“Papa!” A high-pitched voice calls out.

“What is it,” A low-pitched one answers.

“We’re here!”

The two have found themselves in front of a two-story, old-school building, with the words *Unknown Inn* sprawled across it. Looking at it, the low-pitched voice shows a surprised look.

“Oh, you’re actually right for once. Also, don’t call me that.”

“Then what should I call you?”

“Haven’t I given you plenty of names already?”

“You get mad when I call you by an old name!”

“That’s true, but I’m an adult and you’re not, so stop being cheeky.”

The high-pitched voice, cheeks puffed in discontentment, turns away.

“Come on, don’t be mad. Will you forgive me?”

“No!”

“What if I give you some sweets?”

“Sweets!” the high-pitched voice answers, tempted.

“So you’ll let it slide? Great.”

“Hey, I still haven’t said I’d forgive you!”

“Will you?”

“…yes.”

“Great.” The low-pitched voice pulls a lollipop out of his pocket and gives it to the high-pitched voice, who immediately starts sucking on it.

“So,” the high-pitched voice says, mouth still filled with the lollipop, “what should I call you for now?”

“Well, considering who I am today, I think a *dapper* kind of name would be best.”

“Dapper?”

“It means classy, like this top hat I’m wearing.”

After a moment of thought, the high-pitched voice calls out, “Charles!”

“Who’s Charles?”

Once again pouting, the high-pitched voice says, “It’s a name. For you.”

“That does sound good, but you came up with it, so I’ll look for something else.”

In response to this, the low-pitched voice receives numerous punches to the leg.

“Ouch, stop it! I was just kidding!”

Still pouting, the high-pitched voice turns away.

“I’ll forgive you if you give me more sweets.”

“You’re going to bankrupt me at this rate.”

“Bankrupt?”

“It means I can’t buy sweets anymore. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“…no.”

“Then will you forgive me?”

“…I will.”

“Great. Shall we go inside then?”

“Wait, I don’t have a name for myself yet.”

“You can’t just choose a name, you know? You have to live with what you’ve got.”

“But you take a different one every time we get to a new place!”

“I can do it, you can’t.”

“Why?”

“It’s because you still need me to buy sweets for you.”

“I can buy them myself!”

“If I give you the money, yes.”

After a moment of silence, the high-pitched voice says, “I’ll tell everyone you’re a big fat liar if you don’t let me pick a new name.”

“Okay, but I won’t give you anymore gratitude if you do.”

“Gratitude?”

“It’s when I give you sweets as a reward.”

“…”

“Alright then, shall we go tell everyone that I’m a big fat liar?”

“…I’m fine with the name I have now.”

“Great,” Charles said, as the duo entered the Unknown Inn. After taking a quick look around, Charles spots a woman, who seems to be the receptionist, and the two start making their way there together.

“Hey, papa, why is everything made out of wood?”

“…”

“Papa!” the high-pitched voice repeats, tugging Charles’ sleeve.

“Oh, were you talking to me? You weren’t saying my name, so I thought you must’ve meant someone else.”

“Hey, *Charles*, why is everything made out of wood?”

“To make it look old-school and authentic.”

“Authentic?”

“Everything that goes against what’s new and better.”

“Why would you want that?”

“Don’t ask me, I’m not the one who made it.”

“Do you have an issue with my inn’s design?” the receptionist suddenly says.

“Absolutely not, fair lady. How could I ever have a problem with a magnificent creation such as this?” Charles answers, a wide, polite smile on his face, as he takes off his hat and bows slightly.

After clicking her tongue, the apparent owner asks, “So, you want a room for two?”

“We will take whatever you have. I believe you have gotten a call from a mutual acquaintance of ours on the subject.”

“You’re the ones Scott was talking about, then?”

“Correct. I am Charles, the little one is Hayley.”

“One child and one adult, huh?” She looks Charles over quickly. “His description of you was a bit different.”

“Oh, I simply wanted to try a gentlemanly kind of look. I managed to get a top hat and the right kind of clothes, but I sadly was unable to get a cane.”

After a short pause, the owner says, “Got it. I can let you stay here for about three days…”

“Great.”

“…if you get on all fours and beg.”

After waiting a moment due to shock, Charles asks, “What?”

“Oops, sorry, let some of my bedroom habits slip through.”

“Bedroom habits?”

“You see,” the owner starts speaking, “when a man and woman –”

After interrupting the owner by flicking her forehead, Charles says, “There’s no need for you to know.”

Pouting again, Hayley says, “You never tell me anything.”

“If you’re sick of getting bullied, I can teach you how to dominate men.”

“You will?” Hayley’s eyes are almost sparkling.

“Of course,” the owner says, shortly before getting another forehead flick.

“Don’t tell her anything weird. I will be helping a damsel in distress, so I’d like to leave Hayley to you for a moment, if possible.”

“Damsel in distress?” The owner takes a quick look around the lobby. “You think a woman carrying a heavy bag is a ‘damsel in distress?’”

“A civilised man such as myself helps any lady in need, even if it is no more than carrying a bag.”

“You never help me carry things!”

“I said lady for a reason.” This response is met with another pout. “I trust you will be able to distract her for some time, Miss Owner.”

“No problem. I’m great at pleasuring those who obey me.”

“I am starting to reconsider leaving her with you.”

“Yes, sorry, bedroom habits slipping through again. I’ll keep her entertained.”

“Great. I will come get you once I am done, Hayley.”

“Okay!”

Charles quickly walks to the woman, who has put her bag on the ground to take a short break.

“Do you, perhaps, require some assistance, Miss?”

The woman briefly looks over to Charles, who’s bowing slightly, hat in his hands.

“I’m quite fine, thanks.”

“Are you certain, milady? It would be no effort whatsoever for me to transport your bag for you.”

“I’d appreciate it if you left me alone. I don’t need some stranger’s advances.”

“I assure you I had no such intentions in my mind, not even for a moment. I had simply wanted to offer a helping hand to a troubled woman.”

“Well, I don’t need it.” She picks her bag up and, with some difficulty, starts walking again.

“Understood. May I at least ask your name, however?”

“…It’s Olivia.”

“I am called Charles. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

She continues walking away and turns the corner without responding.

“Not a good start,” Charles says to himself, sighing, as he goes back to Hayley and the owner.

“Next, shall I tell you the story of how I got an extraordinarily stubborn piggy to swear obedience to me?”

“No, you will not.” Charles flicks her forehead once more. “I trust you refrained from telling her anything inappropriate, yes?”

“Of course not. Right, Hayley?”

“Nope, nothing!” The two then exchange knowing smiles.

He decides against asking further. “What room are we staying in?”

“Almost everything is occupied, room fifteen’s the only one we had left. It’s a one-person room, but there’s a couch as well. Turn the corner over there, go up the stairs and you should be able to find it on your right side. Here’s the key.”

“Great, thanks. Shall we get going?”

Hayley nods.

“Bye Miss Owner!”

“Bye-bye.”

The two had just started climbing the stairs, when Hayley speaks up.

“Hey, Charles, how did Miss Owner make sure we were the ones Mister Scott called about?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, you only told her a mutual friend had called her. That doesn’t say anything about it being Mister Scott specifically. We might as well have been people who go around saying that in inns until we find one that just happened to have been called by a friend earlier.”

“That is a good point, yes, but there are other ways to recognise someone.”

“Yeah, but Miss Owner said Mister Scott’s description of you was different, and she didn’t even know we’d be an adult and a child. You’ve only had the name Charles since we got to the inn as well, so that couldn’t have been it, and you also didn’t move in any unusual ways during he conversation, so it couldn’t have been a signal.”

“That is correct, but it was still confirmed.”

“How?”

“Think about it yourself.”

“Hmm…It must’ve been something you said then. The only things you said between the first time Scott was mentioned and when Miss Owner decided to let us stay were our names and something about your appearance and, since it couldn’t have been the introduction, it must’ve been that thing about the way you look. Was that a message you’d decided on already?”

“Correct.” He pats her head. “I can almost hear myself talking when you reason like that.”

“I’m imitating you after all.” He chuckles slightly.

“Room fifteen…looks like we are here.” Charles takes a quick look around the room. “Great, it seems they have indeed got a phone.”

“Does that mean you’ll be making calls here all day?”

“Correct. I have been making great process lately, so I have got many leads.”

“Then can I go explore?”

“Go ahead, as long as you promise not to leave the premises.”

“Yay!” Hayley said, as she runs out the door.

“Close the door!”

After walking back to the room, she looks inside, sticks her tongue out, and runs off again.

Then a sigh comes, followed by the sound of someone walking and saying, “Refrain from running in the hallway as well, please.”

Again, Hayley ignores him, before tripping over her leg and falling.

In the background, the words *serves you right* could be heard, coupled with a door closing and another one, right next to her, opening.

“Are you alright?”

“Ah, yeah, I’m fine,” Hayley says, as she gets up, dusting her clothes off. “Hey, you’re the woman who turned Charles down!”

“It’s Olivia. Are you that man’s daughter?”

“That’s me! I’m Hayley!”

“Don’t become like him then, you hear me?”

“Aw, don’t say that. I know what you *really* think about him. I’ll support you!”

“It sure doesn’t sound like you know.”

“Ms. Owner explained it to me. You’re rejecting him so he’ll come back for more later, right?”

“No, no, no, absolutely not.”

Hayley tilted her head in confusion. “But if you aren’t given candy, you’ll only want it more afterwards?”

“You know, you really shouldn’t be listening to Rachel. She and her type of men are like…a different breed of human. If you want advice for normal people, you should ask a normal person, like me.”

“Okay, then, how do I get Charles to like me more?”

“Hold on. I noticed this earlier as well, but you call your dad ‘Charles?’”

“He doesn’t like it when I call him papa.”

“I really don’t understand why you’d want to get closer to someone that doesn’t even properly acknowledge you as his daughter.”

“It’s the reason I do.”

Olivia chuckles. “You’re a smart girl, aren’t you?”

“Charles says it’s one of the two good things about me.”

And then she sighs. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“So you’ll help me?”

“Well, I did tell you to ask me. How long have we got?”

“We’ll be staying here for three days. Will that be enough?”

And then she sighs once more. “It’ll be a start.”

“I love starting!”

“Then you can start by coming inside. Hallway isn’t exactly the best place to have a strategy meeting.”

“But I love hallways!”

“And you don’t love rooms?”

“You’re right, I do love rooms as well. Almost as much as I love strategy meetings, actually. Alright, I’ll head in.”

As she walks in, she notices many vials and bottles filled with colourful liquids scattered across the place. A thick, but pleasant smell permeates through the room. “So, this is what a normal person’s room looks like?”

“Well, not really.” She laughs. “I wouldn’t call perfumery the most ordinary hobby of all.”

“Then what would you call it?”

“I’d say it’s uncommon, but not strange.”

“But strange means unusual, which means uncommon, doesn’t it?”

“It does, oftentimes, but, well… let’s just drop it and get to the topic at hand.”

“Aw, but I want to smell the perfumes first.”

“We don’t have that much time, you know? I’ve got a visitor coming soon.”

“How soon is soon?”

“In a few hours.”

“Then we’ve got more than enough time for a few!”

“Well, I suppose we could. But only for a bit.”

“Can you define ‘a few’ for me?”

“I’m bad at definitions.”

“You ended up trying every single mixture I have!”

“But they all smelled so good! Plus, you were having just as much fun telling the story behind each one!”

“That’s true, but we’ve still only got thirty minutes left now.”

“Hmm, I guess we should get started then. By the way, why have we been ignoring the phone?”

“The phone?”

“Yeah, the phone. It’s been going off for a while now.”

“Hold on, let me check.” She starts walking towards it.

“What a weird number. I’ve never seen so many eights.”

“The number had a lot of eights?” She suddenly speeds up and quickly mashes the keys, before putting the phone to her ear.

“Why are you in such a hurry all of a sudden?”

She shushes Hayley, then starts talking into the phone. “Hello, honey.” “Sorry, I didn’t notice it going off. It was on vibrate for some reason.” A moment passes, and she laughs. “But what’s up? Why’d you call?” Her expression turns sour. “You’re going to be late? Did something happen?” Her face goes red. “Oh, shut up, you. Alright, I’ll see you in a bit then.” She hangs up.

“Who was that?”

“My visitor. It looks like our half an hour has become a full hour.”

“Great, then we’ve got some extra time!”

Wistfully, she answers, “I guess we do. Did your father say anything about being back on time?”

“Nope! Charles only told me not to leave the premises.”

“Alright. Let’s quickly get started then.”

“Can I ask a question first?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“What are premises?”

Olivia chuckles. “In this case, it’s the inn.”

“Okay, got it.”

“Let’s get started for real then, this time.”

“One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Is he really called Honey?”

Olivia laughs. “It’s not his name, sweetie, it’s just a nickname. Like calling your father ‘papa’”

“So nicknames are based on relations?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

“Then what’s your relation to the person on the phone?”

“It’s one of love.”

“Like me and Charles?”

“That’s not the kind of love I’m talking about. What I mean is romantic love.”

“Ah, Ms. Owner’s told me about that!”

“Forget what she said. In my love, there is no dominant side. It’s one side needing another, and the other side needing them back. Mutual dependency is what you call it.”

“But if one person needs another person, won’t that make the other dominant and give them free reign?”

“That’s the point of love, Hayley. You don’t take advantage of the person you love like that, precisely because you love them.”

“I think I get it now. But isn’t it the same for normal love?”

“Well, yes, but in case of romantic love, you would want to spend all your time with the other, and be their biggest priority when they’ve got time themselves.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“How so?”

“Charles always tells me that your safety should be priority number one.”

Olivia laughs again. “Yes, I suppose health and safety is more important. But, anyway, we should be focusing on a way to get you closer to your dad first.”

“Right! You got any ideas?”

“Nothing concrete, but we can start with trying to make him more dependent on you. If you become an irreplaceable part of his life, the love will come eventually.”

“Irreplaceable?”

“It means you do something for him that no one else can do.”

“I already do that.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, I’m doing it right now.”

“You are?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, what is it then?”

“It’s…” Hayley hesitates slightly.

“It’s what?”

“Um, Charles told me not to talk about it.”

“You’re just making me more curious.”

“I really can’t say, sorry.”

“Well, that’s alright, but I won’t take it into consideration for my plan.”

“Your plan?” Her eyes shine in excitement.

“My plan.”

“Looks great.”

“I told you not to underestimate my cooking prowess.”

“You didn’t seem the type on first impression.”

“My whole job concerns taking care of people. How could I not?”

“You make a strong argument.” With two plates of food in hand, Charles leaves the counter. Turning around, he bumps into someone. He barely keeps the plates balanced.

“Close one.” He breathes a sigh of relief.

“Ah, are you alright? Sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“I should be the one apologising, I was the one who turned around so suddenly.” He looks back at the owner. “There is really only one person who could have prevented it.”

“What? I thought it’d be interesting.”

The man laughs. “You’re awfully frank for a gentleman, aren’t you?”

“I apologise for the breach of etiquette, my good sir, as my current role had briefly slipped my mind.”

He laughs once more. “You really have a knack for attracting interesting people, don’t you, Rachel?”

“It’s a talent.”

“Well then, I will be heading towards the table.” He gestures to the plates. “Would hate to let it go cold. You two have fun now.”

“Enjoy your meal.” She turns towards the man. “And I assume you’re here for the usual?”

“Yup.”

“You should be able to find her in her room then.”

“I already called her, so everything should be figured out.”

“Great. If only everyone were like you and had things figured out ahead of time, instead of just taking them as they come.”

“The table is within earshot of the counter, you know?”

“It’s my own inn, of course I know.”

The man chuckles. “It always astounds me how well you get along with your customers.”

“It’s a talent.”

“I’ll be off then.”

Suddenly, a voice excitedly yells, “Charles!”

“Keep it down, Hayley. And don’t run inside, before you fall again.”

“Ah, hello,” she says to the man, as she slows down to a walk.

“Hello there,” he answers, and they pass each other by.

“Sit down, Miss Owner’s made us something to eat.”

“Thank you, Miss Owner!”

“What did I tell you about keeping it down?”

“What did you tell me about thanking people?”

“And what did I tell you about being cheeky?” Hayley shrugs. “Sit down, let’s eat.”

“Okay!” She grabs the chair next to where Charles was sitting and moves it to the other side of the table, taking the plate with her as well. Charles raises an eyebrow as she does this.

“Is something the matter?” She asks.

“Nope, nothing,” he answers, and they both start eating.

“So, where did you come from?”

“The basement. It’s a really long hallway, with turns everywhere, so it took me a few minutes to get there.”

“You must have been running again, right?”

Her eyes wander around. “Maybe.”

Charles looks at her sternly, while she keeps looking away guiltily.

“…yes,” she mutters,

“There’s not much point in feeling bad about it. However, you wouldn’t want to cause trouble for anyone, would you?”

“Of course not!”

“Then keep it in mind.”

“Okay.”

“Good girl. I would give you a pat on the head, but I cannot reach, unfortunately.”

“Yeah, it really is too bad.” A slightly sad look shows up on her face.

“If only there were something you could do about it, right?”

“That would be nice.”

He raises his eyebrow again. “Well, alright.”

They eat the rest of their meal in silence, before heading back to their room.

“And that’s the last thing that happened today.”

“Nothing especially useful then.”

“Sorry.”

“For what? It’s not your fault there was nothing to find.” He motions to the bed. “Now go to sleep, it’s getting late.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Don’t be selfish.”

“If I sleep on the bed, you’ll have to sleep on the couch. I don’t want that.”

“You don’t have to be so considerate of me. I’ve slept in far worse places.”

“But…”

“No buts, just lie down. If you do not, I’ll start wondering why you did not ask me to sleep in the bed with you, like you usually would have.”

Hayley opens her mouth to speak up, but closes it again.

“How about I start by asking Miss Olivia about it? She looks like she would know something.”

Hayley starts fidgeting.

“Just obediently go to sleep for now. I still have more work to do.”

“…okay,” she says meekly, before lying down.

“Why’re you sleeping on the table?”

Charles looks up drowsily to see Hayley shaking him awake.

“It’s very comfortable.”

“Really?” She rests her head on the table. “You’re a liar.”

“I guess I must’ve fallen asleep while working last night.”

“Why do I have to go to bed early, while you can stay up so late you fall asleep like that?”

“Because I’m an adult, and you’re not. Now leave me for a bit, I’m going back to sleep.”

“Then can I go explore again?”

“Sure, why not.”

“What about breakfast?”

“I’m sure Miss Owner can prepare something.”

“What about snacks?”

Charles sighs, reaching his hand into his pocket and emptying it on the table. “Take this and go. I’m too tired to do anything more.”

After she’s run off, Charles gets up and lies down on the bed. Before he falls asleep, he wonders how a table can lie more comfortably than a couch, while silently cursing the owner for not properly warning him about it.

“You’ll be late if you don’t get going now.”

“It’ll be worth it.”

“Oh, shut up, you!”

“Miss Olivia!” Hayley yells, as she runs up to her, while she’s talking to a man in the hallway.

“Who’s this?”

“I’m Hayley!”

“She was my guest until you arrived, yesterday. I gave her some advice.”

“About that, it didn’t really work.”

“I see you two need to talk, so I’ll take my leave first.” He kisses Olivia on her forehead. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Until then.” She waves as he heads off. Then, with a sad smile on her face, she turns to Hayley. “So, what happened?”

“He’s onto us!”

“He knows the plan?”

“He knows there’s a plan, and he knows we came up with it together.”

“But that’s not what’s important, right? As long as he doesn’t know the actual plan and what it’s for, it should be fine.”

“What do you think he does for a living? He could figure it out in his sleep!”

Olivia raises an eyebrow. “What does he do for a living?”

“He, like, solves problems and stuff.”

“Half the jobs in existence do that.”

“But he, like, goes around and does it.”

“So he’s a handyman?”

“No, he solves mysteries.”

“A detective?”

“No, you pay those money to do something.”

“How does he live off it if he doesn’t get paid for his job?”

“He does get paid!”

“You’re only confusing me more and more.”

“He gets paid in help!”

“Help?”

“He helps you, then you help him! It’s a trade!”

“A trade of what?”

“Favours,” Charles suddenly appears and speaks up. “I help someone, then I ask them for a favour in return. It is quite simple, really.”

“Charles? I thought you were still sleeping!”

“Not possible, with how loud you were being. It is still early, some people are trying to sleep, so please keep it down.”

“Got it,” she whispers in response.

“Also, the hallway is not the best place to discuss secret plans.”

A look of realisation dawns on Hayley’s face and she nudges Olivia. “Door’s still unlocked,” she hears, then runs into the room, Olivia following right behind.

“Okay, well, I’m pretty sure he’s onto the plan now, which may not be good.”

“I know, right! What do we do!”

“For one, don’t stress too much about it. Staying calm is a good start.”

“Got it!” She takes a deep breath. “Okay, I’ve calmed down.”

“It doesn’t look like it. You’re still fidgeting.”

“Really?”

“Sitting down might help.”

“Okay.” She sits down, taking another deep breath. “I’m calm.”

Olivia decides to ignore her leg still bouncing nervously.

“Then, let’s come up with a new plan of action.”

“I’m telling you, there are no spirits living here.”

“It’s not just a spirit, it’s an apparition!”

“There are none of those here either.”

“What is going on here?” Charles asks, intruding on a conversation between the owner and an unknown boy.

“It seems some nut job thinks this place is haunted.”

“I’m not a nut job, and I *know* this place is haunted.” The young man pulls out a device. “My radar says so!”

“A radar that detects ghosts? Sounds unbelievable.”

“It’s never failed me before.”

“Has it ever succeeded?” Charles asks.

He averts his eyes. “That’s not what’s important.” He looks back at the owner. “What’s important is that there’s definitely a ghost residing here, and I have to find it!”

“This is not a playground for wannabe ghost-hunters. Now, could I please ask you to take your leave?”

With a smug look, he answers, “No can do, lady. I’ve got a room reserved, after all.”

“Good news, Charles. A better room has just opened up. You won’t have to sleep on that couch anymore.”

“Really? Great. Gave up on trying to sleep there after only ten minutes yesterday. Never heard a bigger lie than ‘you’ll get used to it.’”

“My apologies for that. Not like I could’ve done anything to help, regardless.”

Charles shrugs. “What will breakfast be? I am starting to feel hungry.”

“Wait, wait, wait, you can’t just send a customer off like that,” the man stammers.

“Why not? I’ll return your reservation fee, don’t worry.”

“Hold on,” he says, turning towards Charles, “she can’t just do that, can she?”

“Sorry, lad, but owners of inns and hotels are allowed to send off anyone they think would cause trouble for them and their other customers.”

He looks between Charles and the owner, whose expressions both say *You’re out of luck,* before finally resigning himself with a sigh. He clasps his hands together, as if in prayer, and kneels.

“Please let me stay here! I don’t have anywhere else to go if you kick me out! I promise I won’t cause any trouble!”

“There is no need to worry, lad.” Charles reassuringly puts his arm over the boy’s shoulder.

“Sir!” His expression brightens as he looks into Charles’ eyes.

“A few nights in the streets will only make you tougher.”

The boy’s eyes widen as he realises his presumed ally isn’t one, and he begs the owner with a renewed vigour.

“Please don’t send me out! I’ll pay extra, and I’ll leave my device right here with you if you let me stay! Please!”

The owner scratches the back of her head, unsure of what to do. “I wouldn’t make you pay extra, I’m not an extortionist. But I’m not sure about letting you stay.”

“Isn’t it fine? Has he not shown you his resolve? He even swore not to cause trouble, right?” Charles looks at the boy, who starts nodding frantically. “Is that not enough?”

She sighs. “Alright, I’ll let you stay. But if you do anything inappropriate, you’ll have to leave right away. Understood?”

“Yes! Roger! Affirmative!”

“Well then. What’s your name?”

“It’s Josh, ma’am.” Rachel takes a look at her documents.

“Josh Eardon?”

“That’s me.” The owner starts rummaging through a drawer.

“What would an Eardon be doing in an inn like this? Do you not have the capital to afford a proper hotel?”

“Well…I’ve got some circumstances.” He shows a gloomy expression.

“Here’s your key, Sir Eardon.”

“Ah, thanks,” he says, as he takes the key out of her hand. She keeps her arm extended, however, and Josh looks at it awkwardly, unsure of what to do.

“The money.” Charles says.

“Ah, of course.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a handful of coins and drops them on the owners open palm. She sighs and starts counting.

“Okay, I’ll be off then.” Josh starts to walk off, before being stopped by Charles, who grabs him by the back of his collar.

“Show me your key.”

“Um, alright.” Charles takes a look.

“Follow this corridor, take a left, your room will be the third one on the right.”

“Right, thanks.”

“Additionally, you’d do well to stay until Miss Owner gives the word.”

“It’s fine, he can go.” Charles lets go of him.

“Yes, then I’ll be off.”

Once he’s out of earshot, Charles speaks up.

“Not your type?”

“The opposite. In contrast, I think you’d fit the bill pretty well.”

“Should I be flattered?”

“I’m sure you’d look great grovelling on the floor.”

He chuckles.

“No flick this time?”

“What, you wanted one?”

“You can’t tease a teaser, you know?”

He shrugs. “It was worth a try.”

“You can keep trying, if you want. It’ll be worth a laugh or two.”

This time, the owner’s actions are met with appropriate punishment, followed by an “ouch.”

“I will be taking my leave shortly, so if you would please take care of Hayley for me.”

“That’s fine, but I have no idea where she is.”

“If you see her, tell her I’ve gone out, that you’re in charge and that she shouldn’t leave the premises.”

“Will do.”

“Come to think of it, I am not completely sure she even knows what premises are.”

This warrants a small laugh from the owner.

“I’ll convey the message.”

“Great. I do, however, need to speak to someone before I leave and pack a few things, so I will delay my departure for the time being.” He starts walking away from the counter, following the left side of the hall.

“What about breakfast?”

“Make it to go!”

“Any idea where Charles is?”

“He went out. Said you shouldn’t leave the inn and that I’m in charge.”

Hayley suddenly starts standing completely upright, military style. “Permission to continue exploration mission?”

“Granted.”

She discontinues her stance. “Yay!”

“Don’t you want to eat lunch first?”

“It’s a tempting offer, but I’ll pass.” She returns to her earlier pose. “I’ve spotted unknown personnel entering the area and must go scout ahead.”

“Mission confirmed. Good luck out there, soldier.”

Hayley leaves the counter, following the corridor and taking a left. She knocks on the third door on the right.

“Hello?” Sounds of shuffling and tumbling can be heard from inside, before the door opens.

“Who’s this?

“I’m Hayley!”

“And what’re you doing here?”

“I noticed a face I hadn’t seen around before, so I thought I’d come and say hi. So, hi!”

This warrants a smile. “Hello.”

“So, what’s your name?”

“Ah, I’m Josh. Josh Eardon.”

“Nice to meet you!” She sticks out her hand, and he shakes it.

“Likewise.”

“Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

“So, soldier, what is your business in our base of operations?”

“Ah, are we doing military role-play?”

Hayley shoots him a disapproving look.

“I mean, sir, are we doing military role-play, sir.”

“Affirmative, soldier.”

“My mission is the uncovering of the ghost in this inn, sir.”

“Ghost!?” Hayley exclaims, breaking character.

“Yes, sir, the ghost. I spotted one in this inn with my detector device. I lent it out a moment ago, however, so I can’t show you.”

“That’s scary! I mean, um, that’s scary, soldier. You’ve got guts, going gallantly ghost-wards like this.”

“I don’t think it’s guts or anything like that, sir. You may not have noticed, but I’m quite spineless. It’s just, my granduncle used to own this inn, before he got scared away by a ghost that started haunting it. My parents thought he’d gone insane, but I believed him. I’ve always been interested in the supernatural, but I’ve never dared to come close to any, but this time, I thought, since it was for my granduncle’s sake, I could come here and find the truth.” He scratches the back of his head nervously. “Sorry, I don’t know why I’m saying all this all of a sudden.”

“I think you’re amazing, soldier. Having the courage to come here for the sake of your granduncle, it’s inspiring, soldier.”

“Thank you for your kind words, sir, but I’m afraid my mission’s been compromised.”

“Compromised?”

“Yes, sir.” He sighs, dejected. “I’m only allowed to stay here on the condition that I don’t look any further into the matter.”

“No, what does compromised mean?”

“It means it can’t be done any more.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. I mean, affirmative, soldier, that’s very unfortunate.”

“Yes, sir. It’s an awful start to my mission, sir.”

“Ah, but I can do it for you!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, yeah, no problem. I’m already wandering around constantly anyway, might as well look for the ghost while I’m at it.”

“Didn’t you think it was scary?”

“Did I?”

“Well, whatever. Thanks for the help.”

“Not a problem! I’ll ask Charles to help too.”

“You know Charles? It’d definitely be a reassurance, having his help.”

“Yep, he’s great at solving mysteries. First things first, though, tell me about the ghost. Do you know anything already?” As she asks this, she grabs a notebook and pen to write on.

“I don’t know much about it. All I really know is that it’s an apparition and that it’s definitely in this building.”

“What’s an apparition?”

“It’s a type of ghost that’s bound to a building, which is usually where they died. When they’re still new, they can’t even go out the door. During this time period, they’re called ethereal.”

“Ethereal?”

“It means you can’t touch them, but they can’t touch anything either. You also can’t see them, so at this point, you won’t even notice they’re there. As they get older, however, they become tangible, so they’re visible and capable of touching things. During this stage, they can still float, but they can’t go through objects anymore. Eventually, they’ll become capable of switching between ethereal and tangible, and they can move further and further away from the building.”

“Can they still become invisible?”

“According to my research, they can no longer become invisible once they’ve reached tangibility for the first time.”

“Also, are there any limits to their ethereal or tangible forms, or can they change completely freely?”

“I’m not sure about this, but I think they can only become ethereal for a limited amount of time per day.”

“Alright, I got it. I’ll be on the lookout for anything ghostly.”

“That’d be amazing, thank you.”

“You’re welcome! I’ll be off then, I’ll tell you if I find anything.”

“Be careful not to get spotted by the owner. I really don’t want to get kicked out.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry.” She puts her notebook away, and Josh catches a glimpse of it. “People never realise when I’m gathering information.”

“…”

“Is something wrong?”

Josh points to where she hid her notebook. “Can I see that real quick? I want to read what you wrote.”

“…no, you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“You just can’t.”

“Well, what if I…” he snatches the notebook, “just take it?”

“Wait, don’t…”

“You just doodled a ghost in here!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine!” She taps her head. “I’ve got it all stored up here!”

“Then what’s the point of the notebook?”

“Charles says it has a ‘profound positive effect’ when people think you’re taking notes.”

Josh sighs.

“If the expert says it, it can’t be false, I guess. It did make you seem more trustworthy.”

“Not just seem: I am extremely trustworthy, after all.”

“If you say so, I’ll be putting my faith in you. Sorry, I mean, good luck with your mission, sir!”

“I won’t disappoint you, soldier,” she says, as she walks out the door.

“Hey, Olivia, good timing. I’m about to go out to the garden, you want to come along and pick out some herbs for your perfumes?”

“If it’s okay with you, that’d be great.”

“It’s not a problem at all, although there are a few that you shouldn’t, but I’ll tell you then.”

“What’re you two talking about?”

“Hayley? I was about to go do some work on the garden, would you like to come help?”

“Sure!”

“Before we go, Hayley, I’ve got something for you.”

Hayley’s eyes light up. “A present? I love presents!”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but it’s just breakfast.”

“Don’t worry, I also love breakfast!”

“I’m sure you do. We’ll be outside, so come find us once you’re done.”

Hayley quickly shovels down the food and joins the two of them, shortly after they go outside.

“That was fast.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Olivia laughs. “I don’t think that’s how you use that idiom, Hayley,” Rachel says.

Ignoring her, Hayley continues, “your garden sure is amazing. Do you take care of it yourself?”

“I get help sometimes from enthusiastic visitors, plus Olivia does her fair share to help too. I still do the majority myself, however.”

“You sure are amazing. It’s like you can do everything.”

“There are a million things I can’t do, dear. I can’t make fragrant perfumes like Olivia, or make a ghost detecting device like Sir Eardon, or, well,” she stops and thinks for a moment, then says, “I don’t know what Charles does, exactly, but I’m sure there are things he can do that I would never be able to. There are just a few things I can do well, but that’s the case for everyone, isn’t it?”

“You’ve got a humbleness unbefitting of someone so capable, don’t you, Rachel? Not that it’s a bad thing, though.”

“I really think you’re overestimating me.”

“I really don’t think I am. I mean, you learned almost everything about running an inn, completely on your own, and you do such a good job at it that I’ve never seen someone leave dissatisfied.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re great!”

“I don’t know what to say, you two. I’m flattered.”

“For now, how about *we’re here.*” The three have arrived at a closet, filled with gardening tools.

“That’s a good point. We’re here!”

“This work’s quite tiring.”

“We’ve been at it for a while, after all. Don’t worry, though, we’re almost done.”

“Do you enjoy doing this, Miss Owner?”

“I quite like it, yeah. It attracts more customers too, so it’s absolutely worth the effort.”

“How about you, Miss Olivia?”

“I don’t especially like it, but it’s nice having something to distract me sometimes. I get quite a valuable bounty out of it as well, as I can get a lot of inspiration for perfumes while working here, and I can take the plants with me right away as well. Come to think of it, Rachel, why didn’t you start with a garden earlier? You always liked taking care of the flowers you have inside, right?”

“Well, it eats up quite a bit of time and is expensive to boot. It took me a while to open up enough time and then a while to get the project started too. I’m sure it must’ve been the same for you, getting into perfumery.”

“True.”

“Actually, Olivia, I could plant some orchids for you, if you want to try making a vanilla-based mixture.”

“That’s fine, thanks. I dislike vanilla.”

“Really? You look like the type who loves it. You have such mild tastes, usually.”

“Polar opposite of you, right? You S.”

Rachel chuckles.

“Anyway, Hayley, if you could take care of that corner there we’ll be done with this side.”

“I’m on it.”

“Olivia, could you…” she stops talking abruptly, as she looks to the entrance of the inn. “What’s your boyfriend doing over there?”

“I don’t know…he shouldn’t be home for a few more hours. Sorry, I’m going to check up on him.”

“That’s fine. I’ll bring your stuff to your room later.”

“Thanks.” She runs off.

“Anytime.” Rachel looks up to see Hayley standing there. “Are you already done with the corner?”

“No, but I’ve got something I want to ask you about.”

“Ask away.”

“I was just wondering what me and Charles look like to you. Miss Olivia thinks Charles doesn’t consider me his daughter, but you’ve spoken with Charles a lot more. I want to know what you think.”

“You want to know what it looks like to me, huh?” She takes a moment to think. “Well, for me, it seems like he definitely does acknowledge you, but he’s too embarrassed to have it broadcasted to the whole world.”

“Embarrassed?”

“Yep, embarrassed. You haven’t been together with him for your whole life, right?”

“How’d you know?”

“It looked like it. I’ve got quite an eye for people, you see. Anyway, I’m quite sure he loves you to bits, but he’s having a hard time truly coming to terms with the fact that he’s a father, and that’s why he has you call him by his name.”

“So you don’t think I need to do something to become closer to him?”

“I think you need to keep doing what you’ve been doing until now.”

“I can do that!”

“And you should. So, has your query been sufficiently answered, soldier?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Then get back to work!”

“Okay!”

Charles passes by Olivia, who rushes away from the inn, without even seeming to notice him. Charles looks back at her, surprised, and catches Hayley and Rachel working on the garden as he does so.

“I see you two are hard at work.”

“You’re already back, Charles?”

“Feel free to leave, Hayley. I’ll be fine doing the rest on my own.”

“Really? I’ll be off then!” She runs towards the entrance, then slows down to a walk as she enters the inn, remembering what Charles said.

“You take care of all the flora yourself as well?”

“I get help sometimes.”

“If I did not know any better, I would think you overwork yourself only because you like it.”

“I might like it a little bit.”

“Oh? Opening up to the other side of things?”

“I let all those feelings out during work, so I’m fully ready to dominate when needed.”

“Very intelligent.”

“Charles, hurry up!”

“Looks like my time is up. Good luck with your work.”

“Likewise.”

“So, where were you off to?”

“I was out visiting a friend of mine.”

“What’s that thing you’re holding?”

“A radar.”

“That detects?”

“That is what a radar does, yes.”

“No, I mean, what does it detect?”

“Ghosts.”

“Like Josh’s device?”

“Yes, exactly like that.”

“Can I see it?”

“You can ask Josh after I’ve returned it.”

“Can’t you just show it to me real fast?”

“Nope.”

“Stingy.”

“Not my problem.”

“Oh, speaking of problems that aren’t yours, can you help me find the ghost in this inn?”

“Miss Owner told Josh not to look into it any further, you know?”

“That’s why I’m doing it, not him.”

Charles chuckles. “Fair enough, but I don’t think I’ll go against Miss Owner’s wishes and help you investigate. Do tell me if you find anything though.”

“So, you’ll take the help, without giving any back?”

“Yep, just like you’ll take the sweets I give you without giving any back.”

Hayley grabs the one remaining piece of candy out of her pocket and hands it over to Charles. “Happy now?”

“I already was.”

“Can I have it back then?”

“If you return the device to Josh for me.”

“Okay!” She grabs the device and walks out the door. Charles follows behind her.

“Why’d you ask me to do it if you’re coming along anyway?”

“You want the candy or not?”

“…I do.”

“You know what to do then.”

Charles stops in front of Olivia’s room.

“Looks like Olivia forgot to lock her door. The key is still in the lock.”

“You’re right. Wanna go in and check the perfumes?”

“You cannot just go into people’s rooms without their permission.”

A man’s voice sounds out from the inside. “It’s fine, come on in.”

“See? It’s not a problem!” She opens the door, and the two are greeted by a familiar face, sitting on the bed. A faint scent of vanilla fills the room.

“Hey, you’re Miss Olivia’s guest from yesterday!”

“Hi there, Hayley. And you’re her father, then?”

“Charles. Are you Miss Olivia’s husband?”

“Boyfriend, but I’m well on my way there. Name’s Gregory.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Sir Gregory.”

“Likewise.”

“Can I call you Greg instead? Gregory’s a pain to say.”

“That’s fine, most people do.”

“Nice to officially meet you then, Mr. Greg!”

“Again, likewise. Anyway, do you two have any idea where Olivia’s gone off to?”

“I saw her run off in a hurry a few minutes ago.”

“She must’ve had something important to attend to. I really shouldn’t have dropped in like I did.”

“What happened?”

“I was feeling a bit under the weather at work, so I headed back early. I thought it’d be nice to have her take care of me, but it looks like I was just being a bother.”

“You two still live separately then?”

“Yes and no. We technically live together, but she’s got this place rented indefinitely, because she prefers working on her perfumery here. Something about taking inspiration from the area and all that – I’m sure you know what those creative types are like, right? Anyway, she spends a lot of time here, so I usually come to visit her and stay over quite often.”

“This place did not give the feeling of a temporary place to stay.”

“Miss Olivia knows Miss Owner extremely well too!”

“That as well. Do you consider this place a second home, then?”

“It’s too small to house two people, so not really. It’s so packed with her creations, in fact, there’s not even space for me to keep spare clothes.”

“Speaking of her creations, what is your opinion on her perfumery?”

He thinks a bit.

“I think it’s great that she’s following her dreams.”

“But?”

“Well, I’d love to live together. Don’t like being used as a guinea pig for it either.”

“She tries them out on you?”

“She always says it fits me, but I strongly doubt it.”

Charles takes a look around the room.

“Is that sleeping powder?”

“Oh, yeah, we bought some of that. We have a bit of trouble sleeping sometimes, so we thought it’d be a good solution. We try to use it as little as possible, though.”

“Ever had a problem with it?”

“Back when we didn’t know the dosing too well. If you take a bit too much of that stuff, you’ll sleep like a rock, but if you take too little, it’ll have almost no effect. It’s quite amazing really.”

“I will keep it in mind if I ever need it. In any case, we will leave you to your rest.”

“Good idea. I’ll need to be well-rested tomorrow to catch up on today’s work, but it was fun talking to you two. And, Hayley, thanks for keeping Olivia company. She gets a bit lonely sometimes, although she doesn’t admit it.”

“My pleasure!”

“Goodbye then, Sir Gregory.”

“Bye!”

“Yep, goodbye.”

When they’re about to walk out the door, Charles turns around.

“One more thing. Can I have a sip of your water? I am feeling a bit parched.”

“Go ahead.”

“Thanks.” He drinks a bit. “Well then, goodbye.”

He waves as they go out the door, before lying back down.

“Mr. Josh?”

“Is that you, Hayley?”

“It’s me!” The door opens in response to this.

“Hi there, Hayley.”

“Hi! I’m here to introduce Charles and give back your radar.”

“Why don’t you come in first?”

“That’d be nice. Oh, here you go!” She hands him the device.

“Thanks.”

“Well then, Charles, this is Jo-”

“Ah, it’s fine, you don’t need to introduce us. We’ve already met.”

“Yes, but have you been introduced?”

“No?”

“Here’s your chance then.”

“Um, okay? Thanks?”

“You’re welcome.”

“Don’t forget to actually introduce us then, Hayley.”

“Oh, right. Charles, this is Josh. Josh, this is Charles.”

“Pleasure to be introduced, lad.”

“Pleasure’s all mine.” They shake hands.

“Now then, to the topic at hand.”

“Oh yeah, Mr. Josh, get this! Charles won’t even help us find the ghost.”

“That’s too bad. I would’ve appreciated it.”

“No, that’s not quite right. I’ll be sure to give assistance where possible.”

“But you told me you wouldn’t help!”

“I said I wouldn’t help investigate. It’s a big difference.”

“Tch.”

“Now, to get to the important part. Lad, can you tell me every bit of information you’ve gathered on this ghost?”

“Everything? Even the parts I’m not sure about?”

“Leave nothing out.”

“I’d love to, but it’d probably take until evening.”

Charles procures a small notebook from his pocket. “Don’t worry, I’ve got time.”

“That took way too long.”

“You could’ve left at any time, you know.”

“But it was interesting!”

“Everything comes with a sacrifice.”

“I know, and it was worth it, but now it’s night time already! We’ve only got one more day left here now!”

“Too bad, so sad.”

Hayley walks in silence for a moment, then realises something.

“Hey, Charles, you haven’t gotten any favours here yet, right?”

“That is correct.”

“Then we can’t leave tomorrow already, right?”

“I get the feeling this will not be a problem.”

“Why?”

“Just a hunch.”

Hayley sighs.

“So we absolutely have to go?”

“We will see.”

“If you get my hopes up for nothing, I’ll hit you.”

“And I will take it in stride.”

A long pause follows.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Feel free.”

“Do you know what Miss Olivia and I have been talking about?”

“I have got an inkling.”

“Then, what do you think I should do?”

“Are you asking advice on how to deal with a person from the person himself?”

“You said asking is never a bad thing.”

“I never said it could not be inappropriate.”

“Even if it is, I want to know the answer.”

Charles thinks for a moment.

“How about some general advice?”

“General?”

“You can apply it no matter when.”

“Okay, tell me then.”

“When you’re wondering how to do something, there are two ways to look at every method. How it has worked in the past, and how you think it will work in the future.”

“But how do you put it into practice?”

“In this case, look at the point you started at. Think, *have I made progress using my method?* If so, think, *what is my end goal, exactly* and *will this bring me there?* Do this, and you will always come to an answer, although its correctness is not always guaranteed.”

“I’ll try it.”

“I am sure Aristophon would be glad.”

“Aristophon?”

“The writer who described this method. Maybe, when you are older and wiser, we can read up on him in the Great Library.”

“That sounds nice.”

“But, for now, it is about time you go to sleep.”

“Okay!”

Hayley lies down in the bed, while Charles continues to work at the table. After a while, Hayley speaks up.

“You’re not going to sleep on the table again, are you?”

“It may be inevitable.”

“Inevitable?”

“There’s no way to stop it from happening.”

“I know one.”

“Being?”

“You come sleep in the bed with me!”

“I humbly refuse.”

Hayley pouts.

“So you won’t work with me, even if I’m doing what you *told* me to?”

“Advisors do not help follow the advice, you know?”

Hayley turns away, annoyed.

“I hope you break your neck on your stupid table.”

Charles chuckles. “Sweet dreams to you too.”

“What is on the breakfast menu?”

“Nothing. You’ll have to purchase the premium inn set to get your three meals a day. Double the cost.”

“Double? That is practically extortion.”

“It comes with many other additions as well. I promise it’ll be worth your while. As a bonus, I’ll even show you the absolute height of my service, though you’ll have to take a trip to my sleeping quarters for it.”

“You make an enticing offer. Alright, I’ll upgrade my package, though I’ll refrain from the bonus.”

“Aw, that’s my favourite part.”

“Here’s the money.”

“Let me count…Zero…Yeah, that’ll do. I’ll see what I can whip up for you.”

“Appreciated.”

“I don’t get it. You didn’t even give her anything.”

“I gave her something priceless.”

“Being?”

“A smile.”

“If paying in smiles was possible, I’d be the richest girl in the world.”

“It’s not about the smile, it’s about bringing people joy.”

“You’re not that mushy, are you?” A voice comes from the entrance.

“Miss Olivia!”

“Hi there, Hayley.”

“Why were you outside?”

“I was taking a walk.”

“Enjoying the good weather while it lasts, huh?”

“While it lasts? The sky’s perfectly clear.”

“But there is a northern wind, is there not?”

“Maybe? I wouldn’t know where north is from here.”

“You can take my word for it.”

“But what does it mean?”

“It means a peaceful, sunny morning will become an eventful, rainy afternoon.”

“I don’t think you can predict the course of the day based on the weather.”

“You would be surprised at the symbolism present in nature.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, Mr. Smart. You’d know.”

“I had no intention of bragging.”

“You’ll have to wait a bit, you two, I’ll have something ready in ten minutes or so.” Rachel takes a look at the scene, after coming out of the kitchen. “Sorry for interrupting, you were talking about symbolism?”

“It is quite an intriguing topic, if I do say so myself, although my conversational partner does not seem to care much for it.”

“I think it’s interesting!”

“What do you not think is interesting?” Charles turns to Rachel. “Flowers have meanings too, don’t they? Are you knowledgeable on the subject?”

“I know my fair share. Anyway, Olivia, have you seen Greg? He was supposed to pick something up this morning, but he has yet to show up.”

“He wasn’t there when I woke up, so I figure he went off to work early.”

“He’s not one to go back on his word, not without a notice at least.”

“Maybe he had an emergency?”

“I suppose.”

“Well then, I’m off to my room. I got a few ideas for some new concoctions.”

“You’re not worried?”

“Greg knows how to take care of himself.”

“True.”

As Olivia turns the corner, Charles speaks up.

“‘Pick something up,’ huh? What could it possibly be?”

“Why don’t you figure it out yourself, *mystery solver*.”

“I already have.”

“Why haven’t you said it then?”

“Would it not be an incredible bore if every mystery was solved right off the bat?”

“What? But I wanna know!”

Charles looks over to Hayley, then smiles, having got an idea.

“Why don’t you guess? That would be quite amusing, no?”

“Huh?” Hayley looks bewildered

“That does sound fun.”

“Hey!”

“Doesn’t it?”

“I don’t wanna!”

“You’ll never know otherwise.”

“Fine…” She thinks for a moment. “Maybe breakfast? Since it’s morning.”

“Oh, sh-. I forgot about breakfast!” Rachel runs away from the counter in a hurry.

“You know, Hayley, you don’t have to make an appointment to get breakfast here.”

“Oh, right. That’s true.”

Charles looks in the direction of the rooms. “Hey, is that an Eardon I spy?”

“Hm?” She follows his line of sight. “It is!”

“Why, hello there, lad.”

“Good morning, sir!”

“Wait, I still don’t know what Greg’s mystery pick-up is!”

“Too bad, eh?”

“Greg? Mystery pick-up?”

“A customer was supposed to receive an unknown item from Miss Owner this morning, but he never came, despite it being out of character for him.”

“No one saw him? Shouldn’t we be worried about him more than about the object?”

“Olivia said he’ll be fine!”

Josh looks confused.

“That’s his girlfriend she’s talking about.”

“Ah, okay.”

“Although she didn’t seem to have seen him either.”

“So he disappeared without anyone having seen him?”

“You could put it that way, yes.”

“Wouldn’t that mean he got…” his face fills up with fear, yet a hint of excitement. “Spirited away?”

“I suppose that would be an appropriate conclusion, based on the knowledge you’ve gathered.”

“I get it…the ghost is scared of me exposing him, so he’s trying to intimidate me.”

“Wouldn’t it just kidnap you then?”

“That’d be too obvious, for one, and I’ve also taken countermeasures. It’s good that the ghost has finally decided to show its face. This is my chance to capture it!”

“Calm down. Don’t forget what I said, lad.”

“What do you mean?”

“About the appropriateness of your conclusion.”

“But you said it was appropriate, didn’t you?”

“Not quite.”

Josh tilts his head in confusion, then looks to Hayley for help. “Do you have any idea?”

“Hold on, I’m thinking.”

“You know, Hayley, you look the cutest when you focus on something.”

“You’re not just saying that because I’m quiet then, right?”

Charles averts his eyes and is kicked shortly after. Josh laughs at the exchange.

“This doesn’t bring us any closer to what Charles meant, however.”

“Ah, I get it,” Hayley interjects. “He means that it’s only an appropriate conclusion if you know only what you do.”

“Indeed. I also meant that it’s only one of the possibilities.”

“Can you two hold on for a moment? What are you trying to say?”

“What I’m trying to say is, the late bird does get the worm, *sometimes*.”

“That tells me even less, sir.”

“You’ll get there.”

“Don’t worry Josh, you’re not alone in your cluelessness!”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“You are making a mistake there, Hayley. Clueless would put you two in a negative light, while you aren’t necessarily at fault for not understanding right away.”

“Then what should I have said?”

“Something like-”

“Can we get back on topic? I feel like we probably shouldn’t be wasting time now.”

“You will get what I said in a moment.”

“What?”

“Alright, breakfast is served. Oh, Sir Eardon, didn’t see you there.”

“Thanks, Miss Owner. Now, lad, you haven’t eaten, right? Have some of mine.”

“Can I?”

“Feel free.”

He reaches for the plate, then something dawns on him.

“Oh, I get it.”

“There you go.”

“What? I’m still confused.”

“Is something going on?”

“Not much, we were simply discussing Sir Gregory’s disappearance. There is something extremely suspicious about it.”

“You think so too?”

“Definitely.”

“Stop ignoring me!”

“There’s a more important matter at the moment, Hayley. I was thinking, how about we do a quick *inspection*.”

“Inspection? You want to take a look around his room?”

“Affirmative.”

“I don’t think I can let people snoop around a customer’s housing.”

“According to the *law*, you are allowed to look into any suspicious activity in your personally owned real estate.”

“Hm. I can’t argue with the law, can I?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I’ll get the reserve key.”

“Great.”

“I feel so out of the loop.”

“I get you.”

“Don’t talk to me, you traitor! You said you understood!”

Josh reels back.

“Don’t worry about it, laddie. You still have the wisdom I have bestowed upon you.”

“I wouldn’t know how to apply it, though.”

“I am confident it will come back to help you out at a later time.”

“I’m back.”

“Let’s go then. Hayley, stop sulking already.”

“Hmph.”

“I can see your ‘sneaky,’ longing glances to my pocket, you know. You’re not getting any sweets now.”

“Fine.”

“Great. Josh, if you could be our lookout for Olivia.”

“No problem, sir.”

“Lookout? Didn’t she go to her room?” Hayley asks.

“She went outside earlier.”

“Really? I guess I must’ve been too busy looking away and pretending to be angry to notice.”

“Likely.”

“Are you two coming or not?”

“So, find anything yet?”

“I have found many things. Like that.” He points haphazardly around the room. “And that. And that.”

“Find anything *relevant* yet?” Rachel speaks annoyedly.

“You could say that.” He grabs a stack of clothes from the ground. “This here.”

“Used clothing? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ask Hayley, I’m sure she knows.”

“I do?” She looks up from the perfumes she was smelling.

“You could.”

Hayley thinks for a bit.

“Oh, I remember! Greg mentioned yesterday that there’s no space for spare clothing here.”

“Which implies?”

“He definitely didn’t leave of his own accord!”

“Very good.”

“So he really might have been kidnapped?”

“That means Josh could be right!”

“Sir Eardon? Did he say something?”

“He claimed it was a ghostnapping!”

“That is neither grammatically nor logically correct.”

“Yeah. There’s no way it’s a ghost.” Rachel agrees.

“Actually, I was talking about the use of the fictional word *ghostnapping*, as the context would seem to imply it meaning a kidnapping by a ghost, even though a kidnapping is not done by a kid. It is inconsistent and inexistent, therefore it is grammatically and logically incorrect.”

“Makes sense. I won’t use it again.”

“Great. Josh’s apparition abduction theory, however, holds up quite a bit better.”

“It’s not a ghost.” Rachel insists.

“I am not saying it *is* a ghost, I am saying it *could* be a ghost.”

“And I’m saying it definitely isn’t a ghost.”

“The way you say that makes it sound suspiciously like you know something we do not.”

“That’s not it. What I mean is that we shouldn’t assume it’s something supernatural.”

“Well, how do you explain him disappearing without his girlfriend noticing if it’s *not* a ghost!” Hayley interjects.

“Simpler than you think.” Charles walks to a corner and holds up a bottle that was there. “Puts you out like a rock.”

“That’s…sleeping powder?”

“If he were to have *coincidentally* had slightly too much of this last night…”

“…you’d be able to take him away without even a reaction from him.”

“Wow. How lucky that you asked him about these things yesterday.”

“You never know when a bit of additional knowledge will come in handy.”

“The way you say that makes it sound suspiciously like *you* knew something we didn’t.”

“I am always prepared, nothing more.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.”

“Disregarding that, can I ask you a question, Miss Owner?”

“Feel free.”

“What flowers were in that bouquet you made?”

“White chrysanthemums and hyacinths. Do I need to tell you the meanings?”

“I am well aware.”

“Wait, what are you two talking about now?”

“Think, Hayley. Who was going to get something from Miss Owner again?”

She ponders for a moment. “Oh, I get it.”

“Very good. Miss Owner, if you could please take a look around the inn and check if he is around somewhere. Ask Josh to help you out.”

“On it.”

“What about me?”

“Should I help?”

“Give me a report of yesterday’s happenings, first.”

“Everything?”

“That will take too long. Start with anything that struck you as unusual about those two.”

“Then, about Olivia…For one, she seems to care a lot about the deepness of love, despite not seeming to be able to tell.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she talked a lot about true love and surface level love, but it didn’t look like she really knows the difference between the two, so I was wondering if she may be wrong about the love she’s feeling herself.”

“You mean she’s got ideals about love, and you think she may be fooling herself into believing her love’s like that?”

“Yep.”

“There are many similar types, who act in extreme manners when their ideals are not met, so this could definitely be relevant. Anything else?”

“She said some things about dependence that seemed to contradict themselves. *Love is mutual dependence,* despite not depending on Greg at all.”

“If we’re speaking of emotional dependence, I reckon she does. Although, if she thinks that dependence lacks reciprocity, she may, once again, act out.”

“Also, she doesn’t like vanilla!”

“What do her tastes have to do with anything?”

“It’s unusual!”

“Some people have different tastes. It’s normal.”

“Not in this case, because –”

“Sir Gregory smelled like vanilla.” A look of realisation dawns on Charles’ face, as he interrupts Hayley. “I think I understand what’s going on.”

“You do?”

“Surely. I can most likely solve this mystery, but I need to make a call first.”

“Do you still need me?”

“I need you to help Miss Owner find those two.”

“I’m going then!”

“Wait. One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“You said Sir Gregory called Miss Olivia two days ago, right?”

“Yep.”

“I need that number.”

“I’m telling you, she doesn’t listen!” Rachel looks panicked.

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

“You tell me. We don’t know enough.”

“Then just wait for…ah, speak of the devil.”

“I’m not so evil.”

“It’s good that you’re finally here, Charles. What were you doing?”

“I performed a quick interrogation.”

“Interrogation? Who?”

“A certain someone’s secretary.”

“Well, in the meantime, we’ve managed to find Greg. He’s in the storage shed, but…”

“…Miss Olivia’s blocked herself in with him?” Rachel nods. “Figured it’d be that.”

“What else have you figured out? She insists that nothing is going on there, but, for some reason, I don’t believe it entirely.”

“There do seem to be a few things going down, however, for privacy’s sake, I will refrain from putting them out in the open.”

“What? How do you want me to stop her if you won’t tell me anything?”

“You don’t have to stop her. You can leave that to me.”

“Anyone there?” He knocks on the door.

“What, so, since Rachel can’t convince me to stop, you’re here now?”

“Not at all. I’m simply taking a look at the garden and enjoying the sun before the rain starts.”

“And you coincidentally ended up right here in front of the door, looking for me?”

“I figured I could have a nice little chat while I basked.”

“Yeah, right. You’re just here to tell me off in that ridiculous, veiled manner of yours.”

“I’m not, however. Why would I?”

“You don’t think I’m in the wrong?”

“Not necessarily.”

“You only say that because you don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I have an inkling. *Taking a page out of Rachel’s book, reaffirming his loyalty,* something like that.”

“…”

“I will interpret that as a ‘yes.’ The remaining question is, ‘Why?’”

“No, it’s ‘Why should I tell you?’”

“The answer to that is the same as to why you’d tell Hayley about those ideas about love of yours. *To tell*.”

“Pft. If telling is for the sake of telling, then is asking for the sake of asking as well?”

“The reason to ask is not *to ask*, but *to hear*.”

“So you’re only here to hear?”

“Correct.”

A silence follows, which is broken, later, by the first falling raindrops and, shortly after, Olivia’s voice.

“Fine, I’ll tell you. But you better not talk to all the others about it.”

“You have my word.”

Another silence.

“Go ahead, then, ask away.”

“I figured you’d tell the story.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“I’ll inquire, then: was I correct in my first assumption?”

“Just about, yeah.”

“And then, for what reason are you doing that?”

“Why would I possibly want to *reaffirm his loyalty*?”

“I’ll rephrase my question: what is your deduction based off?”

“The lingering scent of his secretary’s perfume, the way he’s been looking down lately, as if he’s got something to say. The bouquet as well, what else could it mean, asking Rachel to gather flowers for him? He’d need a lesson in faithfulness, whether they’re to apologise or as a parting break-up gift.”

“How’d you know the gift was flowers?”

“What else would he ask Rachel for?”

“Fair enough. Then– ”

“Hold the phone. I want to ask something too.”

“Feel free.”

“You said you don’t necessarily think I’m doing something wrong, but what’s it based on?”

“The things I’ve been asking you.”

“So, the situation?”

“Not quite. Rather than what the situation is, it’s what you *think* it is and *on what basis* you think as such. I already know exactly what has happened, after all. The only unknown for me is the information you’ve gathered.”

“…you know everything that’s gone down?”

“Correct.”

“How did I bring him down here, then?”

“High dosage of sleeping powder in his water, then you dragged him here during the night.”

“What kind of bouquet was it?”

“White chrysanthemums and hyacinths.”

“What’s the meaning of that?”

“The chrysanthemums are symbols for loyal love. Hyacinths usually mean an apology.”

“What did– ”

“It’s my turn for another question.”

She sighs. “Go ahead.”

“You aren’t truly sure he cheated, are you?”

“I– ”

“No need to answer, actually. Just ask your next question. *The important one*.”

She takes a deep breath, to prepare herself

“…did he really cheat?”

Charles waits a moment.

“He did not. His secretary attempted to seduce him, but he shut her down. The bouquet was to apologise for not telling you about it earlier and to promise faithfulness going to the future.”

She finally releases the breath she’s been anxiously holding in.

“Relieved?”

“Partly. I’m mostly…regretful. I’ve really done something horrible, haven’t I?”

“I suppose you have, but I don’t think you’re at fault for it.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You acted appropriately based on the situation. Basically, the one to blame is the one who brought that situation forth.”

“No one like that exists.”

“Oh, there definitely are ones who could’ve done this. Up in the sky.”

“What, you’re blaming the gods themselves?” She laughs, due to the craziness of the idea.

“Yep, I’m blaming the gods themselves.”

“You’re crazy.”

“If I am, it’d be their fault too.”

She laughs again.

“Well then, I will be taking my leave. The rain is starting to be quite an annoyance.”

“You were right when you said it’d start raining, huh?”

“Of course I was. I know exactly how they made things, after all.”

“How’d it go?”

“Perfectly. If I had to describe the way it worked in one word, it would be charmfully.”

Rachel chuckles, the tension broken.

“Charmfully?”

“You ever heard the expression, *it worked like a charm*, Hayley?”

She chuckles as well.

“Where are Greg and Olivia?”

“They are inside the shed, still. I reckon they have a few matters to talk through.”

“I’ve got one question left on my mind, still. What exactly happened?”

“I’m confused too!”

“We’ve been trying to piece things together, but to no avail. You seem to know what went down quite well, however.”

“I suppose I am quite informed on the matter. I will leave the details for her to tell, if she wants to, but to put it simply, she thought he had cheated and wanted to teach him a lesson.”

“That’s it? There’s no ghost involved?” Josh, who had left earlier, asked as he returned.

“You sound disappointed. Would you have preferred him being spirited away?”

“…of course not.”

“So we can put the idea of the inn being haunted behind us?”

“Oh, absolutely not. Rather, we can focus on it more wholeheartedly.”

“Really?” Josh says excitedly.

“No way. I don’t know what research you’ve been doing, but, like I’ve said before, I don’t want any of it.”

“Aw…”

“No need to worry about it laddie. I have already finished, after all.”

“Finished? How much have you been snooping around here?”

“Quite defensive, are you not? Regardless, I am sure you would be quite pleased when I say there is no ghost problem here.”

“See? I said you wouldn’t find anything supernatural here.”

“I would not be so sure about that.”

“You’re saying there *is* something here?” Josh’ eyes light up again as he says this.

“Nothing *you* need to concern yourself with, Sir Eardon, if you still wish to stay here,” she bites at him.

“Right! …yes,” he retreats.

Rachel’s eyes dart suddenly to the entrance. “Olivia?”

“Hey.” She waves briefly while looking at the scene. “Could you all give the two of us a moment?”

“As you wish.” Charles bows slightly. “I will, however, be back shortly, though it may already be late by then.” He exits the scene.

“Wait up!” Hayley yells, running after him, before being scolded once more for not listening.

“…okay. Bye then.”

“Yes, I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Olivia steps out the entrance. Rachel lays her head down on the desk.

“Tired?”

“Extremely. Too much happening in one day for me. It’s a relief that it’s finally over.”

“I am saddened to be the bringer of bad news then, but I have still got unhandled business as well.”

Rachel sighs. “Right, there was that too.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow? I’d like to rest a bit.”

“I am afraid this is the last day of our lodging, so such an option does not exist.”

Another sigh as she painstakingly sits up straight again.

“Bring it on then.”

“No need to be so tense. I simply wanted to talk to you about the case I have been investigating these past few days.”

“That’s all? You made it sound much more important than that.”

“I believe this matter can only lead to a mutual positive result and therefore deserves some urgency.”

“Can you stop talking in that fake *gentleman* way then? It’s a bit of a pain.”

“I do no such thing; frankly, I find it preposterous you would even imply it.”

“Right, of course. My apologies, good sir.” Two small smiles can be seen, the tension broken.

“Going back to the topic at hand, however, I have been looking into a certain murder trial, which ended without a guilty verdict being spoken, as a result of a lack of evidence. I believe this was caused by an inadequate investigation.”

“When was this, exactly?”

“Approximately 30 years ago. In fact, I spoke to you about this, because you might have heard of it. It is about a girl who went by the name of Raika. Does it ring any bells?”

“…no.”

“Are you positive? The victim was found dead in this inn, after all.”

“I’m sure.”

“Is that so? I’ll go on then: the incident took place while this inn was still under different ownership. A man called James Eardon was the innkeeper. He was generally considered a kind person, although he seemed to have trouble finding female companionship. Despite being of the prestigious Eardon family, he wished to take care of things on his own, without relying on his ties, but the maintenance of the inn began to become too difficult for him alone. That is why he took in a homeless teenage girl he found on the streets and taught her how to help, in return for giving her lodging.  
That girl was Raika.”

“I see. Well, this all happened before I ever came here.”

“I assumed you would have some knowledge of the prior situation, but I suppose that is not the case. Regardless, the story is not done quite yet. Raika was quite talented, so, with her help, the inn flourished. She quickly became somewhat of a mascot, even. Many assumed the two were a couple, and it seems James would not have minded it that way. Raika, however, wholeheartedly continued focusing on her job, so as not to ruin the chance she’d be given.   
Two years later, she was found raped and murdered in the basement. The prime suspect was James, but there was insufficient proof, so he was released, declared innocent.”

“…that took quite a turn, didn’t it? Is that why the inn became vacant?”

“Not quite. James continued to work here, although frequent customers said he looked perpetually dejected. He made things work, although he never tried to find help again. Eventually, an extreme drop in popularity came to be: rumours had started to pop up that the place was haunted by the girl who had died, Raika. James, after the passing of time, was chased out by the ghost and left on the brink of insanity, living in fear of it, according to what I have heard.”

“It’s a good thing the ghost is gone now then. I wouldn’t want my customers to be bothered by one.”

“I would not be so sure about it being gone. I visited an old friend of mine, who just so happened to be a remnant of the dead as well, to test out the laddie’s device, and it turned out positive. It is almost certain that the ghost is still here.”

“Didn’t I say you couldn’t look into it any further?”

“I simply thought speaking to the deceased may allow me to find new clues.”

“And? Any luck getting something out of the ghost?”

“I am getting there. Additionally, it seems this particular type – one that’s bound to a building – is called an apparition. After approximately 20 years, they apparently reach full physical form and you can’t even tell them apart from a normal human at a glance, so it becomes quite difficult to find them. For all I know, I could be talking to one right now!”

“…”

“Now that I think about it, you reopened the inn around 10 years ago, didn’t you? That corresponds almost exactly with when Raika’s ghost would have become *real*, so to speak. Is that not a funny coincidence?”

“What are you implying?”

“Oh, nothing at all. I simply thought I would point it out, since I just so happened to notice. Returning to the subject of the apparition, it seems they can also go ethereal and phase through walls at will, after twenty-five or so years. If, for example, they wanted to go to the basement from here, judging by the infrastructure I have observed, it would only take them a maximum of a minute, back and forth, rather than the few minutes it took Hayley earlier. Speaking of Hayley, she said you somehow returned from checking the basement within a minute of departing when you were looking for Olivia. Is that not *another* funny coincidence?”

“…out with it already. Just say what you’re trying to say.”

His fake smile drops from his face and he looks her straight in the eye. “You are Raika, are you not?”

“And if I were?” She responds, undeterred.

“If that were the case, I believe some kind of deal could be struck here.”

“What, you keep the secret and I help you out in return?”

“No such thing. I would never ask a favour in return for an intangible thing such as silence. No, what I am talking about is mutually beneficial. I said so at the start of our conversation as well, did I not?”

“Then, what is it you’d be able to do for me?”

“Well, although I have been unsuccessful in my own investigation, this is mostly due to a lack of avenues to gain information, leaving me unable to look into everything. I would, however, be perfectly willing to trade in a favour from a friend of mine who does have access to such things. I am confident he would be able to find enough evidence to convict the murderer.”

“A friend?”

“Inspector Hawkes.”

Rachel shows a surprised face. “*The Hawk of the police force*? Him?”

“The one and only. He received my help in a few of his first cases, before he made his big break, so he owes me quite something. I am sure he would not mind thoroughly examining the matter.”

“That’s quite a commitment, isn’t it? Then, what can I give you in return?”

“That should be obvious, no? What is the one thing you are most capable of providing?”

“Yeah, I get it. You want to come to my room after all and get some *punishment* for snooping around against my will, right?”

She gets flicked on the forehead and the two of them share a brief laugh.

“But, you know, all of my rooms are still booked or occupied. I don’t think I can extend your lodging.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem, because I have got an inkling that a room is going to open up before long, so I will come back to you later.”

“Alright, since those hunches of yours have all been correct so far. In the meantime, considering you know practically my whole life story, I think it’s only fair you lay some of it bare as well.”

He averts his eyes. “Oh I would *love* to, *however,* I do recall having some prior business to attend to so I will have to cut this conversation short while I-”

“You’re not getting away from me that easily, you know?”

“I am well aware, of course, but I seem to have spotted Hayley over there, so I think our best course of action is to enlist her as a temporary replacement for the *meantime* between now and the moment I am back to announce the vacancy of the chamber I was speaking of earlier. Yes, that sounds like a perfect plan, no?”

“Tha-”

“Okay, great.” He waves at Hayley, who excitedly runs over. “It is good that you are here, Hayley. If you could please entertain Ms. Owner while I am gone for a moment that would be lovely, thank you.”

“I can do that!”

“Great!” He pushes Hayley a bit closer to the desk. “Then, with that, I shall be off, bye.” He speeds away and disappears behind the corner.

“Why was he talking so fast?”

“He must’ve been flustered.”

“I only wanted to make him talk about his past.”

“Ah, he never talks about that, even when I used to pester him about it constantly.”

“Well, at least, now that you’re here, you can tell me about how your current relation came to be, right?”

“I’d love to!”

After turning the corner, Charles found a young man sitting down, in a way that he couldn’t be seen from the counter, but would be able to hear what was being said.

“You seem pensive, laddie. Penny for your thoughts?”

Josh looks up. “I was just thinking that, this must be what you *really* meant earlier today. I’m the bird, and everything you talked about was the worm. Were you already aware of everything at the time?”

“Who knows?”

With a wry smile, Josh responds. “If you’re going to act the fool, I’ll play along too and tell you all about me, as if you don’t know. Is that alright?”

“Feel free.”

“When I was younger, Father was always busy with work, so I often talked with my granduncle instead. He’d tell me all kinds of stories, and I’d sit there all day listening to him. To me, he was always simply the gentle grandpa, you know? So it was especially scary when he told me about the ghost that haunted him back when he worked at his inn. That was what sparked my interest in the supernatural. I didn’t care at all about what Father wanted me to do in the future. I only wanted to come here, get rid of the ghost, and come home to a proud granduncle, who would say *Well done* while patting my head, so I spent years researching. When Father got mad at me for wasting my time away on ‘nothing,’ I yelled at him that I’d prove the worth of what I’d been doing and dashed out the house, straight to here. But nothing is ever that simple, is it? If only I’d known about what Granduncle had done earlier.”

“So, what will you do now that you are aware of it?”

“I…will go home and confront Granduncle. I’ll hear what he has to say for himself. Then, I’ll apologise to Father and actually listen to him for once – it’s about time I stop stalling that. And afterwards…well, I don’t know yet.”

“That is quite enough of a plan, I believe. The future is still far, you will have time to decide the rest.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He sighs, before his gloomy face finally fades, being replaced with one of silent determination. “Could you pass the message on to the owner? I’m gonna start packing.”

“Not a problem.”

Josh starts walking away, but stops to say one last thing.

“Thanks again for helping me find out what really happened here. If you ever need me for something, come find me. I’ll do what I can to help.”

“I will keep it in mind. Goodbye, Sir Eardon.”

“Not gonna call me *lad* anymore?”

“I believe you have graduated from that now.”

Josh smiles. “Then, please. Until we meet again, sir.”

“…and that’s how we ended up here.”

“Quite a story. I never thought Charles would be so benevolent.”

“Are you badmouthing me?” Charles interjects.

“Of course not!”

“It’s a compliment, you know? Can’t you take one?”

“Maybe if I knew what the subject matter was in the first place.”

“I was telling Miss Owner about how we met!”

“It was truly a tearjerker. And, now that you’re back., you can finally replace your replacement and tell me personally about your past.”

“I will refrain from doing such a thing.”

“What? You said you would when you got back!”

“During the interim between the room opening up and the end of our earlier conversation was when I would. I have confirmed the premature departure of a tenant, namely Josh Eardon, so that time period has already come to pass.”

“I won’t let you weasel your way out of this so easily.”

“Too late for that.”

“Come on! Can’t you just tell us?”

“You as well, Hayley?”

“I want to know! Please?”

“I really would rather not.”

“But-”

“Give it up, Hayley. If he insists that much, there’s no point in trying to force it.”

Hayley sighs. “Fine…”

“Thank you.”

“No need to say thanks. I’m the one who started it, after all. Plus, I can understand not wanting to talk about the past. Although I still think it’s unfair you get to know mine, but not vice versa.”

“Understandably so, but I will not change my mind.”

“Wait, what have you two been talking about? What past does Miss Owner have?” Hayley interjects.

“Nothing much. Maybe she’ll tell you about it, if you ask nicely.”

She looks at Rachel with her best puppy eyes.

“Please?”

Rachel sighs, smiling.

“I can’t say no to that face, can I? But not right now, later. Anyway, Charles, you said something about Sir Eardon leaving, didn’t you?”

“Yes. He has decided to go home early, after hearing what happened to his granduncle.”

“Sounds bad. Did he get into an accident, or something?”

“Nothing happened recently. I am talking about his granduncle, James Eardon, and the occurrence 30 years ago.”

“James was his granduncle?”

“Correct.”

“And he was listening in on our conversation?”

“Also correct.”

“And you knew?”

“I believed he deserved to know the truth. It concerns him quite heavily after all.”

“Well, I don’t like having my secret revealed to even more people. If it’s just you two, it’s okay, since you don’t seem the type to babble.”

“Hayley does.”

“Hey!”

“True.”

“Hey!”

“Well, I will ensure she stays silent, so no need to worry.”

“I know, but the kid doesn’t have me feeling quite as secure.”

“You underestimate him. He has more maturity in him than his clumsiness lets on.”

Rachel sighs resignedly. “If you say so, I’ll take your word for it. You seem to have more of an eye for people than me, after all.”

“What years of observation does for you.”

“Not like just anyone could learn to do it.”

“You would be surprised. Anyway, I think it is high time for the two of us to get ready to move rooms, so we will be off.”

Once he’s turned around to leave, Rachel reaches out.

“Wouldn’t you consider staying here even after your favour runs out? It’d be nice to have some people around who I don’t need to hide anything from. Also, being able to do errands that go past the courtyard would be nice. It’ll be a free stay, of course, if you help out a bit around the inn.”

“You make an enticing offer; the past few days have been quite entertaining. However, I am afraid I will have to decline.” He looks outside. “There is somewhere I must go and something I must do. That is why I am traveling.”

Rachel shows a melancholy face. “Is that so? I won’t stop you then.” She sighs, resting her head on her hand.

Hayley grabs her other hand. “Don’t look so sad! I’m sure we can come back some other time. Right, Charles?”

“Yes, someday in the future.”

“The way you say that makes it sound like you don’t really want to, you know? The distance in your voice is almost tangible.”

“That is…not what it is. It is, but it is not.”

Rachel’s sadness starts to turn into anger

“Stop with your crypticism and just speak up!”

After a moment of silence, Charles speaks up hesitantly. “I have to keep this distance. If I do not, I will get attached. And if I get attached, I may lose my will to keep searching.”

“Searching for what?”

“…I cannot say.”

“Because I’m too far away?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” Hayley interjects, “am I the same? Too far away?”

He hesitates “Hayley, you’re…” he sighs, “not.” He droops his head.

“Tell us, then.”

He holds up his palm as a stop sign.

“Give me a second to choose my words.” He slowly breathes in and out, then lifts his head, determined. “When I was young, I was the same as you two. Abandoned. All I had was my few friends, fighting to survive every day. And, just like you two, someone showed up who could save me from that. But only me.”

“And you left the others behind?”

“Yeah. I left them to rot. For my own sake.”

“And now, you’re trying to find them.”

“Yeah. For their sake. So *I* can be *their* saviour, like that someone was for me.”

“There’s no way I can let you stay here forever, in that case.”

“Neither can I.” He answers.

“But it’s not like everything from here has to stay here, you know? You don’t have to be far away, even when you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“Give me your hand.”

He puts his hand on the counter. She pulls her ring off her finger and puts it on his.

“See? Now I’m right there with you.”

“A ring?”

“It was my mother’s in the past. It’s the only thing I have left of her.”

“Are you sure? Isn’t this important to you?”

“It’s fine, I don’t really remember her anyway.”

“Still-”

“You know, I already decided to put who I used to be behind me. Raika is already dead. Now I’m Rachel, the owner of the Unknown Inn – I'm a new person. Plus, mementos are from the dead, for the living, right? Wouldn’t make sense for a ghost to keep it.”

He laughs. “Fair enough.”

“So,” she puts out her palm. “where’s my return gift?”

“You know I don’t keep much with me.”

“Oh, I’ve got something!” she takes a piece of candy out of her pocket and lays it in her hand.

“I think I’d prefer something a bit less…perishable.”

“Consider it a promise.”

“A promise?”

“That we’ll come back someday, to give you something more lasting.”

She smiles. “I suppose it’ll do.” She puts it in a drawer. “But I’ll hold you to it.”

He smiles back, honestly.

“Hello there.” Charles, who was waiting in the hallway, greeted Olivia and Greg.

“Ah, hello.” Greg responds, a bit surprised.

“We just passed by Rachel and Hayley talking at the register. Were you looking for them?”

“No, I was waiting for Sir Gregory. I was hoping to have a small chat with him.”

“Well, we were just about to-”

“Actually, I was hoping to get a chance to talk with Charles as well. Do you mind waiting up a bit for me, Honey?”

“...okay, fine. But don’t take too long, alright?”

“Of course.”

“Then, see you in a bit.” She kisses him on the cheek, lets go of his hand and goes to her room.

“You seem to have recovered quite quickly. I thought you might have needed a bit more time before becoming lovebirds again.”

“Yes, thanks to you, thing never got too out of hand. We were able to talk things out.”

“Even then, you would think that being drugged, held and dominated against your will would take a bit more of a toll on someone, would you not?”

“Usually, I guess, but I already kind of knew she was like this.”

“And you stuck around regardless?”

“You know, part of the reason she’s like this in the first place was because of all the people who didn’t. When I first fell in love with her, I spent so long getting her to open up to me. You must’ve seen what she acted like at first, right? Imagine that, but even worse. But I couldn’t give up on her, despite it. There’s no way I would leave her after finding out about her problems.”

“You did not think about the potential danger?”

“I did, but I figured I’d deal with it when the time came.”

“Seems quite out of character for the person I have heard you described as.”

“True. But it’s fine, isn’t it?”

“I suppose, although I would still expect you to be a little mad at least.”

“Well, I guess you misread me then.”

“Possibly.”

“If that’s all, I’ll be off then.” He starts to leave, but stops when Charles speaks up.

“Do you think people on death row are mad at their executioner?”

“What? Where did this come from.”

“Just answer.”

“Well, I suppose not. It’s not the executioner’s fault, after all.”

“Then, what about at their jailer? The judge? Who would they be angry with?”

“Do they have to be? Maybe they’ve already accepted their fate?”

“If someone thinks what happened to them is unjust, they’d surely be mad at someone.”

“And if they don’t? If they think it’s just, then they wouldn’t be mad, right?”

“Yes, that is what I thought too.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“You see, I talked to your secretary on the phone, pretending to be a copper. When put under pressure, she admitted to attempting to seduce you, but claimed nothing actually happened.”

“All’s good then, right?”

“The only explanation I can find for your attitude is that you do not think you were unfairly punished. Things do not add up. So, the question is, did she lie?”

“Who knows?” He answered, smiling as always, and departed for the lobby, leaving behind a frowning Charles.

*It’s cold.*

*Where’s Sister?*

*It’s cold.*

*It’s cold.*

Hayley wakes up from her nightmare, covered in sweat. She goes up to Charles’ bed.

“Papa?”

He turns towards her, waking up.

“Is something the matter?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Did you have a nightmare?”

She nods.

“About before we met.”

“There’s no need to think about that anymore. I’m here now, aren’t I?”

She nods.

“Then go back to sleep. I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

“…okay.” She starts walking back to her bed, not feeling much better.

“Where are you going?” Charles says, holding up his blanket. “Didn’t you come here so we could sleep together?”

“…Yes!” she excitedly jumps up into the bed.

After a moment of silence, Hayley speaks up.

“Papa?”

“Yes?”

“Why were *you* still awake?”

“I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Today. I was wondering if I did the right thing.”

“Well, everyone’s happy, right?”

“...yeah.”

“Then everything is good.”

“Hm,” he nods. “I suppose.”

“You wanna know what I’m thinking right now?”

“Why not? Shoot.”

“I was thinking that that Aristophon guy really did know what he was talking about.”

“He was a smart fellow, after all.”

The room falls silent again.

“Papa?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

She hugs him.

“Yeah. Love you too.”

He hugs her back.

*It’s cold.*

*“Hey, are you feeling alright? You don’t look too good,” someone says. He looks around for a second, thinking.*

*“Here, take this.” He takes off his jacket and hands it over. “Is that better?”*

*A nod.*

*It’s warm.*