draw breath as a writer, I want to keep conjuring new stories, including *Riviere* and *the Land of Prayer*. I'd like to thank everyone involved in the publication of this second volume of the series, as well as all my readers. Thank you all so much! And I hope to see you next time!

This has been Jougi Shiraishi.

I'll see you in Volume 3! (Note: Volume 3 doesn't have an actual publication date at the time of writing, but I super, super, super want to write it, so...)

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