

Welcome to the Outcast's Restaurant!

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A tale of the
mightiest chef
who was booted
from his guild!



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A “dog” that Atrielle brought to the restaurant one fateful day. This Fenrir chose to be cast out from his pack so that he could accompany a certain adventurer on her travels.

Olivia

A maid-model magic doll who collapsed in front of the restaurant. The only part of her past that she can recall is that she was cast out by her former master.

Welcome to the
Outcast's
Restaurant!



One day, at the
Outcast's Restaurant



**Olivia dutifully began
to hike up her skirt.
The eyes of every
patron in the
restaurant instantly
locked firmly on the
naive maid.**

**“Are you referring to my
undergarments? I could
show you if you so desire.”**

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Chapter One

The Outcast Maid Doesn't Smile

She ambled along for a great while.

Observing the state of the machine's legs, one might think that it had been walking for days on end, but one couldn't be certain.

While her memory banks displayed a much higher degree of speed and reliability than the average human's, the same couldn't be said of her memory capacity. Whenever she would reach the limit of said capacity, old or relatively unimportant memories would be deleted.

Unfortunately, this process was indiscriminate and would even overwrite memories precious to her.

As a result, she didn't quite know how long she had existed in this world, nor did she remember that which she had forgotten.



It was a hot summer's day. The kind of day that felt as if the Sun itself was doing its best to char the entire planet to a cinder.

Come midday, the Outcast's Restaurant was jam-packed. Seats at both the counter and the tables were occupied by the usual gallery of vivacious regulars.

Atrielle, the resident cute mascot of the restaurant, deftly weaved her way through the throng of patrons as she served tables.

"Here is your Special of the Day," she said, placing the dish in front of one of the customers.

"Oh, if it isn't Atrielle! Do that peace sign thing!"

"C'mon, smile for us!"

"Peace signs are free. Smiles are one copper coin each," she explained expressionlessly all the while forming her hand into a two-pronged sign of peace.

"How's about you start calling me 'Master' or somethin'? That'd be nice."

"That costs three copper coins."

"Atrielle! Would you quit it with this weird-ass racket you're running outta my restaurant?!"

Just as Dennis aggressively chided the waitress, the bell at the restaurant's entrance sounded.

Standing in the doorway was Bibia clad in a green short-sleeved coat.

"Come on in, Bibia."

"Thank you. I will have the usual."

Bibia took his seat at the corner of the counter as he curtly placed his order.

"It looks like things are really taking off around here, are they not?" commented Bibia as he regarded the bustling interior of the restaurant.

"Yep. Starting to feel real short-staffed here in the busier hours even with Artrielle helping out."

"Then how about hiring some new employees?"

"If they're any good, I'll take 'em. Why, d'you feel up to it, Bibia?"

"Well, I have my whole adventuring thing going on, so..." the young boy retorted with a conciliatory smile.

Bibia wanted Dennis's opinion on his new hairstyle. To Dennis, he still looked the same as ever. Bibia tried to explain that he'd gotten the sides trimmed to give his look a more refreshing feel, that this way it had more volume, and that he could flick his hair behind his ear now, but all his explanations fell on deaf ears. Dennis was puzzled by the whole thing and advised him to just keep it cropped.

"So how's the search for a new guild going?" Dennis changed the subject as he lathered some oil around a pan.

"I have a fair few things keeping me busy, you know."

"Oh, by the way, you hear that Bethel got accepted to a teaching position at a school in the capital?"

"I do. She sent me a letter, as well. She is quite the little achiever, isn't she? Did you happen to hear anything about Henrietta's whereabouts?"

"Got a letter from her saying she's going through Knight Cadet training. She's not convinced she's gonna come outta there alive. Apparently, she's already thrown up three times."

"Ah, well uh, she's a tough girl, so I'm sure she'll be fine... probably."

By the time Bibia had finished his fried rice, most of the midday customers had filtered out of the restaurant.

Recently, Dennis had granted Atrielle the authority to decide whether to close up shop or not. Atrielle scanned the suddenly empty restaurant before quickly making her way over to the sliding door entrance and rattling it open.

She pushed through the curtain door hanging outside of the restaurant and brought her hand up to her forehead to survey the area and determine if she would have to act upon her newfound responsibility. As soon as she'd stepped out, she immediately spun around and came back inside.

"Hm? What's up, Atrielle?" Dennis asked, concerned by her speedy retreat.

Though Atrielle could certainly tout her newfound popularity with the townsfolk due to her little in-store side hustle, Dennis didn't quite believe that she'd also developed the skills necessary to close up shop in nearly half a second.

Chances are she'd seen something outside, which then caused her to promptly turn on her heel and rush back in.

Atrielle silently beckoned for Dennis and Bibia to come outside with her. They both tailed her and happened upon a collapsed frame lying motionless on the ground close to the restaurant.

Shortly cropped blonde hair splayed out on the ground from beneath the filthy hooded robe adorning the figure. Though the individual's face was mostly concealed by their hair, what little portion of their face was visible exhibited feminine features.

"H-Hey, are you alright? What happened here?"

Dennis approached the downed figure and squatted down next to it. Behind the elegant blonde hair plastered to her face, Dennis could see large, beautiful eyes—half-opened and peering at him through the gaps in her hair.

"Ah... Ah... Do excuse me, but would it be possible for you to transport me into a shaded area? It seems I have lost the ability to move independently," the girl croaked hoarsely.

"D-Do you have heatstroke?"

"That appears to be the case."

"Well, um, I'm gonna carry you inside, okay? But uh, before I do, could you confirm that in touching you, you know that I've got no ulterior motives and that you recognize it as legitimate relief activi—"

"My core temperatures are reaching critical levels. If you could please hurry, it would be much..." the prone girl's voice trailed off.

Dennis gingerly reached out toward her shoulder and was surprised to feel the immense heat radiating from her before he had even touched her skin.

"What the hell!? Bibia, get over here! This ain't good!"

"Huh?! Is something wrong with her temperature?"

“I-I don’t know! Damn, you sure you’re alright? Holy, you’re heavy too! Like, really heavy!”

“Dennis! You mustn’t comment on a lady’s weight like tha—Oh my, you are rather weighty, aren’t you!”

Dennis and Bibia carried the woman into the store on their shoulders.

“Ah... Ah... I-If you could set me down in that chair? Please,” she spoke in a peculiar voice, her mouth barely moving and her head hanging limp.

Dennis and Bibia placed the woman in the chair in question and were stunned when her head suddenly lolled back into place and her arms sharply shot out to her sides. She made several jittering arcs through the air with her limbs before she violently tore the hooded robe off herself.

Dennis and Bibia stared wide-eyed at the sight before them. Beneath the shabby robe was a perfectly put together maid dress.

The uniform was garnished with the frills and black one-piece that one would expect from an expensive apron dress. Her legs and plump thighs poked out scandalously from underneath the dress’s short, frilly skirt. Her short blonde hair was secured with a white Alice band. Her face was as well put-together as the rest of her, as though she’d been born to wear that exact outfit.

Complete with her perfect eyes and nose, she looked almost like a statue. The two men got the impression that she had been designed specifically to be beautiful.

“S-So you’re a maid?” Dennis blurted out.

The woman in the maid uniform ignored his question and unfastened a shoulder strap from a button on the back of her attire. She maneuvered awkwardly to get out of the top half of her apron.

“Um, are you hot or something? Do we have any fans anywhere?” Dennis asked no one in particular.

“Please have no fear. I am capable of dispensing the excess heat myself. Thank you for carrying me into this establishment. As a result of your kindness, I am no longer in direct sunlight and as such have secured a much more preferable atmospheric temperature.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Just how much are you gonna take off, lady?!”

She stared directly at Dennis as she used both of her hands to undo a button on the front of her one-piece, which then burst open due to the enormous pressure it was under.

“I mean to remove all of the clothing on my upper body, of course. I do

apologize if this inconveniences you in some way. However, if I remain in my current state, my clothes will become irreparably damaged. I cannot allow that to happen. They are of the utmost importance.”

Wordlessly and without hesitation, the blonde maid slipped her bra off.

Dennis managed to cover Bibia’s eyes just in the nick of time.

“Wha—Dennis?! This is completely unfair! Unhand me!”

“Sorry, Bibia, the restaurant’s temporarily become an adults-only joint.”

“No! What about this situation is ‘adult’?! Unhand me right this instant!”

Atrielle chimed in with but a single word: “big.”

“What’s big? Oh no! They’re big, aren’t they?! Curse my damnable existence!”

Bibia’s impotent wailing continued as a cloud of steam spewed from the woman’s chest.

Her chest then began to crack with a sharp metallic noise. The fissures snaked their way across her flesh, forming a strange geometric shape. With a loud clunk, the shape opened outwards toward Dennis.



Up until this moment, the maid had been languidly slouched in her chair. Now she sat up straight as some hidden mechanism compelled her ribcage to expand outward, creating a large opening in what had previously been her bare chest.

Dennis fully expected to be accosted by a bloody mass of flesh and bone, but instead, he saw a hodgepodge of various cogs, gears, and springs. A kaleidoscope of colored ores glittered inside the inner workings of this unexpected machinery, and at the heart of it all sat a sizable red jewel.

“A-A magic doll?” the words tumbled thoughtlessly from Dennis’s lips.

An autonomous, fully-functional magic doll animated via magic.

A high-level mage could create them with ease by means of some simple rituals, so Dennis had seen lots of them in his time. However, the woman sitting in front of him was nothing like what he had seen before.

The maid finished expelling steam from the opening in her chest and choppily raised her head to look at Dennis and the others.

“Secondary heat diffusion complete. I apologize for having caused trouble for you in such a manner.”

“Um, ahh... As long as you’re okay.”

“Excuse my ignorance, but why might you be covering that boy’s eyes?”

“Um, to preserve his innocence?”



The maid bowed with the utmost courtesy.

“I am truly grateful that you assisted me in my time of need. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Olivia, a maid-model magic doll.”

“Magic doll? I mean, I’ve certainly heard of them before, but this is my first time seeing one in person,” said Bibia, eyeing Olivia from head to toe. “You just seem like a cute girl who talks funny to me.”

“It is an honor to receive such a thoughtful compliment. I thank you.”

“Incredible. Just incredible. I am filled with emotion. Are all magic dolls like this, Dennis?”

Dennis inwardly shook his head.

It’s true that magic dolls are complex magical items. However, it would be more fitting to describe them as mannequins that are able to carry out specific tasks assigned to them. If one was to strip them of the masks or robes that their creators would often have them wear, one would have no difficulty

at all in identifying them as inhuman.

Typically, though, one wouldn't even need to go as far as that, since magic dolls tend to walk around with a very odd gait.

This magic doll, the *woman* named Olivia sat before Dennis, truly was human.

Or, at the very least, she definitely passed as a human without a single doubt.

Bibia hadn't seen the "normal" variety of magic dolls that serve high-ranking mages before, so it only made sense that his assumption would be so far off-base. That said, if Dennis hadn't seen her spring-filled and jewel-encrusted "guts," he would be hard-pressed to believe that she wasn't human.

"Once again, I must express my deepest gratitude for saving me, Master Dennis. If you had not come to my aid, my internal temperatures would have entered the red zone, resulting in my detonation. It was quite a precarious situation."

"Wow, I'd figured things were dire when I saw you collapsed in the middle of the street, but I didn't think it was *that* bad."

"Yes, but still! Wow!" Bibia stared at Olivia, his eyes aglow with excitement. "You really do look just like an actual human being! To think that that isn't actually the case! The mind simply boggles!"

"Indeed, I am not human," replied Olivia. Though her expression remained static, she slumped over with a robotic *zuuun*, clearly depressed.

Uh oh, thought Dennis and Bibia in unison. It seemed as though they'd struck a nerve.

"You are correct. I am not human. No matter how much my outward appearance may resemble one, I am not human. I am simply a disconcerting doll. Indeed, I am."

"Um, but, well, um, the thing is, Olivia... Er," fumbled Bibia.

He looked to Dennis for help, pleading silently for salvation from the awkward situation he himself had created.

It seemed the maid named Oliva was more sensitive than she appeared at first glance.

"Bibia, don't be so rude. Olivia is a fine and proper lady! One whose chest rips open when she gets hot, that's all!"

"Ah yes, right you are! Please ignore me, Olivia! We all have some uh, inhuman qualities, don't we?!"

"Truly? I am not off-putting to you? I appear human in your eyes?"

Bibia nodded furiously.

Sitting to Olivia's left was a very much enthralled Atrielle. As the commotion played out, she very slowly reached out toward Olivia's porcelain-white left hand and gave it a quick poke with her outstretched finger.

Olivia's hand violently rotated 360 degrees at the wrist, and the back of her hand and all of her fingers burst open with a loud noise.

"Atrielle! I don't remember teaching you to go around poking other people's hands without permission!" exclaimed Dennis.

"Atrielle, your face! I've never seen you so flabbergasted before!" said Bibia, bemused.

"It seems that I am unsightly after all. What kind of human can open the dorsal side of their hand?"

"Wha—? No! It's not *that* weird, I don't think! M-Maybe I can do it, too! I've never tried! Atrielle, try poking my hand! Please!"

"Dennis, calm down! I know you're trying to help, but you're only making things worse! Oh, no, I didn't mean you, Oliva! Curses, how are you able to come off so sad with such a still face?!"



The residents of the Outcast's Restaurant finished listening to Olivia's tale.

"So you genuinely cannot recall a thing?" asked Bibia.

"Not the slightest thing."

"Even who made you? Or where you come from?" added Dennis.

"Yes. Those are things that I yearn to know, as well."

"Well, that's not the greatest start. What *do* you remember?"

Olivia raised her head at Bibia's question. "I remember that I was ordered to search for a master to attend to and that I must serve them with every ounce of my ability."

"You said there was one other thing you remember, right?"

"Yes, there was something else."

"What was it?"

"That I had been cast out."

The already strange mood in the restaurant soured significantly at Olivia's words.

“Cast out? From where? Why?” asked Bibia, a great deal of worry tingeing his tone.

“I do not know. My memory appears to have been erased. But I believe what remains to be true. I was exiled, and I have been searching for a master I must serve. I believe I have been looking for a significant period of time. A sadness clutches at my heart when I think of it.”

An imperceivable expression crossed Olivia’s countenance.

Dennis stared at her long and hard and once again grappled with the fact that she looked like nothing more than an ordinary, beautiful—albeit hard-to-read—blonde maid. Fortunately, it just so happened that Dennis lived with another inexpressive girl, so he had some experience parsing the emotions hidden beneath these kinds of inscrutable faces. However, it seemed to him that Olivia was truly expressing no feelings.

Dennis could tell from the way she spoke and carried herself that she was experiencing emotions somewhere deep inside, but they didn’t seem to bubble up to the surface in the same way as with Atrielle.

His view had certainly been colored by his experiences with the waitress, but he still felt that Olivia’s behavior was different altogether from Atrielle’s complexity and standoffishness.

To him, Olivia truly felt just like a doll. It was as if one could freeze her in time and not a thing about her would look out-of-place on account of her innate artificiality.

“Master Dennis, Mistress Atrielle, Master Bibia. You assisted me in my time of need, and I am truly grateful.”

“Oh, um, we’re just glad you’re feeling better.”

“In light of this, I have decided to serve the three of you. While I am greatly inexperienced, I will do my best to cause no inconvenience to you.”

“Wha—?”

Dennis didn’t quite catch on to what Olivia meant.

Oliva stood, crossed her legs, her dainty fingers clasped the hems of her frilly apron, and she offered a picture-perfect curtsy.

“I believe I have been searching for a master for an unspeakably long time. On this joyous day, I have finally found you. What would you have me do?”

“W-Wait a second. What are you talking about?”

“I believe swearing one’s life and allegiance to the man responsible for saving oneself from certain death does not seem altogether out of the

ordinary. Now come, give me an order. Direct me. Apprise me of my duties!"

"Wait, wait, wait. My restaurant's expressionless girl quota has been met, thank you very much," said Dennis.

"You wish for me to wait, then? Might that be an order? Please do not fret. I am Olivia, a maid-model magic doll. I fully obey my master's orders. I will carry out any mission assigned to me."

"Wha—?! The cheek of this girl! I thought we were done with adding more weirdos to the roster around here!"

"Oh, Master Dennis? Rest assured that I will most certainly obey any directive you have for me, but if they err on the licentious side, then might I recommend that you command them at such a time when Mistress Atrielle is not present?"

"Hold it! I'm gonna have to stop you there!" Dennis exclaimed, flustered. "Bibia! Why don't you take her? You could use a maid at your house, right?!"

"Um, I think the restaurant would be a much better choice!" Bibia countered. "There's nothing to do at my house! I wouldn't want Olivia's talents to go to waste!"

"Please bestow an order upon me! Assign me a task that I am to do!"



"So, Green, what are you hungry for?"

"Hehehe. Maybe I should order that Purple Chilli Fried Steak I've heard so much about. I wanna give the chef a bit of a challenge, hehehe."

As they conversed, Green and his lackey cut through the dark, urban night toward The Outcast's Restaurant.

"That's why you're the best, boss," chuckled the underling. "I can handle pretty much anything, but something like that..."

"Hehehe. That cutie Atrielle said it'd never been ordered before, didn't she? I'm looking forward to changing that," Green snickered.

"This is why everyone watches themselves around you, Green! Absolutely nothing gets past you, hehe."

"Got that right. A cool head is priority number one. If you wanna be a real man, then you have to have a finger in every pie, hehehe."

The two shady men eventually arrived at the twilit Outcast's Restaurant. Passing under the curtain and into the dining room, they quickly made

their way to their usual seats and eagerly waited for Atrielle to come and take their order.

Green felt someone's presence at his side and looked up. "Could I, uh
___"

"What will your order be?"

Green froze.

Olivia—still clad in her maid's uniform—was breathing right down his neck.

"H-Haha. Whoa there, missy. Little, uh, close, don't you think?"

"Is this situation not to your liking?"

"Uh, nah. No, it's just that your uh, chest is, uh..."

In her excitement to serve her first customer, Olivia had gotten much too close to Green. Her large breasts had come to rest gently on his shoulder.

Olivia cast a slow glance downward to confirm the situation. Then she drew even closer to Green's face and locked eyes with him. At this point, they were nearly exchanging butterfly kisses.

"Is this situation not to your liking?"

"It really isn't..."

"Then have you decided what you will be ordering tonight?"

"O-Oh yeah. My order. Hehehe," Green broke out into sinister chuckles.

"What is wrong? Please do forgive me, perhaps you did not hear me?"

Olivia suddenly grasped both of Green's shoulders in a painfully tight grip and pressed her lips to his ear before once again asking at full volume, "Have you decid—"

"Agghhh! Aaaaaggh!!!"

"G-Green? What's up?!"

"Whooooooa there. I don't remember when we started offering *that* kinda service around here," Dennis called out from behind the counter. He was slouched over, watching the absurd situation unfold, his chin resting on his hands.

Olivia immediately let go of Green and returned to Dennis's side.

"Did I cause some manner of problem?" asked Olivia, incredulous.

"Listen up, Olivia," Dennis said strictly, straightening his back.

"I am listening up."

"You don't gotta get that close to the customers, you hear me? You'd maybe do that when you're getting ready to kick some serious ass or something, but not when you're taking someone's order."

“How confounding. I believe it is agreeable to become close with our customers.”

“I guess so, yeah, but not *too* close, y’know? Physically speaking.”

The customers piling into the busy restaurant were all very excited to get to know the new employee. In between making orders and chowing down, they’d strike up conversations with Atrielle and Olivia whenever they got the chance.

“Are you sure you’re all right with the clientele your establishment is beginning to attract, Dennis?” Bibia asked in between spoonfuls of fried rice.

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much, Bibia. I gave up on weeding out the bad ones a long while ago.”

“It just seems that as soon as you took on Olivia, this place’s atmosphere became more akin to those bars mysteriously staffed exclusively by attractive women. Only difference being that this is a restaurant, I suppose.”

“Leave it alone, Bibia. Things’ll calm down soon enough... maybe.”

As Dennis and Bibia talked among themselves, a drunk customer hollered at Olivia.

“Mind telling me what color undies you got on to—hic!—night, eh? Hehehe.”

“Are you referring to my undergarments? I could show you if you so desire.” Olivia dutifully began to hike up her skirt. The eyes of every patron in the restaurant instantly locked firmly on the naive maid.

“Hold on a minute; stop right there! I’m not having some drunkard harassing one of my employees like this! And you, Olivia! What are you thinking?!”

“What is this, an eye for an eye?!” exclaimed Bibia. “Does a drunk merit this kind of harassment?!”

Dennis and Bibia continued shouting over each other as Atrielle whispered but a single word to herself: “white.”



A few days had passed, and Olivia had become more accustomed to working at the restaurant. One day around noon, Dennis handed her a slip of paper which she dutifully looked over.

“So that’s basically it. You think you’re up for it?”

“Please leave it to me, Master Dennis. I will carry out my duties to the

best of my abilities.”

“And what are you gonna do if some weird old creep asks to see your panties again?”

“I shall strive to deny his request.”

“You make it sound like you want to show people.”

“Well, that certainly is not the case, but...” Olivia waved her hands around in an attempt to express some sort of inner conflict. Her face remained as static as ever, but she compensated for her lack of emotiveness with her animated gestures.

“I was made to be of assistance to others and to obey their orders,” she continued. “I was not equipped with protocols for evaluating whether certain orders are morally right or wrong. If someone asks something of me, then, well, you are aware of what may happen.”

“I get it, don’t worry. But don’t show your underwear to people, got it? And that’s an order.”

“Order received, Master Dennis.”

And with that, Dennis rested his elbow on the counter and watched Olivia head off to fulfill her mission.

Finding passion in one’s work is, of course, a good thing. However, Olivia took her fervor a step or six too far and would blindly abide by any orders given to her. Despite her incredibly life-like appearance, her steadfast compliance was certainly machine-like.

It seemed to Dennis that Olivia placed the utmost importance on orders and requests and didn’t bother to process said orders and make her own judgments on them.

Olivia’s eager enthusiasm combined with her eye-catching appearance had set the rumor mill aflutter with all sorts of unseemly rumors about The Outcast’s Restaurant. Dennis hoped that they’d all die down sooner rather than later.



Olivia made her way into town and commenced shopping for the items scratched down in Dennis’s list. He had meticulously made note of street names along with the precise locations, what items needed to be bought or picked up, and how to conduct each transaction. Normally he wouldn’t go to such an extent with his to-do list, since Atrielle would tend to be the one

handling the shopping.

Now it was Olivia's turn to take on the task, so Dennis wanted to be absolutely sure that she wouldn't get lost or taken advantage of in any way. Thanks to his efforts, Olivia was progressing without much, if any, difficulty.

Eventually, she arrived at a forge run by an old couple. Although Dennis was able to use alchemy to produce tools of his own, the peculiarities borne from a real master's touch were lost on him. These finer details were important enough that he left the maintenance of his blades to this store.

"Oh, you work for Dennis?" the old woman directed her question at Olivia.

"Yes, I began serving him several days ago."

"My, you're certainly very beautiful, aren't you just! You get a look at her too, honey. She's got skin as smooth as a baby's."

"To receive such a compliment is of the utmost honor to me. It is greatly appreciated."

"What've you been eating to get skin like this, I wonder?"

"My dermal layer consists of many alchemical compounds that strive to emulate human flesh. It is equipped with a healing function that can revert wounds below a certain threshold of severity to a neutral state within two days. The complexion of my skin is a direct result of this healing function."

"Well, I won't pretend to have understood a word you've just said, dearie, but you're very polite."

"Your approbation continues to honor me," Olivia said with a polite bow.



The sky darkened much quicker than Olivia had expected it to, and red streaks tinged the dimming heavens. She had finally finished her shopping, but it looked to have taken much longer than she'd hoped it to.

Due to her innate politeness, Olivia had taken the time to greet and converse with almost every shopkeep she'd encountered today and simply lost track of time.

This is not good. Surely Master Dennis is waiting for me with bated breath. I must hurry back, she thought to herself.

Clutching her shopping bags to her chest, she rushed back toward the restaurant.

It suddenly occurred to Olivia that when humans waited for anything,

they never literally held their breath. Olivia, on the other hand, was able to hold her breath indefinitely without a second thought. Once again, she felt an indescribable sadness seeping in as she was once again reminded that despite her looks, she would never truly be human.

Undeterred by her inner turmoil, Olivia quickly picked up the pace, huffing all the while. She still needed to hurry back to the restaurant.

“Hey there, Olivia.”

Olivia turned in the direction of the sudden voice. It belonged to a customer she had served at the restaurant some days prior.

“Oh, hello.”

“Hey. Somethin’s been buggin’ me a little. Think you could help me out?”

“I don’t see why not. I am happy to help with anything you may need.”

“That’s great then. Just follow me over here.”

Olivia followed the man into the backstreet he beckoned her into.

Further into the deserted alleyway, Olivia spotted a puppy lying weakly on its side. The rest of the dark path was empty save for a group of men gathered around the pup.

Olivia approached the group and squatted down to stroke the animal’s damp fur.

“You poor thing. You look to be quite weak.”

“Does, doesn’t he?” the words leaked from between the man’s grimy lips, which were beginning to curve into something resembling a sneer.

“The puppy is what you wanted help with, I presume? If so, then fret not. It seems to be suffering from malnutrition, and fortunately, my kind master is a renowned chef. If we take it back to my master posthaste, then he is sure to provide sustenance for it. Careful feeding and a warm shelter will return the puppy to a healthy state in no time at all.”

“Actually, uh, the puppy ain’t what we wanted help with.”

“Oh, what else demands my attention, then?”

Olivia’s face remained blank as the man stifled his vile laughter.

“How about you stomp this dirty mutt into the ground? You’ll do it for us, right?”

“... Excuse me?” Olivia was at a complete loss. “I-I am afraid I am unable to obey this request. I am terribly sorry.”

She seemed to shrink into herself as she stood next to the emaciated puppy.

“Huh? I thought this chick does whatever you tell her.”

“That’s what I’d heard.”

“Why would she listen to you, though?”

“Is she crazy or something? Speaks all weird, too.”

Finally, the men finished arguing amongst themselves and turned back to the poor maid.

“Look, just hurry up and do it, okay?! We wanna see you whip up some pup stew, Olivia!”

“Wh-Why must I do this? I don’t understand what the purpose of this order is. This dog is very weak; it requires our help.”

““Why”? Oh, I’ll tell you why.”

“Please do.”

““Cause it’ll be super fun! Now hop to it. Why are you disobeying our order?”

“Um, it is true that I was made to help people and am to obey their orders. But please forgive me...”

Olivia plunged into an abyss of befuddlement.

Helping those in need, serving others. For Olivia, there was no greater joy in the entire world. Nowhere in her memory banks could she find another time that she’d encountered something so unspeakably evil. She simply did not understand why they thought their command was “fun,” and least of all why they wanted *her* to carry it out. She struggled to process it.

“P-Please do not ask something so cruel of me. Let us help it instead. After it regains its health, we can all play with it together. Surely you will derive much more pleasure from play than from this.”

“Oh man, that’s a good one! Yeah, nah, we’re not doin’ that.”

One of the men laughed like a hyena just as the rest of the lowlives surrounding her began to blather among themselves.

“Looks like we’ve found a new toy to play with, boys.”

“Got that right. What else is there to do for unlucky Hans Trading Union hires sent out to some backwater in the ass-end of nowhere?”

“Why don’t we hand ‘er over to the market development thing Lostchile was going on about?”

“Bet she’ll actually do whatever we say if we ask her diff’rently ‘nuff. Why don’t we take ‘er back to the inn and spend the night working this rebellious streak outta ‘er?”

“Listen up, Olivia.”

“Y-Yes?” Olivia’s stunned reply gave the impression that she hadn’t even recognized her own name.

“You better not tell anyone about this. That’s an order, a’ight?”

“O-Of course. I will tell no one of this; I swear on it. So please, stop this lunacy. Don’t give such cruel orders. Let us instead help the puppy,” Olivia begged as she sunk to her knees. “If you would like to relieve your stress, please use me instead.”

Her despair only emboldened the men, eliciting more laughter from the group.

“Hahaha, I like her! I doubt we’ll be bored for a long time!”

“And don’t go saying nothing to that chef either! Ya hear me?!”

“I think it’s a bit late for that, boys.”

The men turned around in unison to try to discern the source of the unfamiliar voice at the end of the alleyway.

The sound of heavy, sandaled footsteps clacking on stone reverberated through the air as the man approached.

He had short hair and wore a white collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up. An apron with the words “The Outcast’s Restaurant” emblazoned on it hung proudly from his neck.

Dennis had arrived.

He menacingly cracked his neck as he walked forward, clearly a motion he was used to.

“My new employee was late coming back from her errand run, so I came looking for her. I’m glad to see she’s found a group of nice new friends to hang with.”

“Fuck, it’s that chef!” one of the men said, rising frantically from the curb he’d been sitting on.

“You lot aren’t from around here, are you?”

“And what of it?”

“After the Night Fog Battalion broke up, tons of off-kilter characters have been making their way into town. It’s been kind of a pain in the ass. Wasn’t Hopper supposed to be a mediator for you scumbags?”

“Best watch yourself, *cook*. We’ll let you off scot-free if you turn your ass around and leave. Now. Don’t worry, you’ll get your little waitress back, too. After we’ve had our fun with her, of course.”

“Hmm... Nah, I’m thinking I’ll take her back now, to be honest,” countered Dennis.

“Dang, well look at you! You really think you can take alluvus? Just who the hell do you think you’re dealing with?”

“I think you should be asking yourself who the hell you think *you’re* dealing with.”

“Uh, some no-name chef?”

Dennis beamed.

“Bingo. Now line up. Who’s looking to die first?” Dennis quipped as he transmuted two gleaming butcher’s knives from bricks in the alley walls.



After making pitifully short work of the gang, Dennis approached Olivia, who was still collapsed on the ground.

Dennis had left just one of the men standing, who remained at the end of the alley, taking in the defeated forms of his compatriots with a terrified look on his face.

“Wh-What the fuck? Just what in the hell a-are you?”

Dennis ignored the miscreant and squatted down next to Olivia, who became visibly relieved when she looked up and saw Dennis’s kind face.

“Master Dennis. So you weren’t baiting your breath, after all.”

“Wha—? What are you talking about, girl? Forget that; what have you gotten yourself into? Why didn’t you just take off, huh?”

“Well, I was given an order to carry out, so—”

“Do you seriously follow any order given to you?”

“Naturally. That is what I was made to do.”

Dennis sighed. “Look, you don’t gotta listen to orders from filth like this.”

“Filth?”

“Those losers laid out on the ground behind me.”

Olivia looked at the collapsed men strewn about the alleyway before turning once more to Dennis and inquiring, “How is one to discern those who are virtuous from those who are evil? I do not believe I have the capacity to make such a decision. I was made to serve humans; I do not have the power to discern the difference.”

“Okay, then this is your first lesson in determining good from bad. Those guys behind me? Bad. Got it?”

“The people behind you are bad. I understand. Now, how am I to identify

other bad people?”

Dennis pondered for a second before answering. “If they try and hurt you or those you care about, then they’re bad. Can’t really go wrong if you think about it like that.”

“And if I am ordered to do something by a bad person, what am I to do?”

“Well, that’s easy. Beat the shit out of them.”

“Very well.”

Olivia stared over Dennis’s shoulder at the one remaining man petrified at the end of the alley.

“That person, should I ‘beat the shit out of’ him?”

“Don’t see why not.”

“I see. I would like to attempt ‘beating the shit out of’ him,” Olivia said as she effortlessly unfastened the shoulder straps of her maid uniform.

Two long, rail-like objects shot skyward from each of Olivia’s shoulder blades with a heavy clunk.

Dennis furrowed his brow as he cautiously observed this unforeseen development.

Olivia pointed one of the long, rugged gun barrels toward the ruffian, who’d managed to collapse to the ground in a daze.

“Olivia. What’re those?”

“These are high-output cannons that fire agglomerated mana. They are well-suited for mid-range attacks. I intend to ‘beat the shit out of’ that man with these.”

“Hold up,” Dennis said. “Not so fast.”

Dennis stretched his palm out to Olivia, signaling for her to listen intently.

“You sure those aren’t gonna do more than just beat the shit out of this guy?”

Olivia pondered the question for a moment.

“More than shit may be extricated from his body once the procedure is completed, yes.”

“Now, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here.” Dennis nervously ran his hand through his short black hair. “Gonna be honest, I wasn’t expecting you to pull out *this* much firepower. That’s the kind of thing you’d use to flatten a city block, not some punk in a fight.”

“How confounding. Then perhaps I should not use these at this juncture.”

“That’d probably be best, yeah. Let’s take this one step at a time.

Together! Now let's deal with this guy ov—Whoa! Don't point those things at me! Put 'em away! I'm too young to die!"



This is a story from a long time ago. A very, very long time ago.

There once was a pristine house looking out over the main street in the royal capital.

The inhabitants of this house must have been a very fastidious bunch. Although the house wasn't exactly airy or dust-free, somehow it was always perfectly spotless.

Any given nook and cranny of the house would be meticulously maintained with nary a thing out of place. One would be hard-pressed to find even a speck of dust.

From within this picturesque home, an obviously distressed boy with blue-tinged blond hair cried out, "It's not here! Why is it not here?!"

When the light hit it at just the right angle, the boy's hair seemed unnaturally transparent. It looked almost like a jewel.

Distraught, he paced to and fro within the immaculate house.

He flew around his abode in a frenzy, opening drawers one after the other without even taking the time to shut them after. A blonde girl wearing a maid uniform armed with a feather duster appeared and kept close behind him.

"Master Yujitt? Whatever is the matter?"

"Olivia! Have you seen some papers lying around here?!"

"Ahh! You must be referring to *those* papers!"

Olivia puffed out her ample chest and placed a hand on her thin waist. She clearly looked proud of herself, despite an eerily blank expression adorning her face.

"The reason they are no longer lying all over the place is that I, Oliva, disposed of them! Aren't you proud of me, master?!"

Yujitt stared with his mouth agape at the all-too-satisfied Olivia.

"Y-You moron! What kind of maid are you?! Those were my precious research notes!"

"Oh, I seem to have made a dire mistake. I thought that they were rubbish, and—"

"Agh! My revelations! The culmination of my genius that revealed itself to me last night! Gone forever!" exclaimed the boy. "I had managed to devise

a method to isolate and collide water nuclei in order to create unfathomably large explosions using thermal reactions! My prodigious and devilish discovery that I'd immortalized in those papers! Gone!"

"Oh my... I do apologize, Master Yujitt..."

Yujitt glared at Olivia through teary eyes. He pointed and bellowed in a voice that shook the entire house. "You stupid, stupid doll! I banish you from this house! Get out of my sight!"

This is a tale from a very, very long time ago.

It is the fable of an old, distant memory that no one in particular now possesses.

Chapter Two

I'll Walk It and Feed It and Everything!

Olivia and the rest of the crew of the Outcast's Restaurant managed to complete all of their morning duties just before opening time. Dennis, pleased by this development, decided to use some of his remaining free time to sit himself down at the counter and read a few more pages of *Buck Naked Adventurer's Restaurant Business for Dummies, 4th Edition*. He was so engrossed in the book that he hadn't sensed Atrielle walk into the restaurant.

The petite girl made a beeline across the dining hall and plopped herself next to Dennis.

"I can keep it, can't I?" she wasted no time in asking.

"... Keep what, exactly?" Dennis hesitated.

"The dog."

"What dog?"

Dennis turned to face Atrielle, placing his elbow on the countertop.

"Didn't we already have a dog around here? You know, the one Olivia picked up."

"You entrusted that dog to the proprietor of the general store, Lord Dennis."

"Well, yeah. Porobo had been prattling on about needing a watchdog for ages. The runt seemed to be looking on the up anyway, and I'm sure he'll take good care of the little guy." Dennis gave Atrielle a long look. "You weren't thinking of keeping it for yourself, were you?"

Atrielle nodded twice.

"So... then where're you gonna pull a new mutt from?"

"I've already got one. It's outside the store."

"Gotta admire how proactive young'uns are these days, I suppose..."

Despite her typical expressionless face, Atrielle somehow managed to communicate a strong sense of longing with a simple, deep stare into Dennis's eyes.

"Uh, do you promise to look after it properly?"

"I will."

"You'll walk it every day?"

"Without fail."

Atrielle responded to each of his questions without an iota of hesitation.

Dennis sighed and folded his arms across his chest.

Ah, damn, he thought to himself. Ain't got anywhere for the thing to live inside the restaurant, so that means I'll have to go and build a dog house. On top of that, we'd have to figure out how to feed it and everything. Damn, what a pain. He furrowed his brows. *Though I guess Atrielle's never asked for anything before...*

Dennis looked up at Atrielle and declared, "You're taking full responsibility for the dog, alright? And it's gonna stay outdoors, capiche?"

Atrielle, realizing that negotiations had gone in her favor, nodded her head with great vigor.

"Well, alright. You've agreed to it, so I'm expecting you to stick to your promise."

"So I can keep it, then?"

"Sure, but I'm serious. You better look after it yourself," Dennis reiterated. "You decide on a name yet?"

"Mhm. Pochi."

"Pochi? Didn't expect such a plain name from you, but okay. Well then, am I gonna meet this 'Pochi' or what?"

Atrielle hopped excitedly off her seat and dashed for the restaurant door with Dennis following leisurely behind.

Much to Dennis's surprise, it was abnormally shady outside today. He craned his neck upward to check for clouds and found nothing but the sun lying high in the boundless blue sky above him. This only confused Dennis further.

It was then that he noticed something near him blotting out the sun. He slowly turned and found a ludicrously huge dog sitting beside him.

"..."

The ashen-grey dog was almost twice Dennis's height. This dog's, this *wolf's* shadow eclipsed Dennis entirely.

It glared down at the man and bared its enormous fangs. A low, threatening growl emanated from somewhere deep within the recesses of its throat.



Atrielle, standing unperturbed next to the colossal wolf, piped up with, “He’s cute.”

“He’s cute?!”



“Wow, absolutely astounding! That’s a mythical Fenrir! You’ve really happened upon something super rare here! Did you know that they seldom venture into the human realm?!” Bibia continued to jabber excitedly as he gazed fixedly at the huge Fenrir relaxing outside of the restaurant.

Atrielle’s happiness was unmistakable even with her blank expression as she sat and stroked “Pochi’s” abundant, wolfish fur.

“Atrielle,” Dennis said flatly.

“Yes?”

“I thought you said you found a dog.”

“This is a dog.”

“That is not a dog.”

“It’s basically a dog.”

“Mythical beasts that are twice a human’s size are not generally considered dogs, Atrielle.”

“Look.” Atrielle turned to the Fenrir and gave it a big hug, sinking her face deep into its coat. “He’s really fluffy. And cute.”

“This cutesy display ain’t gonna distract me from the fact that it’s a massive damn wolf, Atrielle! No chance!” A displeased expression crossed Dennis’s face as he again eyed up the beast named Pochi. “Oh hell. How’re we gonna make a doghouse for this behemoth?”

“Pochi,” started Atrielle, “Do you need a doghouse?”

“I do not.”

“He says he doesn’t need one.”

“Did that thing just talk?! It definitely did! It’s not one of those telepathic beasts, is it?!”

It was indeed.

Though there were many slight kinks to work out, it seemed as though the Fenrir was relatively well-behaved. When all was said and done, Pochi had been fitted with a collar and provided with a rudimentary rain shelter located outside the restaurant.

A few days passed without incident until one sunny afternoon, Atrielle

came to Dennis and announced that she was taking Pochi for a walk.

“O-Oh, sounds good. Be safe.”

Her intentions made clear, Dennis watched as Atrielle set off.

And so, without fail, Atrielle began walking Pochi every day, twice a day, before the restaurant opened for its midday and evening periods.

“Mistress Atrielle has taken to her duties with great zeal and devotion, hasn’t she?” Olivia observed while wiping down one of the tables.

“Guess so. I still don’t get it, though. That thing seems to have bonded with her, and I’ve got no idea how that even happened in the first place,” pondered Dennis. “Hell, we don’t even know where it came from. How’d it even end up in this town of all places? Don’t those things usually lurk in the deepest reaches of the forests their entire lives?”

Olivia let out a quiet giggle. “Well, Atrielle is a rather mysterious lady, isn’t she? I am told that people prefer that certain details are left to the imagination. Such things have a way of enrapturing one’s interest, do they not?”

“You’re not wrong, but don’t you think this is a bit *too* mysterious? The one time Atrielle asks for something, and it’s completely nuts. I gotta do something about this Fenrir situation...”



Atrielle strode with a spring in her step as she walked Pochi. She may have been holding his leash in her dainty hands, but it was unlikely that she possessed much control over the creature. Certainly such a diminutive girl as Atrielle leading a hulking wolf around was a strange sight to behold.

At first, many of the townsfolk were concerned and in some cases even scared to see Pochi wandering the streets. Over time, however, they learned that he would cause them no harm, so the pair’s excursions became solidified as an admittedly-unusual aspect of everyday life.

Atrielle and Pochi arrived at a wide-open field on the outskirts of the town. Atrielle plopped down on the grass and retrieved a lunchbox and a bundle from her bag. The lunchbox was hers, while the bundle was meant for Pochi. She opened both and began digging into her lunch.

Pochi, meanwhile, ravenously chowed down on his own portion. Without a doubt, he’d developed a taste for Dennis’s first-class cooking. It had been a very long time since he had eaten alongside a human.

An unbidden memory surfaced in Pochi's mind.



"Hey there, Mr. Fenrir! I'm Monica, the Beastmaster Adventurer!"

The young woman named Monica had boldly ventured alone to the dwelling place of the Fenrir deep in the recesses of the forest. A head of silver hair sat atop her small body. Monica was young and quite naive. She had yet to personally experience the evils the world had to offer.

"Whoa, now that I've gotten a closer look at you, you're pretty amazing, ain'tcha! Look how big you are! And so fluffy too!"

She approached one of the Fenrir without a hint of fear or worry and buried herself in its fur coat.

"Hey, what d'ya say about going on an adventure with me? We can go on journeys around the world together! Doesn't that just get your blood pumping?!"

"*A journey? With a human?*" asked the Fenrir elder of his pup. "*Have thine senses absconded from thee, child? Thou knowest nothing of the folly and cruelty of humanity.*"

The elder's fur had bleached to a snow white from years of wear and tear, his lifespan nearing an eternity.

"*If thou wouldst still choose to accompany this human,*" the elder continued, "*thou wilt never again be permitted to return to this place. Thou wilt forever remain an outcast from our pack.*"

"So be it," said the young Fenrir. "This human has large aspirations. I choose to bet on such aspirations. I will join her."

"*Thou art a fool,*" with bitter acceptance in his voice, the elder acquiesced. "*Humans are foolish, cruel, and brief. More than thou couldst ever comprehend.*"

"I am aware."

"*I shall say no more. I deem thee now an outcast. Thou shalt no longer be accepted here, and neither shalt thee be accepted in the realm of humans, I should expect. Once this minuscule female hast perished, thou shalt forever wander the interstice between our two worlds. Now, go, thou utter fool. Leave, mine son.*"



Thoughts of the past clouded the Fenrir's mind. Through his mental haze, however, he noticed Atrielle's worried gaze. She must have caught on that he'd stopped eating. He swallowed the rest of his food in a single gulp in order to allay her fears.

Now assured, Atrielle carefully gathered up her lunchbox and Pochi's bundle and placed them both back inside her bag. Soon, the pair set off back home.

A warm nostalgia bloomed within Pochi's chest as he trailed behind a master of much smaller stature than his own.



"I've told you a million times! Do. Not. Eat. People! Got it?!"

Monica had often needed to step in and prevent him from devouring those that he labelled as irredeemably evil. But if he couldn't even gorge himself on villains, how would he sate his hunger in this anomalous world of humanity?

"I'll buy you some food, alright?! Ah, stop! You can't eat that either! That's a cat! That's someone's pet! Geez!!"

The Fenrir spent many adventures at the side of his small, silver-haired master in this manner. Through their numerous quests, the pair grew closer, fought together, and spent countless nights keeping each other company around a bonfire.

He wished for nothing more than to be together with her forever. He watched her grow and develop as both a person and an adventurer in her own right faster than he ever imagined possible. Yet again, he wished to remain by her side for all eternity.

Fate had other plans, unfortunately.

"I-I'm s-sorry," she rasped in a weak, fading voice. Her bloodied body was just barely clinging to life. "I couldn't be... with you... until the end..."



These old memories stirred much pain within the Fenrir's heart.

He followed gently behind Atrielle, maintaining a slow pace so as to not overtake her and force her to work to keep up with him. He gazed at her back as he mulled over the many disordered thoughts in his head.

He had made his way to a human village on a whim and encountered a

small silver-haired girl named Atrielle. She didn't seem to be frightened by him, and the Fenrir felt as though they had been brought together by fate itself.

What cruel machination of fate is this?

Why am I likening her to my fallen master?

I cannot return to my kin, nor do I fit into the human world.

I lost my sole connection to this foreign world, and now I seek only to once again find that familiar warmth.

I want to feel that connection once more, but in doing so, am I not substituting my irreplaceable master with this girl?

I truly am beyond saving. Irredeemable. I am an outcast.

All these cogitations and more swirled about within the Fenrir's troubled mind.



Two men eyeballed the tiny girl and her beastly companion's trek home.

"Death Dealer, there it is. That's the Fenrir."

The shady duo were seated at a table outside of a cafe. One of the men was a plump fellow dressed in grey formalwear. He wore a hat along with peculiar colored circle shades. The other was a lanky, pale man garbed in a well-tailored butler suit.

"I found them for you," continued the plump man. "I was in the area under the orders of the Hans Trading Union, checking on some newbies who we'd suddenly lost contact with, but... well, you can see for yourself. In truth, I'm glad you've come. How should we proceed, Death Dealer?"

"Do not call me by that name," rebuked the tall man in a frigid tone.

The plump man removed his hat from his head and held it to his chest. He offered the tall man a deep, decorous bow.

"My apologies. You currently go by 'Harm,' correct?"

"That will do," responded the tall man. He took a poised sip from the teacup he clasped in his white-gloved hand, careful not to sully his suit.

"Catch that thing by any means necessary. Dead or alive."

"As you wish, Harm."

"That Fenrir is fabulous even when compared to other mythical beasts. This is sure to please Master Lostchile."

"I'm sure it will. And if it does?"

“If you perform your task to our liking, we will see to it that your standing in the trading union is sufficiently heightened.”

“This pleases me greatly to hear. I am very grateful. On my pride as a Beast Trader, I will carry out my mission,” said the man in grey formal wear as he adjusted his shades and replaced his hat.



The city that the Outcast’s Restaurant made its home in served as a hub for eager adventurers to assemble and prepare for excursions into various dungeons. As such, the city was bisected by a main road running from north to south.

Just north of the city center sat the restaurant in question. Further north was the Adventurer’s Guild, and beyond that was the dungeon the guild monitored. Proceeding in the southern direction, on the other hand, would lead to a town square, along with the main entrance to the city.

The restaurant now had a new attraction decorating its entrance. Namely, the Fenrir dubbed Pochi. When not enjoying his daily walks with Atrielle, Pochi spent his days guarding the restaurant and observing the travelers passing by on the city’s main road.

Pochi, as truly ancient as he was, could sense that Atrielle’s guardian and head of this restaurant was unbelievably powerful. Though all humans looked more or less the same to Pochi, the Fenrir could distinguish Dennis’s chiseled features and pronounced nasal bridge, which gave him a rather severe aura. Pochi especially took note of Dennis’s eyes. As typically placid as they were, even the tiniest bit of fury set his eyes ablaze, like the ominous light glinting off of a sharp dagger in the darkest night.

Yet despite Dennis’s fierce appearance, Pochi also noticed that he was quite thefussy, detail-oriented person.

Pochi had a lot of time to observe the denizens of the Outcast’s Restaurant, and in that time, he also noted how well-built Dennis was. Though he wasn’t quite sure of the full extent of the man’s fighting prowess, he was certain that Dennis must have been a close-quarters combat specialist. The man would not look out of place at all leading an army into battle or commanding an order of Royal Knights.

To add to this, Pochi did not get the sense that the man was all that interested in conflict, be it physical or magical. He was most assuredly an

oddman.

“Yo, Pochi,” the man himself asked Pochi as he approached him. “D’ya not get bored with all the free time you’ve got on your hands?”

“*I do not,*” Pochi’s curt telepathic response was all that Dennis received.

Humans and mythical beasts perceived time in vastly different ways, so the exceedingly human concepts of “free time” or “being occupied” meant very little to Pochi.

The lifespan of a human was short in the grand scheme of things, and yet, as far as Pochi could see, they generally seemed to segment the entirety of their truncated existence into continuously alternating periods of “free time” and “being occupied.” Quite pitiful, Pochi concluded.

It was midday, and a mass of customers was beginning to form at the restaurant. Among them were three patrons in particular that Pochi had grown to watch out for.

“Pochi~! Hello!”

“I hope you’re ready for your daily dose of pats!”

Two young and strident mage girls ran up to Pochi. One had her hair tied in a ponytail, and the other in long twintails sticking out on the sides of her head. Both girls had made it a habit to visit the restaurant twice a day every day in order to play with Pochi.

Many of the patrons of the Outcast’s Restaurant had been wary and fearful of Pochi to begin with and needed time in order to adapt to the great beast. These girls, however, had treated him with childlike excitement right from the get-go.

“I’m gonna pet ya, okay?!”

“*Do as you wish.*”

“Whoaaaa! Mythical beast telepathy! I heard that in my actual *brain!* That made my head and my stomach shake. I love it!”

“Hey, hey, send some more thoughts our way! Come on, Pochi!”

“Send something super wordy! Hey!”

“...”

Pochi found a fair few humans difficult to understand, and these two were certainly no exception.

“Ah, hello, Pochi.”

Bibia was the other of the three humans who always went out of his way to interact with Pochi. The Fenrir did not know why, but the boy always felt the need to speak formally around him.

As he further looked over the boy, his outfit stood out to Pochi; a thin, green coat over top of a spiffy, white-collared shirt completed with a bolo tie. His blue eyes complimented his sapphire-blond hair.

Pochi figured that, as a general rule, human clothes and hairstyles served only to differentiate genders. Other than that, he had as much difficulty telling humans apart as a human would differentiating mosquitos. If he were to really focus, chances are he could discern a few specific idiosyncrasies, but that would hold no more significance than identifying different breeds of rhinoceros beetle.

However, even Pochi could tell that “this Bibia boy” was good-looking and well put together. If he thought so, then surely humans generally would think even more highly of him. Pochi recalled one particular occasion where he had seen a certain sheep that was just as alluring as the youth he was now staring at.

“Are you beginning to feel more at home now?” asked the boy. “Have you gotten more accustomed to the town now?” further inquired the boy.

“*Do not concern yourself with my matters, little lamb.*”

“Lamb?”

“*Forgive me, I was mistaken. Pay me no heed.*”

“You mistook me for a sheep? Is this a common mistake for mythical beasts?”

“*It is nothing worth musing over.*”

It was just after closing time, and the sun was beginning to set when Dennis dragged a stool outside paired with a bottle of liquor.

Pochi was curled in a ball with his face buried in his pelt, clearly in the process of getting some rest. Dennis dragged his stool next to the curled figure and sat down. He took a swig from the bottle before speaking up.

“How’re you finding things, pup?”

“*Splendidly, thanks to the delectable meals you concoct for me.*”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Dennis said before taking another glug.

“*I have noticed that the girl seems to avoid vegetables. Is this permissible?*”

“Atrielle does?”

“*She often feeds me her portion of carrots and the like.*”

Little twerp, thought Dennis. *Where does she get off being so picky behind my back?*

“Well, I’m just glad that I can be sure that she’s safe with you. And that

she seems to be having a lot more fun nowadays”

“*I too place great value in that.*”

“Would you mind if I ask you some personal stuff?”

“*I do not mind.*”

Dennis wasn’t sure exactly where to begin and made a few false starts before settling on the most direct route available.

“You used to serve a Beastmaster, didn’t you? Who were they?”

“*Monica. Monica Nachura.*”

“Oh, I think I’ve heard of her, actually... Not sure from where exactly, though. Think there’re tons of legends about her, yeah?”

“*My sense of time differs greatly from yours, human. Such memories stay fresh in my mind, as though they happened only yesterday.*”

“Why have you taken such a liking to Atrielle?”

“*I am not sure myself,*” Pochi felt his eyelids grow heavy, and he nuzzled his face in his fur for a second time. “*She makes me wish to try and live alongside humans once again. For what reason, I do not know...*”

“You think this’ll end well?”

“*I would hope it will. Either way, I am aware that this will be the last time.*”

He transmitted this final thought to Dennis and finished settling his head in his fur.

A strange restaurant in a strange town.

Never before in all his travels through the many realms had Pochi encountered humans quite like these ones. They looked to live the most carefree life, free of any negative emotions. Perhaps, he thought, it was due to all of the delicious food that they ate.

The townsfolk seemed fairly laid back, too. They did not attempt to drive Pochi away, nor was their natural fear of him overwhelming. Not even a single rock was chucked at his frame.

Maybe this town was special, or maybe the human world had changed drastically while he was away.

Perhaps, Pochi thought. Perhaps it is all right for me to remain here.



“Pochi.”

Atrielle arrived with leash in hand, ready for their usual midday foray.

“Walk.”

She was spartan with her words as always.

Atrielle had a silver head of hair which she wore in a high ponytail behind her head. Light skin, long eyelashes, and large, gleaming eyes also made up her general appearance. Today, as most days, she was dressed in her usual white and pink apron.

Pochi lifted his head from his hind leg and lowered it so that Atrielle wouldn't have too tough a time fastening the leash to his collar. He understood that it was the etiquette of the human world for beasts—mythical or otherwise—to wear a leash, even though it was merely decoration in his case.

A genuine attempt at restraining him would be a much more precarious endeavor. However, it was in everyone's best interests for such a situation never to arise, so he went out of his way to be as obedient as possible.

The leash now fastened, Atrielle set off. Along the way, she was stopped by an old woman.

“Oh my, Atrielle! What a nice dog you have.”

“The blacksmith lady,” Atrielle recognized the woman and bowed, “Hello.”

“Hello, Atrielle,” the old woman looked between Atrielle and the large hound before saying, “I'm not sure why, but you've begun to strike me as the big sister type, Atrielle.”

“Big sister?” Atrielle questioned, surprised.

“Yes, seeing you taking care of such a large dog, I just got the feeling that you've completely matured. It's clear as day that you're keeping track of all your new responsibilities. You were always such a good girl, but now it feels like you've found a little brother to protect. Or, well, something along those lines.

“I'm a big sister?” Atrielle mulled those words over while softly stroking Pochi.

“You certainly are! Make sure you take good care of him, okay?”

She is not battle-worthy, thought Pochi. How is she expected to defend me? He, of course, kept this to himself.

And so the pair continued on their routine walk.

Her mood perhaps enhanced by the old woman's compliment, Atrielle walked with more of a spring in her step than normal. Pochi could only guess at her mood by her gait and the general pleasant air around her, because she

remained her usual taciturn and stony-face self.

They took their usual route to their usual field on the outskirts of town, where Atrielle produced her usual lunchbox and Pochi's usual bundle. The two of them then proceeded to eat their lunch in silence. This was now how they'd typically spend their walks.

Atrielle stuffed her cheeks as she quietly gazed at the nature enveloping their surroundings. Even with the absence of discussion, there was something especially peaceful about eating together as they did.

Just as he took his final bite, Pochi sensed something insidious lurking in the shadows of a large tree behind him.

Good grief, he thought as he turned to glare at the uninvited presence. Maybe things haven't changed much after all.

All at once, a group of men jumped out from behind the tree, and Pochi immediately swung his hulking body around onto all fours and faced the group with his fangs bared.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, cool it there, Mr. Fenrir," one of the men in the group of ten started. He stepped forward, his stature and distinctive silver finery suggesting that he was the leader.

"What are you conspiring to do here, human?" Pochi ensured he was keenly aware of Atrielle's location as he blasted this thought toward the group.

"There is no need for all this drama, Mr. Fenrir. We only want you to accompany us for a while, that's all."

"Spare me your prattle, scoundrels, else you will meet your end in my jaws."

"Oh, I'm sure you could gobble us all up if you really wanted to. It would be folly to make light of us, however." The silver-clad man stared pointedly at Atrielle as he spoke. "Even a mythical beast such as yourself would have trouble guarding that girl while contending with all of us. If you're going to do battle, you better be absolutely certain that you can keep an eye on her should some misfortune befall her."

"You underestimate us."

That was when reality truly set in for Pochi. Unlike his first human companion, Monica, Atrielle hadn't the slightest ability to defend herself.

"Listen well, Mr. Fenrir," continued the man. "We are only interested in you and you alone and would rather not dirty our hands dealing with some runt. If you cooperate with us, then we'll see to it that the girl is delivered

home safe and sound. So listen to reason and come quietly, and we won't have to do anything illicit," the man paused, perhaps hoping for acquiescence. "Though if that's the route you'd rather take, then by all means, let's get crazy."

The group quietly drew closer to Pochi, eventually surrounding him. The men were armed with sharp-pointed canes topped by what looked to be a bundle of gnarled fingers. They brandished the canes as they approached, readying themselves for any unexpected movement from the monster.

Then, all at once, they struck Pochi with their canes.

"Guagh!"

A myriad of colors erupted from the canes, and purple lightning burst in all directions, entangling Pochi. This sapped the Fenrir's strength and he collapsed in a heap. An absurd wave of nausea washed over him, and his head refused to stop spinning.

"Pochi!" Atrielle screamed, but was quickly restrained by one of the assailants.

"Wow! That worked better than expected!" excitedly shouted the leader.

"He *did* say that these Canes of Disarray were tailor-made for mythical beasts, but damn! That's The Collector for ya!"

The men gathered around their leader as he shouted.

"Come on, boys, don't just stand around! Grab the chains and ropes, and let's bag this thing and get outta here!"

"Whew! A real Fenrir! Who knows how much this thing'll go for!"



The men gathered ropes and chains from carriages that they had hidden nearby and out of sight. They bound Pochi and tied him to the back of a carriage. Not long after, they were en route back to town.

They dragged Pochi along the jagged, uneven road behind them. He felt each and every pointed pebble and sharp rock digging into his body as he was yanked along.

Three Canes of Disarray were driven into his back and sides, their effect still very much palpable to the battered Pochi. He wasn't able to move even a single one of his legs, and he was certain that it was an effect of the magic the canes were releasing.

As the caravan ambled along the hot ground, the severe pain that Pochi

felt slowly but surely gave way to a worrisome, if relieving, numbness.

Good grief, thought Pochi. Who hired these individuals? A Beast Trader? What do they have in store for me? Dissection? Or perhaps they'll fashion me into a pitiful caged decoration for some depraved wealthy eccentric... What matters most is they haven't harmed Atrielle, the Fenrir continued to wallow. This is my punishment for not knowing my place. Hoping for the impossible comes with a hefty price.

Vague thoughts and disillusionment ran rampant through Pochi's mind.

"You sure this is alright, boss? If we keep dragging him like this, he might bite it before we even get the chance to hand him off," one of the men expressed his concerns with a quick glance behind at Pochi's enervated form.

"Mythical beasts don't kick the bucket that easily!" exclaimed the man in silver.

"But he's got three whole Canes of Disarray lodged in 'im! Honestly, I can't even believe it took *that many* to settle him down. Usually one's more than enough, ain't it?"

"Dead or alive, remember? If worse comes to worst, we don't exactly have to worry about him trying anything, so I'm not too aggrieved!" the man in silver had to shout over the rattling of the carriage. "Our main concern is getting out of here quick, yeah?! Hiyah!" He spurred his horse, and the carriage jerked forward and picked up speed.

"Shouldn't we have brought the girl with us, boss?!"

"Hahaha! What, you scared a little girl's gonna kick your ass?!"

The man in silver was too focused on maintaining control over his frenzied horses to notice the fear plastered across his companion's face in the next carriage over.

"Boss! Someone's tailing us!"

"Wha—?!"

Tracking the direction of his underling's gaze, he saw that there was in fact a horse rider following them. They were fairly far away, but were gaining on them quickly.

The rider was none other than the girl they had been discussing just prior.

"It's that kid! I don't see anyone else with 'er!"

"Where did she get a horse from?! Her being on our ass was *not* part of the plan!"

"Damn," the boss clicked his tongue.

Trailing us all on her own? wondered the man in silver. *Just for some*

stupid pet? I even let her go and everything! Foolish kid. He frantically flipped through his options in his head. If things progressed any further, he might end up having to kill her.

It was all Atrielle could manage to not get thrown off her steed as she made her pursuit.

"What's her plan here?!"

"She ain't doing a damn thing! Lead her somewhere quiet, and we'll pick her up!"

The men in all three carriages observed Atrielle warily as she continued to close the distance.

She maintained her pace until she was speeding alongside Pochi before grasping her horse's mane and standing precariously on its violently-shaking back.

"She's gonna jump?!"

"This kid's crazy! She's gonna try and pull the canes out!"

"Shit! Stop the cart! Seize her!"

"No time, boss! She's boutta go for it!"

"Stick her with an arrow or something, then!"

A man in the rightmost carriage swiftly spun around and readied his bow. He let loose an arrow just as Atrielle made her leap toward Pochi. Her clumsy, erratic jump saved her life as the arrow only managed to graze her skin before disappearing somewhere behind her.

She landed on Pochi before attempting and failing to steady herself. She lost her footing and tumbled off the Fenrir and onto the road.

"She fell! Ha, serves you right!"

"And we were all so worried! And for absolutely nothing! As if she'd actually be able to pull off a stunt like that!"

"She's got guts though, I'll give her that!"

"W-Wait! What's that she's holding?!"

Atrielle had fallen in a heap in the road and was riddled with grazes and scratches. And yet she triumphantly grasped something in her hand. It was a cane with a peculiarly gnarled head.

By the time the men had realized what she had done, it was already too late.

Using all of his might, Pochi tore through the chains that had once bound him.

His deadened eyes glittered with vigor once more, as did the fangs

peeking out from beneath his snarling lips.



Dennis found himself once again worried about one of his associates. He was about to set out to look for Atrielle who was late coming home. Just as he stepped outside, however, Pochi finally returned to the restaurant.

The Fenrir had a painful-looking limp and was heaving along an unconscious Atrielle by the scruff of her shirt. His normally pristine grey fur was matted in dirt and blood, particularly around his chest. His skin had been torn asunder in many places, the sizable gashes leaking blood. The punctures left by the canes looked especially dire. Due to the cane's dampening effect, the bleeding was much worse than it would otherwise be.

Pochi left a trail of bloody paw prints as he approached Dennis. He gently delivered Atrielle over to Dennis, who was relieved to see that, despite being covered in bruises and scrapes, she hadn't suffered any major wounds.

"Please convey my thanks to all the humans who have accepted me and treated me as if one of their own."

"What in the hell happened?" asked Dennis, bewildered. As he looked over the mangled form of the Fenrir, he noticed that Atrielle wasn't the only person that Pochi had brought to the restaurant.

The beast shook his body and a man wearing grey formalwear slid unceremoniously off his back and fell crumpled on the ground. Dennis neared the unconscious man and grabbed him by his lapels.

"Hey, you motherfucker! Wake up! You've got some explainin' to do!" His shouting roused the man, who let out a frightened yelp.

"Please don't kill me!" he pleaded. "Please... I was only following orders."

"Whose orders?"

"A man named Lostchile. He's a noble known as *The Collector*. One of his subordinates hired us to nab that Fenrir."

"Lostchile?" Dennis recognized the name immediately. Back when he was part of the Silver Wings Battalion, he'd partaken in quite a few quests at the behest of a noble with that same name.

Yupaswell Lostchile. He must've ordered these men to capture Pochi.

Dennis dropped the man to the ground and turned to the Fenrir.

"I let this happen. Forgive me. I'll take care of this, but first, let me take a

look at your wounds.”

“*You need not worry about that. Forget all that you have heard about the man named Lostchile.*”

“Wh-What?”

“*I will leave this place posthaste. It seems I am truly incapable of living amongst humans. Whoever involves themselves with me becomes susceptible to any dangers such as the one today. I will leave. Peace will return.*”

Dennis could not accept Pochi’s explanation in the slightest.

“And what, you’re fine with that?” he asked incredulously.

“*I am but a mere outcast. I chose exile from my family, and I choose to exile myself from humanity, as well. I am not welcome here.*”

Pochi faltered from the blood loss, and Dennis moved to support the beast’s giant frame.

“*But I have come to realize something.*”

“What’s that?”

“*This human realm, slowly... slowly, it is changing,*” Pochi proclamations echoed inside Dennis’s mind. “*I feel that a renaissance is coming. A time where none face discrimination, where all respect and care for their fellow man. This kind of future, where none tear each other down just to build themselves up, seems inevitable to me now. I could not even fathom such a prospect in the past. This town has changed my perspective. This strange, strange town.*”

Pochi looked into Dennis’s eyes before continuing.

“*Please tell that child that I am deeply grateful. Because of this short time we spent together, I am content spending the next thousand years awaiting that splendid future.*”



By the time Atrielle awoke, it was already dark outside her window. She turned her head and saw Dennis sitting at her side. The solemn look on his face alarmed her.

“Where is Pochi?”

“He left. He’s gone back into hiding.”

Tears began to well up in Atrielle’s eyes. Looking at her face reminded Dennis of the solitary outcast who was forced to conceal himself from the world.

A solitary Fenrir.

A Fenrir who once chose to live out his dreams alongside a young human girl, a choice which placed him back to the interstice between humanity and beastkind.

“Will I see him again?” asked Atrielle.

“I’m not sure... I hope so. I think if you want to see him again, you need to eat lots and grow up big and strong. We all need to live our best lives so we can witness that future that he foresaw.”

“How...? How do I live properly? How do I be strong?”

Dennis smiled softly and said, “Well, first of all, you can start by eating your vegetables. Quit being so picky.”

A distant howl pierced the night, causing Atrielle’s head to shoot up.

The howl of the outcast dissolved into the darkness. The farewell eventually trailed off into nothing, and silence returned to the slumbering town.

Parting ways is a natural stage of one’s life. Beast and man cannot live together forever.

The Fenrir coincidentally crossed paths with a lone girl. Because of that meeting, because of *her*, he did not regret the choice he made all those years ago.

His farewell was undeniable proof of the days they had spent together. It was an indication that they would continue to walk together.



This is a tale from a long time ago. A very, very long time ago.

A lone wooden house was tucked away deep in a forest close to the capital.

“Yujitt! Did you get into a fight with Olivia again?”

“Shut up, Nachura. That is none of your business.”

“None of my business? You’re the one who asked me out here, you know!”

Yujitt sat slumped in a chair, sullenly sipping on a cup of green tea that the girl known as Nachura had made for him. She then poured some for herself and sat across from him.

“So? You want to make up with her, then?”

“I said shut up. I’m not the one who’s at fault here! She’s the one that

should apologize to me.”

“Olivia would do so right away! Maybe you just couldn’t accept it in the heat of the moment, and maybe you’re starting to feel like you were too harsh on her.”

“Please, that would never happen.”

“You’re not sure about how to apologize properly.”

“I am not worried.”

“Hmm. Pochi, what do you think?”

Nachura turned to face the huge grey wolf curled up outside the house.

“I neither know, nor do I care. It is human nature to fret about meaningless things”

“‘Meaningless’ was that, you mutt?! I’m all torn up about her, and it’s simply ‘meaningless’ to you??!”

“So you *are* worried...”

“You are very loud, small human. I will silence you myself if you dare to interrupt my nap another time.”

“Small?! Do you mean to make an enemy of such an unparalleled genius as me?!”

“Oooo, they’re at it again!”

This is a tale from a long time ago. A very, very long time ago.

A distant past that none can return to.

Chapter Three

Culinary Business Trip! A Fiery Open House!

“This world truly does value education after all, doesn’t it, Dennis?”

“What sort of nonsense has that book been teaching you now?” Dennis asked Bibia, who was seated at the counter, a prawn floating in his spoon.

Recently, Bibia had taken to showing up at the restaurant when it was less packed full of customers and staying long after he’d finished his meal in order to have a quiet place to read. Dennis had noticed that the books were inspiring change within the boy and wanted to know more.

“What do you mean ‘nonsense’?! You meant to ask ‘what wisdom have you gained from this tome,’ am I correct?!”

“Right, no. Just tryna figure what you’re getting at,” Dennis said in an attempt to placate the boy. “You think education’s really all that important? Come to think of it, I never actually went to school myself.”

“Wh-What? Really? Then how did you come to be the owner of a restaurant?”

“Well, that head chef taught me tons of things. She comes from the upper echelons of society, y’know.”

“I see. So you have no experience whatsoever with schooling?”

“Well, I get the gist. They’re full of like, uh, chairs and desks and stuff, right?”

“Wow. You aren’t incorrect by any means, but wow,” Bibia said, utterly nonplussed. He then fished out a piece of paper from his satchel. “Why don’t we garner you that first experience, then?”

The paper appeared to be some sort of flier containing information about one of the magic schools in the capital.

“‘Yujitt Metropolitan Magic Academy’? ‘Open house event’...?”



“Huh, in the blink of an eye. We’ve arrived!”

The day after the pair’s conversation, Dennis and Bibia found themselves staring at the gates of a certain magic school based in the capital. It was a long, long way from the restaurant.

“Why am I here?” inquired Dennis. He was completely decked out in

formalwear they'd bought specifically for the occasion.

"Well, I can't attend alone, can I? I require a guardian!"

"Since when am I your guardian? Aren't you just one of my customers?"

"Ahh, don't sweat the small stuff, Dennis! Come on, let us head inside."

Bibia grabbed a dead-faced Dennis by the hand and excitedly dragged him toward the entrance.

Perturbed as he was, Dennis was actually pleased to have an excuse to visit the capital. He had a reliable contact with whom he wanted to speak with regarding recent events involving ancient magic dolls and highly sought-after giant wolves turning up on his doorstep

They proceeded through the main gate and greeted the receptionist, who promptly located Bibia's name in the registry. Apparently the boy had found the time to register ahead of time.

"Mr. Bibia Strange... Yes, welcome. And who is this man accompanying you?"

"He's my proprietor!"

"I'm his proprietor."

"Proprietor? Um, is that something like a guardian?"

Having sorted everything out at the reception desk, Bibia began expounding the history of the academy to Dennis as they made their way down a lengthy hallway.

"This is the Yujitt Metropolitan Magic Academy named after the legendary sorcerer Yujitt, King of Contraptions."

"King of Contraptions? I swear I've heard that before... He's some famous guy who lived a long time ago, right?"

"Indeed, he was! He was one of the Subjugators of old! He even codified the ancient laws of magic. His other sobriquet was The Machinist, if that rings any bells."

"Hmm, sounds pretty cool. I dunno much about history, though."

"Another renowned Subjugator was Nachura, the Queen of Adventure. There were five of them in total, and as a collective, they were referred to as The Five Silver Wings. Wasn't your Silver Wings Battalion named after them?"

"Was it? Oh, um! I mean, yeah! Yeah, totally!"

"You hadn't the slightest clue, did you?!"



A plethora of stalls littered the inside of the school. Each one provided resources and different kinds of information for potential new pupils. In particular, a well-stocked book stand caught Bibia's attention.

"Oh! A volume of *King of Contraptions*! Wait a minute, they have the whole series!"

"Is that a cool book or something?"

"Yes, it's extraordinarily popular here in the capital," replied Bibia. "It's written by an author called Entmori. At one point, there wasn't a moment where they weren't out of stock, and you'd be incredibly fortunate to obtain a copy. You see, the series was ranked number one in the *Reader's Choice Biographical Novel* rankings."

"Sounds like a pretty specific list, but I guess I get it."

"Oh, I might just have to procure the whole series. This is the first time I've ever come across a single volume of it in person."

"You gonna haul those 'round all day? Why don't you buy them on the way out, instead?"

"Not a chance! I'm buying them this instant! I will not let what may likely be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity evade me!"

Bibia rummaged through his pockets for his wallet while Dennis surveyed the stall. They looked to be fully in stock, so he was fairly sure the books weren't in any danger of selling out any time soon. Actually, they seemed to have *a lot* of copies.

"Hey Bibia, look at how many of them they've got. Aren't they just offloading extras here?"

"That's just how beloved they are, Dennis! Yes, the whole series, if you will!" Bibia excitedly spoke with the stallholder. "Yes! Oh, I cannot wait to flaunt these about! Perhaps I should procure two sets so I can lend them out to others..."

"Come on, Bibia. I had no idea you were such a sheep; you don't need two se—Hold on! Is that a *Buck Naked Adventurer's Restaurant Business for Dummies, 5th edition*?! When in the world did that come out?! I'm gonna need four copies! One for reading, one for display, and another two for storing and sharing! Oh man, and is that the legendary 3rd edition I see?!"

Sometime later.

"Ooohh, so this is what classrooms are like," whistled Dennis, indicating how impressed he was. He was clutching a heavy-looking brown paper bag to his chest. "Much bigger than I expected."

“They are big, aren’t they?” replied Bibia totting a large paper bag of his own.

The classroom was laid out in the style of a typical auditorium. It hosted a stage equipped with a blackboard and tiered semicircles of chairs laid out in increasingly taller rows, stretching almost as far as to the roof. Dennis and Bibia could see the entire room and all of the students in it from their post at the very top.

Outside the room hung a sign that read “Introduction to Magic History.”

“Oh yeah, I know how this goes. The teacher writes on that blackboard with the white thing and all that jazz, right?”

“Dennis, please, you sound like a neanderthal,” sighed Bibia. “Oh! Look, Dennis, the teacher’s arrived!”

A short brunette with a bundle of papers in her hands pushed through an inconspicuous door at the back of the room. The woman had a freckled face and looked to be rather young considering the position she held.

“Isn’t that Bethel?”

“Guess she did say she’d snagged a job at a school in the capital, if I’m remembering correctly.”

Bethel made her way over to the podium and began double-checking every piece of her paperwork. She then adjusted her rather large uniform, and only after she was done with everything did she finally cast her gaze out over the students.

Dennis and Bibia smiled and gave her a wave. Bethel looked as if she was eager to respond in kind, but remained composed in the presence of her pupils.

“Maybe we should skedaddle. We might only be getting in her way here,” said Dennis.

“You may be right. I am glad to see that she’s doing well, though,” responded Bibia.

Bethel watched the two of them depart, then once again looked over the smattering of students sitting in their seats.

“So, um, well then,” she fumbled. “Let’s do this thing!” she suddenly shouted. She briefly glanced down at her notes before continuing, “Soooo last time, we were looking at the King of Contraptions’ role in magic history, weren’t we? Jumping off from our last stopping point, recent research seems to point to the existence of a magic doll that the King manufactured in order to serve him...”



Dennis and Bibia spent some time meandering about the academy before eventually arriving at the cafeteria.

"This place really has got it goin' on," said Dennis. "Might not be the worst idea to send Atrielle here to study."

"I concur, this place is quite beautiful. The recent renovations have really paid dividends, I feel."

"Can't say I feel the same about the rice they serve here, though. Just looking at it is depressing."

"Oh please, Dennis. You expect too much from mere cafeteria rice. They do what they must to decrease the pricing in order to ensure the entire student population is well fed."

"That isn't an excuse! Cheap stuff doesn't have to be awful, Bibia. I mean, look! That kid over there looks like he's gonna up and die if he takes even the slightest nibble."

Bibia's gaze followed Dennis's extended finger to see a group of queasy-looking students.

"This fried rice... is pretty heavy... huh?" groaned one of the students.

"You get what you pay for... Just gotta deal with it," rasped another in response.

"I don't wanna study anymore... I just want a burger."

Bibia watched the listless group, slurping on some lightly-seasoned egg soup all the while.

"Dang, I bet things'd be on a whole 'nother level if we had a level 100 chef around here," said another of the students.

"Look! There's one!"

Dennis turned in the direction of the incongruous voice and spotted Bethel coming their way. She plopped her tray of food down onto the table and greeted them with a wide smile.

"It's been a while, Boss! Same with you, Bibia!"

"Hey, Bethel. It has been a while. You look like you're doing great!"

"Thank you, thank you. I used to need your help with just about anything, but now it finally feels like I can stand on my own two feet."

"You looked very confident when you were teaching, Bethel."

"Oh man, you really caught me at such an embarrassin' time!" Bethel let out a flustered, little laugh.

The trio sat around their table and ate together for a short while before Dennis started up the conversation once more.

“So, Bethel, you’re like, uh, one of those professor types now? Is that what they’re called?”

“Nuh-uh, nothin’ like that just yet,” she waved her free hand and put her fork down. “I’m doin’ part-time work right now, so then I’ve gotta do lots of research stuff, and only then I can become an associate professor, and from then on finally I can be a real professor.”

“That’s still fantastic,” Dennis said, pride ringing in his voice. “Of all my former employees, I’d say you’re doing the best.”

“That’s not true at all,” she said. “Speaking of, is Henrietta with y’all?”

“Nah, she’s still a cadet going through knight training, last I heard. She just wants to be a rank and file knight, though, so she’s not going on to do any of the proper officer business. But heck, if she’s happy, I’m happy. After all, being a knight’s not a bad job stability-wise.”

“Hold it. I was under the impression that she was on the verge of graduation and joining the order proper,” interjected Bibia.

“Was she? Huh, well, either way, she’s probably the busiest one of us right now, and we can’t exactly go see her while she’s still in training. But I wonder if she’s gonna wanna come see us when she’s got less going on,” Dennis said. He paused and refocused his gaze on Bethel, then continued, “Oh yeah, Bethel. I’ve got something I need to talk to you about. Got a minute after lunch?”

“Huh? That’s quite sudden. Uh, classes end at...” she trailed off when she noticed a tall figure glide past the table where they were seated.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Ms. Bethel.”

Bethel’s eyes warily moved toward the voice and scaled their way up the form of the towering man dressed in black formalwear. Finally, she made eye contact with his sunken-in eyes, which stared back at her from his pale, corpse-like face.

“Ah, um, hello, Associate Professor Catnaaj,” Bethel was uncharacteristically uncomfortable in her reply.

“We both have Combat Magic next on our schedules, do we not? Let us both do our best.”

“Eh, um... Y-Yes, let’s,” came her uneasy reply.

Catnaaj smiled and retreated to a seat further into the dining hall. Something about his smirk rubbed Dennis the wrong way.

“Uh, is everything alright, Bethel?” he asked. “Is he messing with you?” Bethel gave a blatantly fake smile and waved her hand dismissively. “No, nothing at all!” she exclaimed. “By the way, totally off topic, but I’ve gotta present something at my next class, so don’t come, alright? Hahaha, oh if that wouldn’t be the most embarrassing thing!” Bethel’s chortling sounded incredibly forced.



Once they had polished off their meals, Dennis and Bibia made their way across the grounds to a room labeled “Combat Magic Practice.”

“I believe we’ve located it,” said Bibia.
“So she’s gonna be paired up with that shambling corpse from earlier?”
“Perhaps we should heed her warning and leave her be.”
“I’m a bit worried is all. I don’t think Bethel would tell us if she was having problems. That’s just the kind of girl she is,” said Dennis.
“Regardless, all we can do at the moment is observe.”
“This is just to make sure, alright? Let’s go in, stay out of the way, and keep an eye on her. If everything checks out, then we’ll just sneak out, and nobody will be any the wiser.”
“I’m not entirely convinced, Dennis. She made it perfectly clear that she didn’t desire us to watch.”
“I know that, but... Come on, Bibia. We’ll apologize to her afterward if we have to.”

And so the two of them scouted out an out-of-sight dark corner at the back of the classroom and made themselves comfortable.

Just as they had anticipated, Catnaaj and Bethel entered the classroom one after the other. Catnaaj fiddled around with something before turning to face the class.

“Hello, everyone. Today’s Combat Magic Training will be headed by me. I’m Catnaaj, Researcher of Combat Magic. My assistant for today will be Ms. Bethel.”

“H-Hello, thank you for having me,” squeaked Bethel through a strained smile.

The class was surprisingly engrossing. Dennis noticed that Bibia had even taken out a notebook at some point and was diligently taking notes. This was the first time Dennis had ever experienced learning about magic in an

academic setting, and the novelty of it all had him enraptured. He had always used magic intuitively, so having its intricacies explained to him caught his attention and he soon found himself listening intently.

Bethel dutifully assisted in preparing various materials and provided other general assistance when it was deemed necessary throughout the class. Dennis couldn't understand what she was so worried about.

"Now," said Catnaaj. "Allow us to perform a demonstration for you all. Ms. Bethel?"

"Y-Yes."

"I am going to cast an offensive spell. I would like you to defend against it, please."

"Sh-Shall I use Nullification here?"

"That would be ideal, yes. I am now going to cast the incantation we were just discussing."

Bethel and Catnaaj paced to opposite sides of the blackboard and readied their wands. Catnaaj weaved his wand through the air, eventually pointing it at Bethel.

"Wolf Fang!" he suddenly cried out.

"N-Nullification!"

Bethel's defensive spell did nothing to stop Catnaaj's attack as it struck her head-on and sent her careening into the wall behind her.

"What the—?!" Dennis shouted instinctively.

What kind of demonstration was that?! he thought. He obviously wasn't holding back there!

Bethel, powerless against gravity, collapsed onto the ground before slowly dragging herself into a prostrate position. Cold beads of sweat dotted her brow.

She had realized that Catnaaj was not going to hold back only a moment before he'd unleashed the spell. She'd had mere milliseconds to brace herself and manage to cast Nullification. That had likely saved her from a much greater injury, since her shoulder had taken the full brunt of the attack.

If she had been more gullible and trusted Catnaaj to behave, she might have ended up seriously hurt. Nullification simply lacked the power to handle such a situation.

The entirety of her left arm throbbed with pain from her shoulder to her elbow. Her incantation had dampened some of the blow's impact, but it still felt to her like she might have broken a bone.

Tension oozed throughout the classroom.

Catnaaj surveyed the scene, satisfied with the outcome.

“Oh my,” he spoke, loudly projecting his voice throughout the classroom. “Perhaps my magic was too powerful for you? Ms. Bethel, it troubles me that you cannot even defend against a basic spell such as Wolf Fang. How very unbecoming for a teacher of this prestigious academy.”

“Y-Yes! I’m deeply sorry!”

“Gosh, this is precisely why I loathe teachers being granted positions here solely due to the connections they possess. I’ve heard that you were recommended by another school’s headmaster, but nepotism is nepotism nonetheless. You must understand: the Yujitt Academy has no need for anything other than *real* mages.”

“I... I will try harder in the future.”

Quiet whispers began to trickle through the auditorium as the shocked students talked among themselves.

“Hey... is this really alright?”

“Associate Professor Catnaaj has a reputation for picking on new teachers.”

“Should we do something about this?”

“He’s rumored to be very connected... At least he’s got the teaching chops to back it up.”

“Ms. Bethel did... once...”

Catnaaj returned to the podium and sharply gestured once with his hand. The murmurs ceased immediately.

“Now,” he addressed the class, “Allow us to return to our lecture. An accident has occurred here, but let us take us it as an example of why defensive magic is—”

“So that’s what you call an ‘accident,’ you piece of shit?”

All eyes shot toward the harsh voice that erupted from the back of the classroom.

Catnaaj’s head snapped to stare at the source; Dennis, who stood atop his desk with his hands stuck deep in his pockets like some sort of hoodlum.

“Is this school so low-brow that their teachers can’t even properly restrain their magic output?”

Catnaaj’s brows wrinkled with distaste at Dennis’s outburst.

“I do not know who you are, but it appears that you are here for the open house, no? Forgive me, but I do not believe that an amateur should be—”

“I’ve got some concerns as a guardian. Why should we spend craploads of hard-earned money only to be taught how to waste magical energy?”

“My goodness, this is why I dislike these open house ordeals. We really should stop letting the loonies in. What you witnessed was simply a part of the lesso—”

“Oh, so it’s ‘a part of the lesson’ now? Was it a lesson on how to handle someone tricking you into lowering your guard and ambushing you with an overpowered attack? Got it. Ms. Bethel certainly played her part perfectly then, so why are you being so hard on her? She saw through your cowardly trick and defended herself accordingly,” Dennis exclaimed. “What was the name of this class again?” he asked Bibia.

“‘Defensive Measures for Combating Dirty Cheat Wizards,’ if memory serves,” came the boy’s wrathful quip.

“Oh yeah. Sorry man, I forgot. I’m an idiot, so I made a dumb complaint. Carry on with your class.”

By the time Dennis had finished his diatribe, Catnaaj’s pallid cheeks had flushed a furious red.

“You ingrate. Do you think you can get away with disparaging an Associate Professor of this illustrious Yujitt Academy?”

“Insulting? And what you just did to Ms. Bethel wasn’t insulting? You think you’re not gonna get what’s coming to you?”

Figurative sparks crackled as the two men stared each other down from opposite ends of the auditorium.

“... Fine. We will meet in the square outside,” Catnaaj said. He once again addressed the classroom, “Everyone, it seems that this person here has volunteered to participate in a practical demonstration of a duel. I would very much like to take him up on this unique opportunity. You do not mean to back out, do you?”

“Nah, I don’t think I will. Let’s make this an open house worth remembering, eh?”



Catnaaj stalked down the corridor, the clacking of his leather boots resounding roughly through the halls.

That ruffian, he thought to himself. “Dennis,” was it? How dare he... I will humiliate him in front of everyone. I’d like to see if he can still take that

tone with me after I'm through with him.

“Is this truly a good idea, I wonder.”

The sudden voice derailed his train of thought, and Catnaaj stopped dead in his tracks. He looked around and saw a man silhouetted in a nearby doorway.

The man was dressed in a butler’s outfit.

“Death Dealer... no, Harm,” growled Catnaaj.

Harm stood motionless. Every movement he did make seemed calculated. He gracefully slipped on a pair of white gloves.

“I came to see your progress regarding the Yujitt Manuscript matter, only to find you making a fool of yourself. Would you care to explain what exactly it is you are doing, Catnaaj?”

Catnaaj gulped at Harm’s ice cold voice.

“Th-This is not of your concern. The Manuscript matter is proceeding just fine.”

“It does concern me,” said Harm. He took a single grandiose step into the light.

He towered over the already quite tall Catnaaj. His perfectly-fitted butler’s uniform revealed the contours of his lean musculature. Harm approached Catnaaj with his back straight and shoulders squared and looked down on the associate professor, making firm eye contact with him.

“Please do not draw undue attention to yourself, Catnaaj. Do not forget the sacrifices Master Lostchile has made for you.”

“N-Now listen here, Harm. I am well aware, and I am in complete control of the situation. Do not interfere.”

“I have to maintain a firm grasp on you, the walking bundle of vanity that you are,” said Harm coolly. “Who knows what idiocy you’d partake in otherwise. Now, *you* listen to *me*: I do not know what you are thinking, but you are well aware of what I will do to you if you cause even the slightest of issues for Master Lostchile.”

Harm gave Catnaaj a predatory glare before lightly stabbing his finger into his chest. Catnaaj reacted as if someone had just taken a sledgehammer to him and tottered back a step.

“Let me be clear. If you inconvenience the Master in any way, your carcass will make a fine meal for the dogs. I assure you, running is out of the question. The Hans Trading Union’s information network is unfathomably vast. We will find you no matter what decrepit corner you tuck yourself into.”

“Don’t you dare threaten me, Harm. Or should I call you Death Dealer, Senior Officer of the Hans Trading Union?” Catnaaj glared defiantly back at Harm.

“Do not call me by my old name,” Harm returned a cutting gaze at Catnaaj. “I am no longer the lost dog I was then; I have been reborn. I am now Master Lostchile’s Harm. You would do well to refer to me as such.”

This man was once known simply as Death Dealer. He traded in violence and was capable of solving any problem with the cash he wielded. He served no master and could not be cowed by any external forces. He single-handedly dominated an entire kingdom’s seedy underbelly, and not a single soul would be so foolish as to challenge him, let alone lay a hand on him.

Nowadays, he is entirely devoted to his role serving as a butler to a certain powerful aristocrat.

“Also, do not mistake my words as a threat,” Harm said. “I am simply offering you my advice for your own sake, as well as for Master Lostchile’s. That is all.”

Harm turned his back on Catnaaj, but had more to say.

“Make sure that Manuscript matter indeed proceeds without issue as you say. The King of Contraptions’ ancient records may hold the key to the enigma of the Royal Sword. Master Lostchile wishes to have them in his possession.”

Harm left, taking naturally long steps due to his gangly nature, and Catnaaj silently watched him go.

Looks as though Lostchile’s mutt is getting cocky again, he thought. Merely thought, of course.



Quite the sizeable crowd had gathered at the square in front of the Yujitt Metropolitan Magic Academy’s main gates.

A rumor had quickly spread like wildfire among the school population. It was said that the Associate Professor of Combat Magic Research, Catnaaj, was going to duel a mystery guardian who was attending the school’s open house event.

Students who otherwise had no responsibilities, students who had shirked those responsibilities and skipped class, and even a handful of teachers who had cancelled their own classes in favor of attending this duel all filled out

the crowd.

“I would ask everyone to keep in mind that this is no more than a demonstration for practical purposes,” announced Catnaaj. “A demonstration that this person requested himself, mind you.”

Everybody knew that those were empty words. Of course, Catnaaj was aware that they knew, as well.

“If you would like to concede, now is the time.”

“That’s my line, buddy,” snorted Dennis. “If you apologize to Bethel right now, I might even let you off easy.”

“Good grief.”

Catnaaj retrieved his wand from his coat.

“Shall we begin the demonstration, then? If an unfortunate accident were to occur in the process of this lesson, please understand that the academy cannot be held accountable.”

He flourished his wand, and his true, sinister smile crepted out.

This pumpkin is about to learn his place, he thought. Surely, he must've been a luminary in his backwater village. He seemed to think he had even the slightest chance of achieving victory in this duel.

Catnaaj salivated at the chance to elucidate to this man that his perceived strength paled in the face of a true Combat Magic Researcher.

Coincidentally, the academy’s principal was beginning to grow wise to some of Catnaaj’s more dubious activities. Catnaaj would take advantage of this wonderful opportunity to make an example of this pumpkin in order to discourage any would-be whistleblowers.



Bibia and Bethel stood among the throng of people, warily watching the situation unfold.

“Oh no,” lamented Bethel. “I didn’t mean for this to happen...”

“You and I are both familiar with how Dennis can be sometimes. Besides, we haven’t seen him demonstrate his prowess since that unpleasant ordeal a while back,” replied Bibia.

“Yeah, but—”

“Oh, I simply must see Dennis’s level 100 skills be displayed once more!”

“Aren’t you going to draw your wand?” asked Catnaaj.

“Yeah, nah, I use a different style. I’m good,” said Dennis. He clenched and unclenched his fists a few times in order to get the blood flowing.

“Hmph. Let us begin, then. Don’t come crying to me if this results in your demise!” Catnaaj thrust his wand forward and shouted, “Fatal Evening Shower!”

An innumerable number of sharp icicles creaked into existence above Dennis’ head. They remained suspended for a moment, then suddenly rained down upon him.

Many of the spectators averted their eyes so as to not witness the supposedly inevitable bloodshed.

Catnaaj let out a perverse laugh as he eagerly awaited Dennis’s gelid end. “Perhaps I should have granted you a fighting chance,” he said.

“That spell has gotta be a bitch to clean up,” said Dennis nonchalantly. “Gets a zero outta a 100 from me as a restaurant owner.”

“Wha—?!”

Dennis calmly stood amidst the field of fallen icicles, completely untouched.

An older professor who stood just at Bibia’s back proceeded to analyze the situation out loud.

“That young man managed to raise an absolute physical protection barrier above his head in an instant! Yet it was so shockingly thin... Could it be that he imbued it with Divine protection of some kind? What a masterful exhibition of magic.”

“Actually,” whispered Bibia to Bethel, “that was Dennis’s unique level 100 skill: Restaurant Curtain Door. It allows him to erect an indestructible curtain door anywhere he so pleases.”

“Woooww... That was incredible,” she said in awe.

“It provides a good deal of defensive power, but it unfortunately takes the mundane form of a restaurant’s curtain door. Also, it has a certain pitfall inherently attached to it: if you state ‘I have a reservation,’ then you can pass through it without issue.”

“F’real? You sure you’re cool bein’ uncool, Boss?!”

“... Well, look at you,” Catnaaj said to Dennis. “I was holding back a fair bit, so it’s not unexpected that you have managed to survive.” He once again aimed his wand threateningly at Dennis. “Do not assume lady luck will bless you a second time! Unbecoming Performance!!”

Another swing of his wand caused the very earth beneath their feet to

shake. Large, earthen golems began to rise from the ground before him. Then they all rushed Dennis simultaneously.

“Whoa! Finally, something interesting!”

Dennis instantly conjured a butcher knife and slashed at the nearest incoming golem.

“Enforcement: Kick out any and all undesirable customers!”

The golem crumpled under Dennis’s blow, but did not stop when it hit the ground. Instead, it continued to sink until it had been crushed deep into the earth.

The older professor behind Bibia scrutinized the situation for a second time.

“That’s Spatial Manipulation! Could he have interfered with spacetime itself?! That lad isn’t some prodigy from another prestigious magic school, is he?

Bibia again took it upon himself to fill in Bethel on the intricacies.

“It’s finally happened! That’s Dennis’s Enforcement: Kick out any and all undesirable customers! It is a skill that can transport whatever it makes contact with to any location that Dennis wills via spatial manipulation! The average human would be crushed to death in mere seconds under its force! What an absolutely vicious skill!”

“I sure wouldn’t wanna get hit by that!”

“What’s with your strange skills?!?” exclaimed a flustered Catnaaj. “Fiery Explosion!”

Dennis intercepted Catnaaj’s desperate attack with a metal pot he’d summoned from somewhere.

The throng of students roared equally with excitement and confusion.

“That guy’s amazing! He stopped Catnaaj’s Fiery Explosion with a pot!”

“With a damn *pot!*”

“Yeah, that was super rad and everything, but like, a pot?”

“Why a pot?! That was incredible, but seriously, a pot of all things?!?”

Bibia and Bethel’s voices joined the cacophony of noise.

“I expected nothing less from you, Dennis! The pot is a tad... well, you understand!”

“Nice going, Boss! Still not feelin’ the whole pot thing, but attaboy!”

“Ngghghhh!!” Catnaaj let out a yell of frustration. “Y-You whelp! Fire Lanc—!”

“As if I’d let you cast again!” interrupted Dennis. “Taste Destroyer!”

A strange, brown cloud filled the air surrounding the associate professor and interrupted his cast.

“Wah!” he cried out. “My eyes! My nose!”

The old professor, still posted behind Bibia, once again voiced his interpretation of the events.

“Th-That wa—! He created something from nothing! That’s the final goal of all alchemical study!! Has that lad somehow conquered the law of equivalent exchange?! What on earth are those particles?! Perhaps some kind of unique magical element?”

Bibia excitedly relayed the details to Bethel.

“There it is! That’s another one of his level 100 skills, Taste Destroyer! It allows him to conjure seasoning from thin air! Only seasoning, however.”

“F’real? You sure you’re cool bein’ uncool, Boss?!”

“I believe this time it’s pepper!”

As Catnaaj floundered about, Dennis used the opportunity to close the distance between the two.

“This was surprisingly fun, but you’re gonna need more kindness, consideration, humility, affection, and love!” he shouted as he delivered his final attack. “And why don’tcha level up while you’re at it, too!”

“Oughhehhh?!”

Catnaaj received Dennis’s attack head on, and then he received a faceful of dirt. That singular attack was enough to drive him to the ground and render him unconscious.

Dennis casually tossed away the butcher knife he had been holding.

The crowd erupted into cheers.

“What! Wow!!”

Before he knew it, Dennis was swarmed by students and teachers all clamoring to ask him questions.

“What was that skill just now? Also, what’s with the pot?!”

“What was the defensive magic you cast? And what were those particles that defied the law of equivalent exchange? Please, lad, I must know!”

“Who are you?!”

“Me? Uh... I’m no one, really,” replied Dennis. “Just a friend of Bethel’s.”

All eyes turned to Bethel.

“Ms. Bethel! Who is this guy?”

“He’s your friend?!”

“Eh? Well, he’s just the Boss, and, uh, guess I lived with him for a while
___”

A loud whistle cut through the air before Bethel could find an even more unfortunate string of words for the crowd to misinterpret.

“Security’s arrived!”

“Took them long enough!”

“What is going on here? I wanted to see what all the fuss was about, and now I see—”

A woman clad in glistening red armor and flanked by security guards pushed her way to the center of the crowd. A dumbfounded expression washed over her when she laid her eyes on the chef in the middle of it all.

“—Dennis? What’re you doing here?”

“... Katey?”

The woman in red was none other than the current leader of Dennis’s former guild, the Silver Wings Battalion. It was Katey, The Crimson Blade Storm.

The crowd’s fervor only grew in response to this new revelation.

“Katey, what’re *you* doing here?”

Katey waved her hand, dismissing the security guards that had been trailing her.

“I did tell you that the Silver Wings Battalion was gonna expand into a lot of other fields, didn’t I? So that’s what we did. We lend out our guys on yearly contracts as security guards to lotsa different places,” she said, matter-of-factly. Then she gave Dennis a tight bear hug. “Not like that matters right now. Dennis! It’s been a hot minute, hasn’t it? Why didn’t you tell me you were gonna be in town?”

“H-Hey! Lemme go!”

“I’m aching for some Hamburg steak! If I don’t gobble one up right now, I might end up turning into one myself!”

“Let me go, you wild Hamburg steak addict!”

“Oh yeah! This is great timing! Why don’t you make use of the cafeteria here and make everyone a Hamburg steak, Dennis? Good idea, right?”

“What are you talking about?!?”

“How about it, Headmaster?” Katey directed the question at an old man standing behind her that Dennis had failed to notice up to that point. “This is the chef I was telling you about. He’s here to look over the kitchens!”

“I’m what?!?”

Katey leaned in close and whispered to Dennis, “I was just in a meeting with him, yeah? And he mentioned that he’s been lookin’ to improve the culinary side of things here, so naturally I brought your name up. What a sweet coincidence, right?? Just go with it. Show everyone here how a real chef does things. It’ll be fine!”

“What the—! Why am I just now hearing about this?!?”

“You’re the Legendary Fried Rice, right? This’ll be a piece of cake for you. Please, Dennis? I’ll pay you back afterward, so pleeeassee?”

“Now listen here, you!”



The following day.

Back at the restaurant, Dennis hung up a notice of temporary closure on the front door before ambling back inside. He slowly lined up a few chairs by the counter, then listlessly lay across all of them, his arm resting on his forehead.

Olivia approached him with some water in hand and spoke softly, “You seem fatigued, Master Dennis. Would water be to your liking?”

“Thanks, Olivia... Thanks.”

“What ordeal did you undergo, Master Dennis?”

“This was unavoidable. When you’re roped into cooking enough Hamburg steak to feed an entire school, you are doomed to end up like this...” Dennis trailed off, his voice uncharacteristically weak. “Just lemme rest my eyes for a sec.”

Bibia and Atrielle sat at a table beside him, busying themselves with a mountain of informational pamphlets.

“Well, that was a fairly exceptional open house, if I do say so myself!” exclaimed Bibia. “What should we select for our next destination? Atrielle, what does your heart desire?”

“Will Lord Dennis join us?”

“I haven’t the slightest doubt that he will! Right, Dennis?”

“I’m never going anywhere ever again!”



This is a tale from a long time ago. A very, very long time ago.

A boy named Yujitt and a girl named Nachura perused through a jewelry store in the capital.

“I think you should be the one to pick something out, Yujitt. Olivia will appreciate it more if it’s something you chose.”

“Shut up, and just help me find something! Look. How about this ring? It’s the same color as my hair, so Oliva will certainly love it!”

“Narcissist. Do you even know what Oliva’s ring size is?”

“She is my own creation, a product of my unparalleled intellect! Of course her three sizes are eternally carved into my mind!”

“You’re an odd mix of genius and weirdo, you know that?” Nachura shrugged as she spoke.

“Come to think of it,” said Yujitt, “why did you not bring that humongous Fenrir with you?”

“I can’t bring Pochi to the capital, man. He hates it here, and everyone would just end up running for the hills upon seeing him. Plus, you didn’t tell him about Olivia, did you?”

“No, I didn’t...” Hints of conflict made themselves apparent on Yujitt’s face. He stared down at the ring that he’d selected and held it in his palm.

“Nachura, what’s going to happen to that Fenrir when you pass?”

“That’s a long way off.”

“You say that, but your life spans differ heavily. I would start thinking about it immediately if I were you,” he said. He tore his gaze away from the ring and looked up at Nachura. “He cared enough about you to willingly be exiled from his own pack, just to be by your side. When you’re gone, he’ll be left all alone.”

“Well, what about you, Yujitt?”

“Me?” Yujitt made the decision to buy the ring right that instant. “I’ve decided. When I die, Olivia will...”

Chapter Four

Tell the Outcast Detective I Said Goodbye

Catnaaj massaged his bruised ribs as he slithered down the hallway to his destination. Upon recalling that fateful, humiliating duel, he scowled, his face flush with a bitter rage. Ever since Dennis had reduced him to a mere laughingstock, not a single soul would give Catnaaj the respect that he thought he deserved. The students would snicker quietly as he passed by them, and the staff viewed him as nothing more than a lamentable clown. The terror that others had once felt in his mere presence had gone up in smoke.

And as if to rub salt in the wound, the headmaster himself had informed Catnaaj that his position as Associate Professor of Combat Magic Research would be succeeded by Bethel at the end of the current semester. This was apparently done at the request of many of the students and staff. What a farce!

Just you wait, he thought. Dullards, the lot of you. I will ensure all of you will live to regret this. Yes, even if you are so foolish as to slight me, you should certainly fear my benefactor.

Catnaaj arrived at the door at the end of the corridor and, after politely rapping on the door, a shrill voice beckoned him in.

The room that greeted him was strange, to say the least. Lining the room's wide walls were rows upon rows of shelves, all packed to the brim with various curiosities and oddities that Catnaaj couldn't even dream of identifying. Everything seemed to be strewn about haphazardly with no discernible logic or system in place.

Books, jewels, wands, paintings, sculptures, body parts belonging to a plethora of beats, and even exotic live creatures stuffed in out-of-the-way cages were just some of the items that were littered about.

In the center of all of the chaos sat a man caressing a two-headed beast. His messy, off-red hair matched the disorganized nature of his personal abode.

"Oh! Catnaaj! It truly has been a while!" exclaimed the man as he continued to pet the unusual canine creature.

"It certainly has, Master Yupaswell Lostchile."

"Look at him," Lostchile said, gesturing to the beast. "Would I be correct in assuming that you've never seen a lifeform like him before? He is an

Orthus. Did you know that the Orthus is even more rare than the Cerberus, Catnaaj? The latter are the ones who have three heads, in case you were unaware.”

“I-I did not, no,” meekly replied Catnaaj.

“Hahaha. Oh, such an adorable little thing, and quite the rarity! It makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Which neck should the collar go on? You can see I’ve deigned to fit the right neck with one, but perhaps it would be more proper to acquire a matching one to complete the pair. It seems fair.”

Catnaaj was hard-pressed to think of a response.

The sheer magnitude of the man seated so casually before him made it difficult for him to maintain his composure. Yupaswell Lostchile was the leading aristocrat in both his kingdom’s financial and commercial sectors, as well as the founder of the largest trading union in his kingdom, the Hans Trading Union.

His only true competition was the Workstat family, who lead the kingdom’s magic users. It could feasibly be argued that their prestige and influence surpassed even that of Lostchile’s. However, in terms of financial strength—the true driving force behind any nation—Lostchile was entirely unmatched.

Besides, due to a recent tragedy befalling the Workstat family involving the loss of their elder, their overall standing in the country had been greatly diminished. As such, Lostchile was firmly and comfortably situated at the top of the kingdom’s power structure.

“By the by, how goes the search for the Yujitt Manuscript?” asked Lostchile in his grating, high-pitched voice. He was not interested in watching Catnaaj struggle with his previous question any longer.

“R-Right. The manuscript that was damaged in that restaurant fire is currently in the process of being restored by a research team at the academy. I have been informed that restoration is possible, though it is unlikely that all of it can be saved.”

“I see. That is good to hear.” Lostchile said.

The aristocrat’s kinked hair was draped over his large, cranium-like rags on a windowsill. His large, drooping eyes stayed closed in delight as he gracefully rubbed his face against the fuzzy Orthus. Somehow, he managed to look equally young and old, like a wrinkled baby.

“When news first came that my coveted manuscript, the very thing that I had dedicated a good deal of my life searching for, had been damaged in a

fire... well, I had but one thought on my mind," continued Lostchile. "What unique method of execution was most befitting of that wretch Joseph? You see, I always believed that he would be his own downfall long before he posed a problem to me, so I left him to his own devices. My benevolence betrayed me, as you know. I am truly embarrassed by my lack of foresight. Regardless, as I'm sure you can tell, I am very happy to hear that the project is proceeding smoothly. The manuscript must be mine. Yujitt's one and only research book is a treasure of epic proportions, and I simply must have it in my possession."

Lostchile paused his monologue for a moment to chuckle quietly to himself.

"Did you know? The secret of the mysterious Skillgram may be hidden somewhere within that manuscript. With that little ace up my sleeve, I'll not only be able to tame the royalty, but Heath, as well! Yes, yes, those documents hold the power to sway even the royal authority!"

"I understand, Master Lostchile. As soon as the restoration is complete, I shall see to it that they are delivered safely into your hands," Catnaaj said with his head bowed.

Throughout his lifetime, Lostchile had earned a nickname: "The Collector." At first, he only had his sights set on works of art, but before long, he grew obsessed with hoarding any valuables he could get his hands on. Outwardly, he presented himself as a learned, cultured patron of the arts. Beneath this facade hid the mastermind behind an ever-expanding and diabolical black market; Lostchile was not above using any illegal means necessary to obtain his coveted treasures.

With time, Lostchile's collection had grown to include creatures, body parts, and even the preserved corpses of the victims of rare diseases. Truly, he was the most deviant aristocrat in the entire kingdom.

"Incidentally, do you happen to be acquainted with a man named Dennis?" asked Lostchile.

Catnaaj immediately broke out in a cold sweat.

"You understand, I've been hearing his name an awful lot as of late. That lad seems to be at the center of all sorts of affairs. I have been informed that he is both the owner of that restaurant that had the manuscripts and the one who deposed both Joseph and Viggo. His name was also mentioned by the group that I dispatched to retrieve that Fenrir. That entire ordeal was awfully disappointing," Lostchile sighed, "No matter, I'll soon procure the rights to

the entirety of this nation's woodlands, so I'm sure to come across that beast again. If I were to render the forests uninhabitable, it'll have no choice but to return to the human realm again, right? Ah, forgive me. It seems that we have strayed off topic again. This fellow, Dennis..."

"W-Well, Master Lostchile, that man, Dennis... I..."

"Yes, you. And Dennis. I understand that he humiliated you quite thoroughly," Lostchile said, a good-humored expression on his face.

"Wh-Who did you h—"

"Harm."

"I-I see. I suppose he was present at the time..."

"The end result was that any frail, paper-mache authority that you had claim to has absolutely crumbled, correct? See, I had initially thought you to be an intriguing man, Catnaaj. However, it appears that I was mistaken."

"M-Master Lostchile?"

"Please understand, I have no intention of keeping uninteresting things around. I have found that unremarkable people are more often than not the cause of needless drama. I believe that banality is a disease that is slowly eating away at the world, rotting it. Don't you agree? Despite that, the truly fascinating elements would not shine quite so brightly if not for the contrast offered by the abundant mundanity permeating this world to its core. Say, Catnaaj, do you know why it is that a two-headed Orthus is a far rarer breed than a three-headed Cerberus?"

"I-I, erm, I do not."

"It is simple. The Orthus has a distinct taste for human flesh, you see. It is no surprise that they were nearly hunted to extinction in retaliation many, many years ago. Soon, there will not be a single one left. A tragedy. Is it truly equitable that so many unremarkable, utterly homogenous humans have the privilege of existing in this beautiful beast's stead? There are enough humans to make you sick. Enough that not a single person would care at all should one boring toady be eaten."

Lostchile loosened the collar on the Orthus's neck and closed in on Catnaaj with a broad smile.

"Oh, looks like their appetites have been wetted. Do you think you can do me this one last favor, Catnaaj? You needn't worry about Dennis anymore; his demise at my hand is a foregone conclusion."

Catnaah, having now sensed that he was about to meet a horrifying end, screamed in terror and attempted to flee. Tragically, something caught his

arm in a vice-like grip and hoisted him high into the air before he could make his move.

“Gyaaaa!!” he shrieked once more. The fight was all but blown out of him by the sharp pain of his humerus being ripped clean from its socket in his shoulder. His eyes frantically darted around in search of the culprit.

A pale face atop a neat butler’s outfit. Harm.

With terrifying strength, Harm grabbed Catnaaj’s feeble neck in one hand and his arm in the other.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”



“Ooh! Gorgeous! This is absolutely divine! Strikingly beautiful!” Olivia let out uncharacteristically excited noises as she examined her brand-new maid uniform on display.

Unlike humans, Olivia did not need to worry about things like sweat slowly degrading her clothing. However, years of general wear and tear still had taken their toll, and an update was certainly warranted. Her garments had been completely overhauled at a local tailor shop, though she had been forced to wear Dennis’s comically oversized clothes in the meantime.

Dennis and the tailor both stared with great pride at Olivia’s new outfit, satisfied expressions settled gently on their faces.

Since the tailor was a regular at the restaurant, Dennis was able to have these improvements to her attire done entirely free of charge. Incidentally, this tailor was also responsible for Dennis’s formalwear that he’d worn to the Yujitt Academy’s open house.

His next meal’s on the house, Dennis thought to himself. *He’s more than earned it!*

“Looks great on you, Olivia!”

“Thank you! I am quite overjoyed! Would it be acceptable for me to try it on?”

“Course. You could even wear it home, if you’d like.”

Olivia began to disrobe right then and there in the shop without the slightest hint of apprehension.

“Whoa, hold it. Can’t be doing that in public. The changing rooms are right over there.”

“I do not mind changing here.”

“Maybe deep down, you really are an exhibitionist.”

Once Olivia had donned her new outfit, the two of them began their trek back home.

Their quiet stroll was interrupted by a shrill child’s voice.

“Dennis! Hey!”

“What’s up, little man? Oh hey, aren’t you one of the jeweler’s kids? Why don’tcha come visit us at the restaurant again sometime? And thanks for being so nice to Atrielle!”

“Will do, I’ll tell my dad! And no problem about Atrielle!”

Olivia watched as the child joyfully skipped away.

“Exemplary, Master Dennis,” she said. “It seems everyone in this town is always overjoyed whenever they happen across you.”

“Oh, yeah. We’ve got a little history, y’know. From before you showed up.”

“What do you mean?”

“There was this whole thing... Well, the townsfolk helped me a great deal back then. I owe them a lot.”

“I see. Is ‘that whole thing’ related to Mistresses Henriette and Bethel? You speak of them often.”

“Yep. Our pals are all out somewhere far away living their own lives. Can’t say it doesn’t make me a bit lonely, but that’s life for you.”

A certain memory forced its way into Dennis’s consciousness, one he’d been thinking about for some time now. It was the memory of the first time that he’d been genuinely scolded. He recalled that he’d been out on a walk that day when he came across a large crowd blocking the path, congregating around three figures.

His venture down memory lane was interrupted by a somewhat similar event happening up ahead. A tall adventurer was going off on a scrawny-looking girl in the middle of the road.

The girl wore a troubled expression and was murmuring something to the man.

“I said I was sorrrryy,” she said in a near-whisper. She looked to be very uncomfortable. “All I did was bump into you just a teensy bit. Why are you so mean? Why are you being so rude to meehee?”

“I don’t care about you bumping into me, it’s your attitude that’s really ticking me off! Where do you get off making fun of people like that?!”

“Whaaa?! I wasn’t making fun of you. You just kinda looked a bit

pathetic, that's alllll. I just thought that a man who gets so bent out of shape over a tiny little collision must live a really uneventful, pitiable life. That's allll.”

“So you *are* making fun of me!”

“Whoa, whoa,” Dennis said, placing himself between the two strangers.
“Chill out, chill out.”

The tall man instantly recognized Dennis.

“Oh, you’re the owner of that restaurant,” he said dejectedly. “I was just
___”

“Hey, come on, let’s all just calm down now. This really ain’t a good look, yeah? Yelling at a little girl in the middle of the street? C’mon buddy. Tell you what, I’ll add in an extra prawn the next time you order that shrimp fried rice, alright? You just gotta skedaddle somewhere else.”

“R-Really?! You sure? Man, I’ve only been to your restaurant once; how do you know my favourite dis—”

“Don’t worry about it, don’t you worry about it. Just make sure you drop by the restaurant again sometime, okay?”

The man seemed to be in better spirits and left quickly. Dennis and Olivia were just about to follow suit when the small girl called out behind them.

“H-Hey...”

“Hm?”

Dennis turned around to face her. She wore a brown checkered jacket paired with black pants. A tweed hat sat atop her head, the rim obscuring her eyes. Her frizzy hair stuck out the back of it and trailed down to about the base of her neck.

“Um, thank you, D-Dennis,” she said in a distinctive voice.

“Hm? Oh, sure, no problem. You were askin’ for that grilling though, you know. Try not to do anything like that again in the future.”

“Y-Yes, I will.”

Conversation finished, Dennis turned and once again began walking away. A sudden epiphany then struck him: he’d never met this girl before. How’d she know his name? She didn’t seem to be a local, either. Where did she know him from?

The girl covered her mouth with her hand as she watched them leave.

“Woooow! *That’s* him? *That’s* Dennis Blacks?” she whispered conspiratorially to herself and giggled. “He’s sooooooooooooooo my type... Handsome, a manly face, and a cool voice to boot... He’s

perrffect.”

She stuffed her hands in her pockets before continuing her quiet, deviant monologue.

“Yeah... he’s mine. I’ve found my Prince Charming, yes, yes. That silly little job Master Lostchile gave me can wait... Not like it matters anyway. I’m only supposed to gather information, right? Ohhh, I want him to whisper sweet nothings into my ear. I crave to see his needy gaze, oh pleeeease. I don’t think he’ll break like my last husband did, tee-hee.”

She pranced off away from the street, and finally proclaimed, “Candy, the Outcast Detective, always comes out on top in matters of both investigations and love! Now, let’s get to work.”



The next day around noon.

“Come on, you can’t be feelin’ down forever.”

Atrielle sat quietly with a plate of untouched fried rice in front of her. She’d been moping around ever since Pochi left, and though a fair amount of time had passed since then, something melancholy still clouded her typically inscrutable face. She wasn’t even poking at the rice in her plate, instead only watching it slowly cool.

“Pochi might be dead,” she finally said.

“Mythical beasts don’t just up and die that easy, you know. They’re built different. C’mon, Bibia, back me up here,” Dennis appealed to Bibia, who was seated at another table and enthralled in a conversation with a mage girl sporting twintails atop her head.

“Y-Yes, that’s right! Strictly speaking, mythical beasts are not composed of physical matter, so it is unlikely they will perish due to blood loss. Probably... I think... Yeah.”

“You heard the boy! I’m sure Pochi’s doin’ fine wherever he’s settled down. And you two, you’ve been canoodling over there for a while now. What’re you scheming?”

“It’s none of your business, Dennis!”

“Nothing at all, Chef!”

Bibia and the girl continued to whisper among themselves, so Dennis turned back to Atrielle.

“Look, he exiled himself for your sake. D’you think he’d want you to be

unhappy all the time after all he did for you?”

“...”

“Master Dennis is correct, Mistress Atrielle,” Olivia seamlessly added herself to the conversation as she descended the stairs. “Though your time together was fleeting, it is not as though your separation will be eternal. If each of you wander this vast and expansive world, you are surely bound to encounter one another again... or so someone once said.”

“You sure quote a lotta people. Didn’t you have memory problems?”

Olivia rapped upon her right shoulder with the backs of her fingers in response.

“It is true, I am not able to preserve many memories, but those that remain are available to me with the fullest clarity. For example, that last quote is stored in the memory stone implanted in my right shoulder.”

“What’s a memory stone?”

“As I do not possess a human brain, nor anything that would be considered as such, I am equipped with 265 memory stones at various points throughout my body. They are located at each of my joints and work in unison in order to emulate brain function as closely as possible. Is this comprehensible to you, Master?”

“Uh... Yeah. Got it.”

Dennis’s face said otherwise.

“Provided that the core gem housed in my chest is not destroyed, and that the majority of my memory stones remain intact, I am able to continue functioning even under the most dire of conditions such as the loss of my head. Therein lies the advantage of my design.”

“Right, all I got from that is that the guy who made you was one helluva mage. Man, I really wanna know who he was.”

“Please allow me to demonstrate. The memory of you purchasing those raunchy magazines is stored in the pinkie finger of my right hand—”

“Hold up. Why of all things did you store that memory, and when’d you see that in the first place?”

“I spotted you in town just the other day. I believed that you might be interested in acquiring more, so I merely appended them to my shopping list.”

“Take ‘em off there right now. And forget that ever happened. It was just an impulse buy.”

“D-Dennis,” stuttered Atrielle. “I didn’t know you enjoyed that kind of

thing..."

Fortunately for Dennis, the restaurant's entrance bell chimed, indicating the arrival of a new customer.

"Oh! Hello, come in, come in!" he cordially greeted the new arrival. "Oh, it's you."

"H-Hi..."

Standing in the doorway was the frizzy-haired girl he'd encountered just a few days earlier. She was still clad in that same checkered jacket, her tweed hat still hiked down low over her eyes. She walked over to the counter and took a seat directly across from Dennis.

"Didn't think I'd be seeing you here anytime soon. Welcome."

"Hehehe, well, here I am. My name's Candy."

"Candy. Got it. Thanks for coming," Dennis said with a smile.

Candy's complexion immediately flushed red, and she hid herself behind the menu. After giving it a thorough look over, she settled on the special of the day. Once she'd placed her order, she retrieved a book from her pouch and started to read. She kept her elbows planted on the counter to ensure that Dennis had a direct view of the cover.

Dennis glanced over at it a couple times as he cooked before it finally clicked, and he dashed over to Candy at mach speed.

"No way! You're reading *Buck Naked Adventurer's Restaurant Business for Dummies*, right?!"

"Eh?" Candy dragged her words out as usual. "Oh y-yes... I am."

"Great book, right?! This is the first time I've ever seen someone else reading it!"

"Oh for sure, it's very interesting, isn't it?! I love this book too!"

"Whoa, no kidding! I couldn't even tell you how many times I've read that thing! What edition do you have? Fourth? Hey, y'know, I just recently got my hands on a couple copies of the fifth edition."

"Whaaa?! Really?! That's awesome!"

"Hahaha, I know! I could lend ya a copy if you want."

"Ehhh?! Are you sure?! As if I could turn that down!"

"Isn't it a tad abnormal to get so over-enthused about a different edition of a book you've already read?" Bibia mumbled to himself between spoonfuls of fried rice.

"I'm not feeling that girl's vibe," concurred the twintailed mage as she stared daggers at Candy from across the restaurant.

“You couldn’t be more right. I had never expected to encounter anyone else quite as invested in that book as Dennis is, let alone a girl, but... Well, birds of a feather, I suppose.”

“I don’t like her. She’s really laying it on thick. I mean, it’s her first time here, and she’s already hardcore flirting with the chef! Nah, she’s definitely bad news.”

“You could follow her example and be similarly proactive, if you pleased.”

“I’m plenty proactive! It’s just that no one seems to notice!”



The next day.

Dennis browsed through the shelves of Porobo’s store. A particularly impressive chef’s knife had just caught his eye, so he reached over to get a closer look. Like in some sort of overplayed cliché, his hand bumped lightly into that of another customer that was reaching for the exact same blade.

“Oh, my bad.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Oh, it’s you again. Hey, Candy,” Dennis looked down at the short girl, who bashfully smiled back at him. “You here to look at the knives?”

“Oh, i-it’s nothing, really. I was just thinking that maybe I should start learning how to cook.”

“Really? This knife’s a damn good choice, then.”

“I-I see. I don’t really know much about these things yet... Could you tell me what is so good about it?” Candy gazed up at Dennis with doe eyes.

“At a glance this knife might look the same as all the rest but if you look closer you’ll see it’s actually made of a entirely different alloy in this case purple steel which is some of the best stuff available on the market but thinking about it now black steel is great too but purple steel still probably beats it out in terms of cost-effectiveness and besides you’ve gotta consider the aesthetic value of each too like this one looks hella cool right but if you’re just gonna be usin’ it for day-to-day cooking then the third model purple steels are probably the easiest for a beginner to use but then again—”

“Oh r-really?? Um, w-well, I think I’ll just get whatever you’re getting...”

“Same as me? I’m shoppin’ for sashimi knives right now. Not exactly the type of knife I’d recommend to a complete beginner like you.”

“Oh! W-Well then! Um!”

Bibia—who’d just happened to be in the area—and the twintailed mage—who most certainly hadn’t been—surveyed the scene play out from a distance.

“She’s not even listening to a word he says...” the mage bemoaned.

“That’s the tried-and-true “hand-touch-oopsie” cliche, is it not? I was under the impression that tactic was confined to libraries and books, though. Is this version tailor-made for Dennis?” Bibia pondered.

“She’s really serious about nabbing him, isn’t she...”

“She’s certainly picked a suitably convenient target, hasn’t she? Dennis invested all of his points into cooking and fighting, and that didn’t leave much room to spare for anything else.”

“H-How about this?! When you’re done with that knife, why don’t you lend it to me?” exclaimed Candy from within the shop.

“Sounds good; let’s give it a go. Wait, is that something people normally do?” said Dennis.

“It’s not weeirddd or anything... ehehe...” came her demure reply.

“She’s going that far with this whole farcical scenario?! That’s simply the ‘let me borrow the book when you’ve finished it’ thing! Keep your wits about you, Dennis!”

“Respect where it’s due, I guess...”



Candy arrived back at her hideout, a rather rundown inn situated on the outskirts of town.

“Waaa, I’m so tirrreeeedddd.”

She flicked the lamp at her desk on and poured herself a cup of tea.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here? Based on the information I’ve gathered, I see that Dennis is kind of an air head, but that just makes him so much cuter! Ehehe, I’m so here for it.”

Candy whipped out a large dossier from a drawer and plopped it on her desk. She mumbled to herself as she went about organizing the messy heap of documents.

“So Dennis Blacks... A street kid from the capital, adopted and tutored by one Jeanne Blacks. He is the former chef of the Silver Wings Battalion, as well as the sous chef at the Blacks Restaurant. His successor, the current sous

chef of that restaurant was also trained by Jeanne, a man named Bezmoch Pebble.”

Candy flipped through a few more pages before carrying on with her review.

“Dennis here is a level 100 Chef and is currently the owner of the Outcast’s Restaurant. He’s got connections all over the place, and the townspeople especially trust him a lot. Also, it seems he’s now the supervisor at the Yujitt Metropolitan Magic Academy, though it seems to be some kind of honorary thing...”

She let out a little squeal.

“I can’t take it! He’s like, *so kind*, but he’s also a bit of a bad boy, and oh gosh, he cares so deeply about his friends! And not only is he a manager but level 100 to boot!!! He’s perfect! He’s way too perfect! I’m definitely making him my husband!! It’s settled!”

Lost in the throes of passion, it took her a while to notice one particular item among the mess.

“What’s this?” she chirped, picking it up. “Ohh, so Dennis may actually *be* that long-lost brother Heath mentioned. They sure do look alike, but their personalities are wayyy different! Wait! So when Dennis and I get married, Heath’ll end up becoming my brother-in-law! No way! That’s so cool!”

Candy cackled wildly before her eyes caught yet another piece of paper.

“Right, there’s this new girl too... Well, I’m not worried about you, Olivia. The real competition is obviously Miss Atrielle Workstat over here.”

She sipped on her tea.

“She’s in my way, no doubt about it. I mean, she’s totally gonna be a downer on our honeymoon! I should get rid of her. Oh, and it looks like she owns that book, too, so this particular job’s gonna be priority number one. Eheh, ‘added value’ is my middle name, after all. Two birds, one stone and all that jazz.”

She set down her cup and gazed off into the void, her smile teeming with malice.

“I’ll make this little girl disappear, score a win for Master Lostchile, and be Dennis’s shoulder to cry on. Wait, isn’t that three birds, one stone? I am just! Too! Damn! Good!”

Another overexcited shriek pierced the silence of the dilapidated inn.



Making someone vanish isn't all that hard, at least not according to Candy, anyway. People always fret too much and end up overthinking it, but all that it requires is a solid plan and some commitment.

For example, it didn't take Candy long to learn all she needed to know about Atrielle. Nearly every day, the girl would go out on a stroll after work or take a shopping trip around the town. In living such a carefree life, she would take a different route each time, but that same careless attitude would be her downfall.

The average person would be hard pressed to notice that they're being tailed, regardless of if the stalker is an amateur or not. It becomes nigh on impossible for said average person to tell when the individual shadowing them is a skilled pro such as Candy.

The diminutive detective stalked Atrielle daily, biding her time for the perfect opportunity.

Waiting was taxing, but worthwhile. She was so incredibly thrilled at the thought of seeing Dennis crumble when he hears the news that the dumb tramp he loves so much has perished in a freak accident. Candy would make sure that when he would inevitably lock himself away from the world at large, she would be by his side. She would be his anchor, she'd comfort him, she'd nurture him, and she'd be the one to finally get him to open his heart once again.

Now's probably the time to start researching romantic vacation destinations for our honeymoon, she noted to herself.

The chance Candy had been so patiently waiting for arrived at last.

Atrielle took a shortcut through a narrow alleyway.

Opportunities as good as this rarely crop up in Candy's line of work, so the ability to pounce at a moment's notice is key. For whatever reason, many have trouble mastering this skill. For Candy, though, it was yet another reason why she thrived as much as she did.

She drew a small knife from the sleeve of her jacket as she quietly stalked closer to Atrielle. She'd reach her in time, she'd slit her dainty throat right as she reached the end of the alley, and she'd drag her lifeless body back into the darkness, all in the blink of an eye.

Candy was just within striking distance when the hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and she instinctively leaped to the side. She pressed herself against the side wall and stared slack-jawed at the spot where she'd been standing just moments ago.

Smoke rose from three sizable holes in the ground.

Candy turned toward her assailant and readied her knife just in time to see a figure drop from the sky and land right in front of her.

The figure was clad in a pristine maid outfit.



“Ever since Mister Pochi’s departure, I have been looking after Mistress Atrielle at Master Dennis’s behest.”

The maid girl must have been lurking on a nearby rooftop. Her landing came with a resounding thud that seemed incongruous with her slender figure. Smoke wafted lazily from the two large cannons sticking out from her shoulders and protruding out past her head.

“Do keep in mind, this maid values nothing more than her usefulness,” Olivia said. “What is the reason for that weapon you are holding? Knives are not conducive to making friends, are they?”

Olivia readjusted her cannons and aimed them directly at Candy.

“What do you think you’re doing? You supposed to be some kinda stupid robot, waving those giant things around?!”

“I am not obligated to answer you. I suggest you state your intentions quickly; otherwise, I will have no choice but to ‘beat the shit out of’ you.”



Candy glanced back at Atrielle only to find that she had already absconded. Had she sensed the presence of her pursuer and ran off? Or was it the gunfire that tipped her off? Candy couldn't be sure.

She had more pressing matters to attend to, however. Somehow, this maid had completely slipped Candy's notice. Moreover, the cannons jutting out from her shoulder blades along with the maid's peculiar manner of speech caused the detective to doubt her humanity. If she truly wasn't human, what could Candy do about her?

She continued to weigh her options until she realized that Olivia was preparing to fire once again. She threw her hands up in front of her in a placating gesture before pleading.

"Okay, wait, wait, wait, waaaiittt! I surrender. I'm not gonna try anything, so don't shoot me plleeassee."

She opened her hand, and her knife clattered to the ground.

"Please state your intentions," Olivia repeated herself.

"My intentions? My intentions... hmm..." Candy chuckled. "It's elementary, my dear. I'm just hoping to have Dennis all to myself, maybe."

"Eh? I require further explanation."

"Liiissstennn, okay? There are just sooooo many people getting between me and my Dennis. I seriously don't want that girl third wheeling on our honeymoon. But, like, Dennis really cares about her for some reason, so I just thought it would work out really well if she just up and died."

Olivia tilted her head to the side, utterly expressionless.

"... I do not follow."

"What's so hard to understand?! It's the ironclad rule of love! You must extinguish any and all obstacles to make your soulmate truly yours! Don't you get it?"

"Hmm... So you harbor romantic feelings toward Master Dennis?"

"Yep! I love him, so I must have him! All of him! Body and soul! I'll stash him somewhere so he can never run away!! He'll be all mine, and nobody else can have him ever again!!"

"I... do not concur. I believe that those you love, those who are important to you, you must grow close to and serve with the utmost of devotion. They are not to be purloined and monopolized."

Candy couldn't help but chuckle at Olivia's words. "You're so naive. You're exactly the type to get taken advantage of by some naughty men. Haha."

Candy began to approach Olivia as she laughed, but was only able to take a single step before Olivia tensed up and cautioned her loudly.

“Warning: please do not approach any closer.”

“Whaaaattt? What’s wrroonngg? I just wanna have a little chat between us girls, that’s aaallll...”

“I have identified you as an enemy and will act accordingly. I shall not partake in any further conversation with one such as you. I shall now proceed to ‘beat the shit out of’ you.”

“Hey, hey, let’s do a little thought experiment, okay? I wanna get your opinion on this.” A row of white teeth peeked from behind the predatory smile of her pink lips. “What would you do if one of the most important people in your life told you they didn’t need you and discarded you like trash?

“I cannot comprehend your objectives. Why are you asking me this?”

“If someone who was important to you didn’t return your feelings, what would you do? Are you okay with just being a useless sidepiece?”

“I do not understand the question. I do not understand th—”

Olivia stumbled backwards; a shock zipped across her thought centers as a fragment of a fractured memory resurfaced. One that had been locked behind a seemingly indestructible seal.



“Olivia.”

The voice sent chills down her spine.

“I have no need for you anymore. This is where we part.”

The words were cold, devoid of any emotion.

“I hereby cast you out.”



The momentary interruption of Olivia’s processes provided an ample opportunity for Candy to close the distance. She understood that Olivia’s cannons were useless in close quarters and pressed her advantage by activating a certain skill of hers.

“Baritsu: Secrets of a Detective!”

The impact Olivia felt was comparable to being smashed in the chest with

a sledgehammer.

Secrets of a Detective was a close-quarters combat skill that was activated when the user touched any part of their body. They would then be able to transfer their entire body weight and direct it at the targeted area, allowing them to ferociously pummel their enemy.

Unfortunately, due to Candy being as petite as she is, her attack was not much stronger than a typical tackle.

However, if the user was to concentrate all of that force onto an extremely small area of their body... Well, there was a reason that this was a fundamental skill used since the dawn of martial arts, not to mention its incredible versatility. It could be used to perform a wide variety of feats ranging from breaking out of handcuffs to defeating extremely large opponents.

Olivia smashed into the alley wall, then bounced to the ground with a crash.

Candy pounced without hesitation and prepared to attack once again, this time using her feet to execute the maneuver. If she got lucky and landed on Olivia's slender neck, the massive kinetic energy that would be generated would surely be enough to snap it in twain.

"Huh?!"

One of Olivia's cannons swung unsteadily in Candy's direction. The maid couldn't actually get a solid look at Candy and aimed too high as a result. This unfortunate mistake earned her a hard kick to the neck.

"Baritsu: Secrets of a Detective!!"

The twisting thrust nearly blew her head clean off her body and all but embedded it into the wall, which shuddered and began to crack. Olivia's body, meanwhile, stiffened for just a moment before falling completely limp.

"Whew, that was closeee..."

Candy slowly retracted her outstretched leg and leered down at Olivia's broken form.

"Nah but *seriously*, that was like, sooooo close." She exhaled and squatted down next to Olivia, her focus firmly on the strange cannons jutting from the maid's back. "What're those thingsss? I wonder how they woorrkk."

Candy stretched her hand out toward one of the barrels when Olivia's hand suddenly shot out and tightly clasped her wrist.

"What the—?!"

Candy recoiled in fear. How was this shambling corpse still able to

move?!

“I am...” Olivia rasped. Her head drooped forward as she pulled herself to her feet with her free hand. “I am not useless!”

Olivia tightened her grip on Candy’s wrist and sent her flying as far as she could manage in her current state, nearly tearing the detective’s arm off in the process. The intense pain in Candy’s arm was soon joined by the pain of her collision with one of the walls.

She regained her composure and threw herself to the side just as Olivia recentered her aim. The wall that she’d crashed into seconds before detonated behind her, and Candy screamed.

“Guile of the Detective!”

With those words, Candy vanished into thin air.

Olivia stood still for a long moment, scanning the alleyway in order to ascertain that Candy had truly fled from battle. Once she was certain, she let herself collapse against the wall.

“Critical damage to the cervical region...”

The maid curled into a ball on the ground, her head held limply in her hands.

“I... I am...”



Candy ran for a long time before she finally felt safe enough to duck into another alleyway and ensure that nobody had followed her.

“Whew... So that freak’s not got the usual human weak spots. I mean, I snapped her neck like a goddamn twig, and she was fine! Gosh, there’s so much I still don’t know. I’ve really gotta get outta this town!”

I’ll go get all my stuff from the inn and hightail it back to the capital, yeah.

Her decision now set in stone, Candy turned on her heel and disappeared into the labyrinthine alleyways.

“Though I guess I did actually finish my job here. Heck, I even got info I wasn’t expecting, too. Won’t have anyone telling me I don’t know when to quit.”

She laughed to herself and pulled her tweed hat back down over her eyes.

“This Outcast Detective knows when to cut her losses! But I’ll see you soon, my dear husband! You’ll soon be all mine! I’ll have you drooling all

over me one of these days..."

Chapter Five

The Outcast Author's Bookmark

Bethel had finally found the time to sit down and take in the sunny afternoon. She suddenly had a whole slew of new responsibilities ever since Associate Professor Catnaaj had disappeared without a trace. It fell on her to take over and continue teaching many of his classes, as well as some of the administrative and research duties that had been assigned to him.

She unfolded a letter she had received from Dennis earlier that day and began reading. According to the contents, Dennis was hoping to rely on her newfound connections in order to dig up some important information. Namely, he wanted Bethel to get in contact with Sestapich, the judge of the Royal Courthouse, and with Katie, the commander of the Silver Wings Battalion.

Unlike previous letters that Dennis had sent, which simply kept Bethel in the loop about the various goings-on at the Outcast's Restaurant, this one was radiating with a unique sense of urgency.

It seemed that a mysterious girl named Candy had appeared and attempted to harm Atrielle, though the scuffle had ended in her grievously maiming Olivia instead. While her true motives were unknown, and while there was little to no concrete proof that Candy's presence was in any way linked to Lostchile or other recent events, Dennis certainly had his suspicions.

Bethel quietly nodded along as her eyes made their way down the paper, and she rose from her chair with a newfound resolve once she finished reading. As soon as the school day was over, she set about gathering any materials that she thought would be useful on her new quest.



A few days following the Candy incident.

“Maintenance complete. No errors detected! What do you think, Master?”

Olivia finished fastening a corset around her neck and exuded an aura of pride, despite her ever-expressionless face.

“Gotta give it to ya, you’re tough as all hell. Doesn’t even look like you got in a fight in the first place.”

“Olivia, the maid-model magical doll, cannot be decommissioned by a mere snapped neck, Master!” she thrust her chest out with pride as she spoke. “Now! Please give me an order! May I commence cleansing these plates?”

“Calm down, girl! These are already washed. Wait, no! That’s cooking oil, not dish soap! That’s cooking oil!”

Bibia peeked at the chaos unfolding in front of him over the rim of the book he’d been reading at the counter, his expression a goofy smile.

“Personally, I am only relieved that you were able to make a full recovery!”

“How long are you gonna be an anti-social bookworm over there, Bibia?”

“Is there an issue?” asked Bibia, incredulous. “I have already paid for a meal, and there are currently no other patrons in this establishment. Besides, recently I’ve found myself enjoying this counter more every passing day.”

“This isn’t a library, Bibia.”

“Speaking of, I’ve been meaning to tell you about this book I purchased. Do you remember? *The King of Contraptions!* I am already studying the third volume, and the protagonist jus—”

The bell at the front of the restaurant interrupted the beginnings of Bibia’s impassioned rambling.

It seemed a new customer had arrived. Quite an unusual customer, as a matter of fact. She sported a tall, pointed hat that obscured her eyes and wore a thick, dark-green coat over her shoulders, along with a brown bag. Nearly transparent azure hair flowed out from beneath her hat, forming curls that went no further than the base of her neck.

“Hey there, come on in,” said Dennis.

“A customer, I presume,” said Olivia. “Please allow me to guide you to your table. Oh, please allow me this courtesy.”

“Coming on a bit strong there, Olivia,” reprimanded Dennis. “Atrielle, you take this one.”

Atrielle gently set down the origami figure she’d been playing with and hopped off her barstool. She quickly padded over to the other side of the counter and poured a glass of water before approaching the new customer and setting it down on the table.

Meanwhile, the girl with the pointed hat continued to peruse the menu with the occasional sip of water, as was typical of the average patron. Despite that, Bibia was visibly perplexed and kept sending her sideways glances.

“Sup, Bibia? She your type or something?” teased Dennis.

“No, not at all... But... Wha...? Whaaaa...?”

Bibia’s eyes flitted back and forth between his book and the girl.

“Um, excuse me,” the girl called out to Dennis in her small, yet clear voice. “I’d like the purple chilli pepper bean sprout steak, please.”

“Oh, good choice. You’re only the second person ever to have ordered that!”

“Oh... really?”

“Uh, I beg your pardon!” Bibia, who had managed to all but sneak up on the new customer, half-shouted.

The poor girl drew back reflexively and pulled her hat further down over her eyes.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Please forgive me if I am mistaken, but are you Entmori, the author of the *King of Contraptions* series?”

The girl’s lips silently flapped like that of a beached fish, as Bibia excitedly presented the book to her.

“Um, I am, yes, but—”

“Whaaaattt?! Really!? You’re *the* Entmori!? I knew it! You perfectly match the author portrait on the back cover! Oh, um! I am actually your biggest fan! Would you please sign my copy, oh would you?!”

“Th-That’s fine, but... first...” Entmori sheepishly glanced at Bibia and then back to the counter. “Um... So you really don’t... you don’t know... anything, do you?”

“About what?” Bibia just stared at her blankly.

“Ah, never mind that. It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Can you believe this coincidence? Out of this world! I was only able to purchase the entire series just recently while in the capital! Yet I have already reached the third volume! I’m positively enthralled!”

“Oh, th-thank you,” stuttered Entmori. Her gaze was now entirely fixed on Bibia from beneath her wide-brimmed hat, though its meaning was difficult to discern.



“Wooowww! She actually signed it!” Bibia exclaimed, his eyes ablaze with excitement as he obsessively examined every intricacy of Entmori’s signature.

“Can’t say I chalked you up for an author,” Dennis said with a smile. “Met all kinds of people in my life, but never anything like an accomplished writer.”

“You flatter me... I’m no one, really,” Entmori said between bites.

“You mind signing something for the restaurant, too? I’d love to hang it up somewhere.”

“Oh, no. Please believe me, I really am nobody of importance.”

“Great idea, Dennis!” Bibia agreed. “I can envisage the display now: ‘Grateful for the patronage of best-selling author Entmori!’”

“Olivia, we have some of those little cardboard things for calligraphy and whatnot, right? Can you go grab one for me?”

“Certainly, Master Dennis. I shall fulfill your command with the utmost haste. I am truly grateful for your order.”

“Uh, this is the origami Atrielle was fiddlin’ with, Olivia.”

“Um!” interrupted Entmori. “I apologize, but I would kindly request for you to not display anything I sign! I don’t want the rumor mills to catch onto where I will be residing, you see...”

“Oh, okay,” Dennis nodded apologetically. “Of course that’s alright. My bad, we didn’t mean to cause you any trouble, yeah? Again, sorry.”

“Ah, no... I’m sorry, as well.”

The awkward air in the restaurant was palpable as everyone exchanged apologies back and forth.

“Well, uh... Forgive me for asking, Miss Entmori,” Bibia was the first to break the silence. “I’m curious as to what brought you here today. Are you perhaps traveling anonymously?”

“Mmm, something like that.”

“If you would not mind me troubling you for a little while longer, I would be forever indebted to you if you could regale us with tales of your experiences as an author! Like Dennis, I have never had the pleasure of speaking to such a well-respected writer before!”

“I don’t... really have any stories to speak of.”

“But you’re a renowned author! My hero! My preceptress!”



“Quite right, conducting research for the *King of Contraptions* series was quite the hassle,” said Entmori. “It certainly didn’t help that Yujitt himself

was a real person, and I was striving to capture and include as much historical accuracy as possible.”

“It sounds like being an author of any kind is awfully challenging,” said Bibia.

“Indeed, they are. Books require you to breathe life into them...”

“Oh, that’s fantastic! Very befitting of a novelist such as yourself!”

Bibia’s compliment evoked an embarrassed little titter from Entmori, who shyly requested he stop. Her attitude had done a complete flip from her earlier awkwardly distant disposition, and she was now actively engaged in conversation with Bibia, even speaking with a certain deal of pride about her work.

“Are you making any progress on new titles?” asked Bibia. “Perhaps a sequel? Could you confirm if you have any plans for it?!”

“It’s going to be a new work...” Entmori hesitated for a brief moment before making up her mind and smiling. “I believe I have it here somewhere. Ah...”

She fished out something from deep within her bag and slid it across the counter to Bibia.

“Hm? Is this...?”

“This is the manuscript for my new title. It’s in the final stages, if I do say so myself, so what do you think about getting an early look at it? I’d love to hear your feedback.”

“Ehhhhh?!?! Is that alright?! Are you quite sure?!”

Entmori laughed at the boy’s sudden burst of excitement. “No need to be so worried; it’s not due to be published any time soon anyway. Think of it as a treat, okay?”

“Regardless... To trust me with your manuscript... I can’t...”

“Ahh, w-well that... it’s uh,” Entmori stuttered and desperately avoided eye contact. “I don’t need that manuscript anymore, so really, it’s fine. It’s fine.”

“You don’t need it?”

“Well, uhh... I’ve already delivered another copy to the publisher, so it’s not an issue if I don’t have this one. I plan to remain in the area for a bit longer so please, take it off my hands for a while. It’ll be our little secret, yeah?”

“Waaaa! This is astonishing! Thank you so, so very much! Ah, Dennis! Sorry but I must make my exit! I have got to get back home and thoroughly

immerse myself in this manuscript!"

"No prob, Bibia. Careful on your way back," Dennis said to the boy and watched him leave with the manuscript clutched tightly to his chest. When Bibia was gone, he turned to Entmori and offered her a fresh cup of tea.

"That sounds wonderful," came the author's reply.

Dennis dutifully poured a cup for his customer followed by one for himself, which he then proceeded to sip.

"Bibia..." Entmori trailed off. "Was that his name? He seems like a good child."

"Though he does act his age on occasion... What brings you out to the boonies, anyway, oh ye great and famous author?"

"Ahhh, well... I was seeking a quiet place away from the capital to finish the production of my new work."

"Can't guarantee it's always quiet 'round these parts, but I think you'll be comfortable nevertheless. News is slow to arrive, and traveling gets dicey, but the town's cozy in its own unique way."

"That sounds perfect, actually," she said. Her eyes were unfocused, gazing at nothing in particular. "Places like this one are good... Very good."



"I wanted to speak with you about the manuscript you lent me the other day!" yelled Bibia, practically bouncing in place. "It was fantastic! Truly incredible!"

"Oh my, really? I am quite happy to hear that."

"I'm of the mind that it will become exceedingly popular upon its release! Were I in your shoes, I would begin making the preparations for the inevitable stage adaptation posthaste."

"Your enthusiasm is rather infectious," chortled Entmori, "but it might be just a tad early for that." She let out a good-natured laugh and waved her hand at the thought, taking care not to spill the cup of tea she was holding in the other.

Bibia was nearly entirely bent over the cafe table the pair were sitting at. "The passage near the opening about the heroine's goblin assailants being thwarted by the mysterious Goblin Killer was especially breathtaking! It had me teetering on the edge of my seat!"

"You mean it? It fills my heart with joy to hear that you enjoyed it that

much, Bibia.”

“Um, I may have actually drafted something akin to a book report, actually. Partly as a thank you. I would be honored if you were to give it a lookover!”

“Ehhh? Reeaalllyyy? You really did all that for me?” exclaimed the author with a smile as she accepted the book report from Bibia.

It was unusual for Bibia to be seen eating somewhere other than the Outcast’s Restaurant, but today that was exactly the case. He had come to this quiet cafe on Entmori’s recommendation. Apparently, Dennis’s joint was often quite boisterous around this time of day, and its environment would not have been conducive to a conversation.

“And I also took note that your new work is progressing in an entirely different direction than the *King of Contraptions* series. I continue to be awestruck at the magnificent range you display in your material!”

“Ahahaha... Yes... Yeah, maybe,” Entmori took another lengthy sip of her tea before she reached into her bag and produced an entirely different manuscript. “If you enjoyed the previous one, how might reading another one sound to you, Bibia?”

“Hm? That’s not... Is that yet another new work?!”

“It’s not exactly that. It would better be considered a... work-in-progress. It would be great to hear your opinions on it, if you wouldn’t mind taking the time.”

“Are you absolutely certain? This manuscript is even more precious than the last!”

“Hahaha, it’s fiiine, it’s fiinnee. I promise it’s no big deal at aaalll.”



Come evening, Bibia was once again seated at his usual spot at the Outcast’s Restaurant, eating his usual order of fried rice with an unusual smile plastered across his face.

“You seem to be in rather high spirits today, Master Bibia,” said Olivia. She idly held a metal tray to her chest.

“Hehehe, quite an astute observation, Olivia. I have been on cloud nine ever since I became something of an advisor to a lauded author, you see.”

“Aren’t you just looking over some stuff she’s written?” interjected Dennis. “How’zat make you an ‘advisor,’ Bibia?”

Bibia clicked his tongue.

“Well, to clarify, she’s actually entrusted me with her unfinished work. She values my input to such a degree that she is readily making revisions based upon my advice! She informs me that this work—influenced by *my* guidance—will one day be published. Oh, the disquieting pressure of success! I can hardly stand it!”

“Whoa, dang. She must *really* trust you, then. Guess authors could use curious little helpers like you from time to time.”

“Right?! I might have a knack for this, mightn’t I?! Maybe rather than magic, publishing is my true calling! Oh, a shame that I am bound by my promise to become the greatest mage in the world! I would not dare break my vow!”

Atrielle was a little ways away finishing up a transaction with two young mage girls sporting a ponytail and some twintails. Their ears perked up at Bibia’s impassioned ramblings, and they turned around to barrage the crew with questions.

“Bibia and some author? What’s that all about?”

“What author? Who is it?! Tell us!”

“Hahaha! That is a matter of utmost confidentiality, I’m afraid. Perhaps you’ll be able to solve the mystery through the dedication sure to be present in her upcoming novel! ‘To my beloved Bibia Strange,’ oh! Can you imagine it?! Can’t you just picture it in your mind?!?”

“You imagine too much.”



A few days later, Entmori and her new charge met back in the cafe for another discussion.

“So, what, uh, what did you think?” asked the writer shyly.

“Hmmm...” Bibia crossed his arms, a dark and troubled expression on his face. “It was certainly interesting, but...”

“B-But?”

“How should I put it... This new manuscript of yours... Well, it doesn’t quite live up to the expectations set by the previous one. It didn’t hit as hard, so to speak.”

“Didn’t hit as hard?”

“Y-Yes. Don’t misunderstand, I still very much enjoyed it! But, um, the

pacing was a tad slow, and all of the characters were old men, and, well, the protagonist was a bit of a wimp. Ah, yes, I also don't agree with your choice to end it on a sad note. It was just a bit..."

Bibia set his cup of tea down to easier reach for his notes when Entmori suddenly leapt to her feet.

"What?! What do you mean?! You said it was interesting, didn't you? Was that a lie?! Are you saying my new novel is garbage?!"

"Wh-Wha—?!"

Completely taken aback by Entmori's sudden outburst, Bibia accidentally knocked his tea cup off the table, which then shattered into a thousand pieces on impact. Luckily, the sound it produced shocked Entmori back to her usual self.

"Ah, forgive me," she said quietly. Her face had drained of all color.

"Um, ah, no. I should be the one to apologize. I am still an amateur, and it goes without saying that I cannot yet detect the finer intricacies in your writing," said Bibia. He was obviously shaken, but finished his apology before flagging down a waiter to help sweep up the smashed cup.

Even once the boy had gotten his replacement cup of tea, he kept casting sidelong glances at Entmori. She looked absolutely petrified with embarrassment, and she couldn't keep herself from constantly fiddling with her azure hair.

"I-I'm so sorry. You took the trouble of lending me your thoughts... I just got slightly worked up. I'm sorry," she said.

"N-No, it's my fault. I was too full of myself. I had no tact in my approach to your hard work, so it's only, uh, natural. Yes... Really."

"No, really, I shouldn't have lost control like that. I'm deeply sorry."

The pair fell into a long, awkward silence that was interrupted only by the sound of each of them sipping their respective teas. Finally, Entmori put an end to this elongated silence.

"So, um, I was thinking about both of the new manuscripts."

"Yes! What about them?"

"I was thinking that maybe I should have them done here..." she trailed off, as if probing to see how Bibia would react.

"Um, I'm not quite sure I follow. Do you mean to say that you'd like to get them printed here rather than the capital?"

"No, not that. I'm considering having them published here. Only here. Solely in this small town..."

“Oh! I s-see. Forgive me for asking, but why? Miss Entmori, you’re a very popular author! Surely you understand that you’d be leaving behind a huge portion of your audience.”

“Haha... You’re right, of course, but,” her eyes glazed over a bit, and she once again stared off into nothingness. Something was clearly on her mind, but it wasn’t long before she sparked back into the conversation. “Yes, that’s it! What I was trying to say was that this town would be the perfect place to judge their overall reception, you know? Then I could use the feedback to polish them up and reprint them in the capital.”

“Oh okay, now I understand! That sounds like a great idea. A cunningly strategic move on your part! Though surely you have considered the high probability of spoilers leaking to the rest of the world, have you not?”

“I highly doubt something like that would happen! Seeing as this town’s fairly behind the times, I’m sure it’ll be fine!”

“That’s true! I’m all for it, then! If you need any help, please do keep me in mind!”

“Oh, really? I would really appreciate it if you could assist me with some editing-related matters. I don’t really know much about that sort of thing...”

“Of course I’ll help! Leave it to me!”



Bibia sat at his usual seat at the counter and slowly picked at his plate of crab fried rice. One wouldn’t even need to glimpse the boy’s dejected expression to understand that something was eating away at him.

“What’s up, Bibia?” asked Dennis. “Somethin’ got you down?”

“Oh, it’s nothing really,” he replied. “This is going to be difficult, though.”

“Ooh, sounds juicy.”

Suddenly, the two mage girls with their equally unique hairstyles piped up, “This is about that ‘author’ you were talking about the other day, isn’t it?!”

“Well, yes, I suppose it is...”

“What kind of books does she write?”

“She’s incredibly renowned! I’m confident that up-to-date girls like yourselves would immediately recognize her name!”

“No way! Cooool!”

“Come on, spill the beans, Bibia!”

“I can’t! I mustn’t! The only information I am able to divulge is that I am working closely with her on her new project, and that it involves gobli—No! I’ve said too much! Whew, good thing I caught myself in time!”

“Awww, come on, Bibia!”

As the ponytail mage busied herself begging Bibia for more information, the twintail mage snapped her fingers in realization.

“Goblins... Aha! I’ve got it! It’s gotta be *Goblin Slasher*, right?! That means the author has to be Kagyura Spider!”

“Kagyura? I’m afraid you’re mistaken.”

“Whaaaa?? But if we’re talkin’ goblins, then it’s gotta be *Goblin Slasher*.”

The twintail mage took it upon herself to explain the plot of *Goblin Slasher* in excruciating detail. It wasn’t long before Bibia was scratching his head in confusion.

“How on earth do you know this story?!?”

“What are you talking about? It’s just *Goblin Slasher*. Like, it originally came from another country, sure, but they’ve translated it and done a stage play and everything! Maybe nobody around here has heard about it, but I spend a lot of time in the capital so I’m super in the know. I’ve got a translated copy if you wanna give it a read, Bibia.”

“But that would mean... This isn’t making any sense. That is almost beat-for-beat in line with Miss Entmori’s *Goblin Killer*. No, no it can’t be...”

“Entmori?” the twintail haired mage furrowed her brows. “Wasn’t that the author that ended up being tossed out of all the literary circles in the capital for plagiarism?”

“What?”

“The one who wrote the *King of Contraptions* series, right? I heard her follow up wasn’t going so hot, so she ripped off *Goblin Slasher* instead. Guess she thought that nobody would notice since it was foreign. It did work for a while, but she got totally busted eventually.”

“What? What? Um. What?”

“So, Bibia,” the mage girl thumped her elbow on the counter and initiated intense eye contact with Bibia. “What exactly are you doing with this Entmori person?”



The next day, Bibia found himself standing at the entrance of a certain inn.

“This must be the place,” he mumbled to himself.

After hearing the very concerning news from the mage girl, Bibia had resolved to speak to Entmori and learn the truth straight from the source. The author had instructed him to come to this inn in particular. When Dennis caught wind of this, he offered to accompany Bibia but was swiftly turned down. This was a matter that involved only him and Entmori.

Bibia paused for a second at Entmori’s door and took a deep breath. His resolve strengthened, he knocked sternly but politely. Something stirred inside.

“Ah, hello,” he said. “It’s Bibia.”

Footsteps approached, but the door remained closed.

“Oh, Bibia. I wasn’t expecting you. What’s the matter?”

As the door finally creaked open, Bibia was greeted by quite the eyeful.



“Uhhh... Whaaa—??” Bibia gaped, completely dumbfounded at the sight before his eyes.

Entmori stood before him, but she was not dressed in her usual coat. Instead, she wore only a negligee that accentuated all of her curves and the contours of her skin. Her white underwear naturally drew the eye to the slopes of her chest, which fought desperately against its lingerie prison and the very forces of gravity. Meanwhile, her panties strained to contain her wide hips and ample behind.

It took a moment, but Bibia finally noticed that her signature blue hair was a terrible mess, and that she had dark bags under her eyes. Clearly, this was her casual look.

“Is something wrong?” she asked innocently.

“Um. Uh... I...” Bibia struggled to look anywhere else but her as he stammered. “I just... Um. I was hoping to simply... to inquire about a somewhat concerning, uh, matter.”

“So suddenly?”

“I-I apologize.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Entmori said with a smile. “Sorry that I’m a little underdressed. Come on in.”

Bibia followed her in and found a stool near a small table to sit at. The room was fairly spartan with only the bare necessities present. A bed, a desk, a tiny table with not much on it. It was quite dreary. The desk, meanwhile, was littered with manuscripts and other assorted materials. Some of the pages had been crumpled up and tossed about the room, a clear indication that Entmori had been hard at work.

Bibia wouldn’t have been able to compliment her organization skills even if he wanted to. He sat and waited patiently for the author to return with the tea that she’d pranced off to make.

Before long, she returned with the drinks. She placed them on the table, then dragged her large office chair away from her desk and set it across from Bibia.

Bibia gulped. He was finding it excruciatingly difficult to keep his gaze focused on her eyes.

At least toss on a robe, he cried to himself. Perhaps she’s less conscious of such a thing than I had initially thought... Or maybe this is all intentional. Egads, I cannot think straight...

Bibia’s face flushed a brighter and brighter red as his inner turmoil

wound him up. Entmori's body type wasn't too dissimilar to Henrietta's, but... *Maybe it is because she is always wearing that coat of hers.* Bibia's train of thought continued in a similar vein until Entmori incredulously interrupted his internal strife.

"So?" She picked up her teacup and held it in both hands so as to warm them. "You wanted to ask me something?"

"Um, that is correct..."

"What is it?"

"Well, Miss Entmori," Bibia looked down at his hands as he continued. "I have been informed about what occurred in the capital... regarding the plagiarism present in your novel, *Goblin Killer...*"

Bibia did not know what Entmori's reaction was; he couldn't even guess at the expression on her face. He had to force his words out and maintained fierce eye contact with his two fists balled up in his lap. Silence filled the room after his revelation, and he felt as though an eternity had come and gone in that time.

"I see."

Entmori was the first to speak up. Bibia dared to look up and saw that Entmori was now resting an elbow on the table, supporting her head. Her gaze was somewhere else, far away.

"Those rumors you heard are probably right," she sighed. "Are you disappointed?"

"Um, wh-why?"

"Why?" she remained still for a moment before the tiniest smile formed on her face, and a sad, bitter little laugh escaped her lips. "I felt as though everything was crashing down on top of me, and I had to do something to fix it. Yet, what could I do but escape from reality? I came to this town, and when you were so kind to me... well, I just went with the flow. I even fooled myself into thinking that maybe I *could* have a fresh start, that I could become a popular author here."

"I... I'm struggling to find the correct words," Bibia said. He had thought a great deal about what exactly he was going to tell her on his way to the inn, but now that she sat before him with such a sad smile, all words abandoned him. "I understand that this likely means nothing coming from me, but..."

"What?"

"I am of the mind that... I think you should take up writing once more. That is, with an entirely original work. I mean to say, the past is the past! Do

not let it shackle you! I know you are well capable of coming up with another huge success! The *King of Contraptions* series did so well, after all!"

She chuckled sadly in response. "That was just a fluke, Bibia. A flash in the pan is quite common in my line of work."

"That does not mean you should resort to plagiarism! I am confident that you could write something marvelous without relying on the work of another! I am! I believe in you!" his voice rose until he was virtually shouting.

Entmori dropped her gaze to the table between them. She nervously rapped her nails upon its surface. The room fell silent once again, and her shoulders began to shake. Eventually, she wiped the tears that had begun to flow from her eyes.

"You're right, Bibia," she said without looking up. "You're right."

"S-So, does that mean...?"

"Yes. I need some time to cool off, but... thank you for worrying about me. For a while, I'd accepted that I'd never see you again, that I'd driven you away, yet you still came all the way here for my sake."

"P-Please! It was nothing!"

Entmori rose from her seat and told Bibia, "I'm just going to go wash my face, all right?"

"O-Of course! I won't be going anywhere."

He watched her disappear into the bathroom, then grabbed his chest when she was out of sight to calm himself.

She listened to me, he thought. Thank goodness. Yes, I'm sure of it now. The pressure she was under grew to be too much for her. It must have pushed her to make an out of character mistake, that's all.

A warm feeling bloomed within his chest; he'd done as Dennis would have. He recognized that someone was in trouble and had gone out of his way to help them. Maybe, just maybe, he was beginning to finally mature. Just the mere thought made him smile.

He heard a shuffling sound and broke free from his trance. Entmori had emerged from the bathroom and beelined directly toward Bibia.

"M-Miss Entmori! This may be a little out of the blue, but would you like to get something to eat after this? Dennis will surely have something read—"

She held a porcelain object in her hand, which she swung at Bibia's head without even a hint of hesitation.

Bibia was too shocked to react in time.

The porcelain shattered into small pieces right as it made contact with his

skull, and his vision went haywire. The sudden pain he felt was nearly overshadowed by the distinct feeling of shock and betrayal.

The swing sent him flying head-first down onto the table, the force of the impact flipping it over. He collapsed onto the floor alongside it. He still couldn't comprehend what was happening.

“Guh! Wha—?!”

“You too?!?” Entmori’s voice boomed throughout the room. “You’re going to look down on me too?! You’re gonna label me a plagiarist too?!?”

“Ugh! Mghmgm!”

Still dazed, Bibia instinctually tried to stand. His skull throbbed horribly, and his elbow wobbled and gave out as he attempted to drag himself to his feet. He buckled again and rolled onto his back. Entmori then straddled his chest and continued to rant.

“You butter me up with all your inane compliments! You lull me into a false sense of comfort! But I know you’re just making fun of me like everyone else! Who do you think you are?! You’re just like the rest!”

“Ugh! Guweee...!” Bibia began to sob, and snot trailed from his nostrils as Entmori’s slender hands clamped down around his throat.

“Just write something new?!?” Flecks of spit flew from her mouth and splattered on Bibia’s face as she screamed. “You really think it’s that easy?! Plagiarists don’t get second chances! Everyone thinks I’m scum!”

“Agah! Guh!”

Bibia tried in vain to tear her hands away from his throat. Her arms felt like iron vice around his soft neck. He desperately flailed his legs around, but nothing he tried had any effect. Slowly but surely, he felt the life be squeezed out of him.

“Once an author is cast out, she’s done! There’s no place in the world for those who make mistakes! Do you understand?! No! As if you ever could!”

“I-I d-don’t,” he rasped. His fingers were slowly growing numb, yet he could somehow still find the strength to muster those words.

“Shut up! I’ll kill you! We’ll die here together! I don’t care anymore! Why couldn’t you just let me have this fantasy?! What did I do to deserve this?!?”

“I... enjoyed it...”

Entmori maintained the pressure on the boy’s neck. Bibia began to lose consciousness, and it took all that he had to keep speaking.

“... Tha-That’s why... I wanted... you to... write...” Bibia’s face was now

turning a sickly pale blue, and his eyelids slowly shut. “D-Don’t... give... up...”

The last thing he saw was interminable sadness in her eyes. There wasn’t an inkling of hope remaining in such vast despair. How long could one go on blaming others? In the end, you are responsible for your own actions. And yet, Bibia was still doing his best to help her rather than save himself.

“I-I’m sorry... I said... something... that irres... ponsible... I’m sorry...”

That was all. He had no more to say; he had no more he *could* say. But it seemed that it was all he needed to say.

The grip on his neck loosened, and he felt tears begin to splash down on his face. She let herself slide off Bibia’s chest and curled into a ball on the floor, sobbing.



The spilled cup, the shattered porcelain littering the floor, the overturned table. The evidence of the violence that had taken place moments ago surrounded Bibia and Entmori. The author sat in the heart of the chaotic mess, and Bibia was propped up against the opposite wall, picking at the dried blood caking his hair.

“I enjoyed it at first, you know,” began Entmori. “Writing *King of Contraptions*, I mean. I used to love novels, and I just got so inspired that I thought I’d give it a try... Things got out of hand.”

All the strength had been drained from his body, so Bibia simply laid there and quietly listened to her.

“So I thought I’d just continue with the next book. But no matter how hard I tried, I just could not come up with anything. Back when I was just doing it for fun, I had so many ideas. Almost too many. But now? When I actually *had* to come up with something? Nothing came. I still tried, but it never worked out; it would never sell. I came to realize that I just liked to read, I didn’t actually have a talent for writing.”

The pain in Bibia’s head had almost entirely dissipated by now. Luckily, it didn’t seem to be a major injury.

“Well, I panicked. Why did I do something so stupid, I wonder? I knew I’d get caught. It’s not like I was subtle about it or anything. There was no need for me to do something so foolish, yet I went and ruined everything. All the people, all the readers who looked up to me... I betrayed every single one

of them... Hehehehe..." Entmori looked like she was about to snap. Her appearance was even more disheveled than when she had first greeted Bibia at the door. Her laughter finally subsided. "I'm sorry, Bibia. I'll tell them what happened; I'll turn myself in. Insane people like me don't belong in society. I don't even recognize myself anymore, so just... lock me away."

"Um..." Bibia looked directly at Entmori. "You mean this head wound? I just lost my footing is all."

"Haha... What are you talking about? I was trying to kill you."

"No, I know what I said. Obviously I... I do not approve of your actions, but... I do not believe I acted as I should have, either."

Bibia slowly rose to his feet and extended his hand out to Entmori. She simply stared at it, unsure of whether or not to accept it.

"Regardless, all souls must carry the burden of their sins, mustn't they? What differentiates the noble from the commonfolk is the ability to stand up when they get knocked down. Entmori, they may laugh at you, or curse you, or beat you... Even if you truly deserve it, I believe you should not let that bog you down; you should instead rise again and defy them. Perhaps... No, certainly."

"No one will read what I've written. Even if they wanted to, the publishers in the capital have cut all ties with me. They absolutely refuse to ever publish anything of mine ever again."

"Then even if not a single other person in the entire world will read your books, I will."

"... Really?"

"Of course. I look forward to reading your next book," Bibia smiled. "I want it to be one you truly enjoyed writing. Simply focus on your own happiness, and write according to your own whims and fancies. Rid yourself of such unimportant concepts as 'sales' or 'popularity.' I promise you I will read it, even in the unlikely event that it is the worst collection of drivel ever compiled into a manuscript. I will be waiting for your next *real* work."



A breeze blew through the grass of an empty field; a solitary grave stood erected in the middle. The sun shone down on the mage boy sitting at the foot of the grave.

"And that is essentially what happened, Cynthia," concluded Bibia. He

idly rolled some blades of grass between his fingers as he spoke. “As I suspected, Dennis confirmed that the wound was not anything to be worried about. Merely a graze. It did still frighten me half to death, however.”

Bibia looked up at the blue sky above.

“Regardless, I can’t help but feel that it was meant to be. I still have so much to learn about the world. If I remain as I am, all I will ever do is deliver undue worry to you and Dennis.”

Scanty, puffy white clouds floated lazily in the sky.

“Hey, Cynthia, is it truly so irresponsible to let somebody know that you admire them? Or to inform them that you adore the things they create, to support them?” His voice was barely a whisper. “I mean, we are quick to forget, aren’t we? And it is so easy for us to grow apart for no apparent reason. Kindness scarcely survives for long, and promises are not always kept. Yet... I believe the recipient of your kindness will forever remember that someone once appreciated them. Even though the person in question may one day forget, the recipient never will. And... And they will never forget that they have let that person down.”

The clouds in the sky didn’t seem to have a care in the world. They sat languidly in the sky, drifting along to who knows where.

“Take clouds, for example... they care not if anyone observes them. Nobody holds any expectations for them, but they continue to move despite that. But, well... humans are not clouds. If we expect something of someone, or vice versa... we will inevitably be betrayed or, worse yet, betray them in turn. Eventually, we will cease moving. No, we are not clouds... And we are not angels, either...”

Bibia stretched a hand out toward the sky, as though trying to grasp one of the clouds and bring it to his chest. He saw not a speck of darkness within that serene whiteness. Then came a smile.

“But I do not consider that to be a bad thing. Not in the slightest. I wouldn’t want to think of it in such a way. I wonder if you’d share my sentiment, Cynthia...”



“So you gonna be heading back to the capital?” Dennis directed the question at Entmori, who was lounging at the counter of the restaurant.

She re-adjusted her pointy hat before responding, “Yes, actually. I’m

probably going to work on my new project there. Do you find that strange?"

"Not at all," Ever the gracious host, Dennis placed a cup of tea down in front of her, and she graciously took a sip. "Hope it goes well for ya."

"Thank you. I'm still not entirely sure of myself, but... well, up until very recently, I was at peace with the idea of simply disappearing, that it would be better if I perished in some sort of accident. But..."

"But?"

"This may come across as odd, but I want to try accomplishing something again. By myself, with my own effort. I want to see just how far I can go despite all that I've done wrong. I can't change the past, and the future remains uncertain, but everything is my responsibility in the end. Every one of us straddles the line between the two, and I've got to carve my own path along that line."

"Can't say I disagree," Dennis said. He handed a menu to her and grinned, "I hope you came here for your last meal."

"What would you recommend?"

"Hmm, what would I recommend..."

"Recommendations?! If it's recommendations you are looking for, then look no further! I, Olivia, will impart upon you some of the finest recommendations!"

Olivia bounced over to the counter, spirits high as ever. Meanwhile, Atrielle appeared next to Entmori and shyly tugged on her coat.

"I recommend the fried rice."

Entmori beamed and agreed to order the fried rice.

"Mistress Atrielle, no! That was my one and only precious opportunity to help a customer!"

"Haha, this restaurant sure is a lively place. I like it," said Entmori.

"Well, that's one word for it," agreed Dennis. "You do your part in the festivities by gorging on this fried rice, okay?"

"That's the plan, not that I have a choice in the matter, haha..." Entmori's happy smile shone brightly from beneath her large hat. "You know, I've already thought up a plan for my next book. I know that at least one person out there is waiting in anticipation for it."



Later that night at the Yujitt Metropolitan Magic Academy.

Bethel pored over the materials she'd gathered for Dennis's investigation with a grave expression. The only source of light in her room was a shabby, old, unreliable lamp.

"It can't be... but maybe..."

Among the plethora of documents were a few copies of the *King of Contraptions* series authored by Entmori. It was a historical fiction series based on the real-life figure who was known by the same title, Yujitt. She knew it was unbelievably popular for a while, but now she found herself looking into the essay that had sparked that series into existence.

She'd already read it in the past, of course. She'd even referenced it in lectures, but now she was returning to it with a new frame of mind. This time, it was Yujitt's masterpiece that had caught her interest. It was a masterpiece so amazing that many doubted its very existence.

A magic doll made to look, think, and act exactly like a human would. A feat that had never been achieved before or since, one that remained a hotly debated topic to this day. After all, if there really was such a thing, why did Yujitt leave behind no records of it? Where are his research papers, his documentation of its creation? Why did it not stay by its master's side until the very end?

Hence, the assumption that it was no more than an exaggerated fable of the great King of Contraptions was quite a reasonable one. In fairness, it would not be unexpected for him to be able to achieve something like that, regardless of the truth.

However, this essay argued strongly for its existence. As such, it was looked down upon within the world of academia. It was seen as something for bored lecturers to drone on about, or as a juicy piece of trivia to perk up the ears of disinterested students.

And yet the letter Bethel received from Dennis looked to have completely recontextualized that essay. If what he wrote was true, wouldn't that mean that the legendary magic doll was now a waitress at his restaurant?

"It's probably just a coincidence, but I've gotta see it with my own eyes, don't I? If it is real... heck, that would be huge!"

Chapter Six

There Are Two Outcast Chefs?!

A few years ago, at the Blacks Restaurant.

“Listen up, everyone!” exclaimed head chef Jeanne as she loudly clapped her hands to get the staff’s attention.

This was far from uncommon to hear in this restaurant, and everyone, from the kitchen staff and the waitstaff to the managers, readily gathered in the main hall. At the center of the hall stood their sole connecting thread: Jeanne Blacks. Despite the youthful air about her, the raven-haired beauty bore the ultimate responsibility for the food the restaurant served.

She tucked a long strand of hair behind her ear and motioned her jaw in the direction of the girl standing next to her.

“This little lady right here’s gonna be joining us as a cook from here on out. Go on, introduce yourself.”

The pink-haired girl clad in a sparkling new cook’s uniform stepped forward, brimming with confidence.

“Nice to meet you, everyone. I’m Hezmoch, Hezmoch Pebble,” she beamed at all her new coworkers.

“Don’t just dismiss her just ‘cause she’s new, guys. She graduated top of her class at a first rate culinary school. Hell, she’s got her sights set on becoming a sous-chef.”

“Thank you, Chef,” Hezmoch replied, fervent ambition roaring in her eyes. “But I’m actually looking to be head chef myself.”

“Hahaha, okay then! You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that. Go easy on her, everyone.”

The crowd around them began to whisper quietly among themselves.

“Top of her class? That’s crazy...”

“I guess appearances can be deceiving, though...”

Hezmoch’s mood rose drastically as the murmurings validated her efforts. She had worked hard her whole life to be where she was now. She combined her innate talents with the drive and determination necessary to realize her dream of being a truly superlative chef. Pride swelled within her chest now that she could be somewhat sure that everything was going well for her.

“... Still, she’s got no chance of usurping our current sous-chef.”

“Yeah, chef Dennis is truly something else.”

“That guy is inhuman, seriously...”

Huh? Hezmoch tilted her head ever so slightly to the side. She turned to Jeanne and asked, “Where is this chef Dennis? I don’t see him.”

“Dennis? He’s probably in the kitchen. He pretty much lives there at this point. Wanna meet him?”

“Yes, I don’t want to be rude to the restaurant’s second-in-command.”

“He ain’t really the type of kid to worry about that sorta thing, but sure. Follow me,” Jeanne beckoned and began walking in the direction of the kitchen.

Dennis... the sous-chef... Hezmoch turned the words over in her head, dissecting them. According to her observations, he was very highly thought of among the staff. *On the same level as me, though? Not likely! I’ll show them exactly what a top graduate is capable of.*

“What culinary school did chef Dennis graduate from?”

“He didn’t go to one.”

“Really? So he went to a magic school then?”

“He’s never been to any school. I thought about making him go, but he’d definitely start some shit with the other kids and end up hurting someone. He’d probably maim if not outright kill any bullies he’d come across. Well, that may be going too far. Actually, maybe not. I just didn’t wanna get called into settle a murder case is all.”

“Eh?”

A gleaming question mark all but sprang into existence above Hezmoch’s pink head as the pair reached the kitchen. Residing within was a young man wearing a blue bandana in place of a chef’s hat. He sliced a head of cabbage into extremely fine grass-like pieces with only a single visible stroke of his knife.

“... The fuck’re you?” He barely looked up from his work.

“This is the new girl,” Jeanne said and gave Hezmoch a slap on the back. “I’ll be leaving her to you. Make sure to teach her a lot, a’ight?”

Hezmoch looked at both chefs, utterly flabbergasted.

Wha... Who is this guy? He’s nothing more than some meathead punk. And how did he do that cut just now?!

“Ooohh! You’re the newbie! Jeanne mentioned you. What was your name again? It was something like ‘Hellstroke,’ yeah?”

“It’s Hezmoch...”

“Hezmoch, right. Done deal! I’m Dennis! Lookin’ forward to working

with ya.”

“Y-Yes... Me too.”

The two of them exchanged a firm handshake, and Hezmoch paled as she quickly realized quite how large Dennis’s hands actually were.

This guy’s scary... I wasn’t expecting this at all. He looks like he couldn’t think himself out of a paper bag.



On a certain throughway quite a distance from the Outcast’s Restaurant, a new store was hosting its grand opening event. A large sign upfront simply read “Diner of the Exiled.”

Its clean and refreshing atmosphere attracted a large swathe of people, and a long line extended far beyond the entranceway.

“I figured someone would do something with this building one of these days, but what the hell is this?” Dennis stood outside, staring apprehensively at a poster hung up on the outer wall.

The poster welcomed all newcomers.

“The Diner of the Exiled

A taste of the *capital* that won’t put a dent in your wallet!

First-class ingredients, first-class chef, first-class food, all for a mind-bendingly low price!”

His eyes drifted down to one of the reviews posted beneath the advertisement. “Much cheaper and tastier than the Outcast’s Restaurant!”

Dennis slowly looked beyond the bustling line of customers and into the restaurant proper. The interior was as clean as it was lavish. It certainly did strike him as something that would not be at all out of place in the capital.

“Th-This place... it’s amazing. Way, way better than mine...”

“This is no time for idle admiration, Dennis!” exclaimed Bibia. “This place is going to siphon away all of your long-standing customers! Though I must say their spaghetti is simply superb.”

“Bibia! Now I know why I haven’t seen you around lately!”

“Oh drats! I was hoping to appear as though I had only recently learned

about this establishment!”

Dennis and Bibia were too engaged in their petty squabbling to notice a lone chef of diminutive height appear from within the restaurant.

“It’s been a while, sous-chef Dennis,” she said. The sun reflected brightly off of her spotless white cook’s uniform as she approached the two.

Dennis did a double take, and his eyes widened. “Y-You...”

“What? What is it, Dennis?”

“Hezmoch? What are you doing out here?!?”

The petite chef smiled. “I’m setting out on my own just like you did, Dennis. I am now also a former sous-chef of the Blacks Restaurant.”

“On your own? But why here? And where’d you even get the funds for this?”

“I have a... backer. He’s a wise nobleman who saw my potential and put forward a lot of his money to personally finance my business.”

“What about chef Jeanne? What did she have to say about all of this?”

“She was against it, of course. So against it, in fact, that by the time I was leaving, I almost felt like I had been legitimately cast out. No, I think ‘exiled’ is a better word.” She smugly thrust her finger in Dennis’s face. “Sous-chef Dennis! I have come to challenge you! Not as a fellow pupil, nor as a colleague! Consider me your business rival! What say you?! Let us find out who really was Chef’s superior pupil!”



Hezmoch had rudely barged her way back into Dennis’s life with a fiery challenge to her former mentor. Dennis was under the impression that in a battle of sales, the winner would clearly be the one who could serve the most customers. And so he boldly took his seat in the gaudy interior of the Diner of the Exiled.

“Well go on then, Hezmoch! Show me what you’ve cooking with!

“Dennis, the contradicting signals your words elicit whilst you’re wearing a bib and hungrily brandishing cutlery is almost too much for me to bear!” exclaimed Bibia.

“I’ll have the steak!”

The food appeared in front of Dennis in no time flat. The steak was plated with an intricate design. A small section of the corner was preemptively removed to reveal the juicy, perfectly done cross-section. This was the first

time Dennis had ever seen something like this.



A thick, dark-brown sauce was spread gently over its surface, which itself was resting on a delicate bed of vegetables that had been impeccably cooked in a meat soup. This was first-rate cooking, no matter how he sliced it.

Contrary to Dennis's trademark style, which was a nostalgic taste of home that kept one coming back for seconds, this steak served as an assault on the senses right from the outset.

"Whoa! This looks simply sublime! But Dennis, what are your thoughts?!" Bibia, too, was obviously astonished just by the presentation alone.

Dennis eagerly cut off a tasty chunk of steak and dutifully brought it to his mouth.

"Thish," he said with his mouth full, "thish ish delishious."

"Dennis! Your face seems to be melting! And your voice isn't faring much better! She already has you on the ropes!"

"This cut would stand out even among the most gourmet of steak cuts. Truly the finest of the fine right here!"

"I-I don't quite understand, but that certainly sounds remarkable!"

"... Tell me, Hezmoch. What're you charging for a cut of such high quality?" Dennis dabbed his mouth with his bib and reined himself in. "If this is on the lunch menu, how are commoners even supposed to afford it? We at the Outcast's Restaurant don't tend to cater to the nobles, you feel me?"

"Oooh! Dennis is back in the fight!"

"This dish in particular is sold for five copper coins," Hezmoch offered up an instant retort.

"That's incredibly cheap!" exclaimed Bibia. "If I am not mistaken, that is only one more copper than the lunch steak back at Dennis's establishment! All five measly coppers would buy you there would be the ramen set!"

"You makin' fun of me, Bibia?! And what are you on about?! The ramen set is fantastic!"

Hezmoch laughed haughtily. "Looks like this is game, set, and match." She politely covered her mouth with a soft-looking hand and let out another smug giggle. "No matter how highly the townsfolk think of the Outcast's Restaurant, what they really crave is mouth-wateringly delicious food! If I can give them what they want at the same price they're used to paying, then what chance do you stand, Sous-Chef?!"

"Um," Bibia leaned in to whisper to Dennis. "So Hezmoch was your... classmate? Correct me if I am wrong."

“Yeah, somethin’ like that. What of it?”

“Well, I am dumbstruck by just how much your culinary styles differ...”

“Yeah, I guess. We’re almost complete opposites. Hey, Hezmoch,” he redirected his gaze back at his new rival. “You called this a match, but... are there really winners and losers in cooking? Hell, even if there are! I’ve always considered you to be the Chef’s number one student. What I’m saying is... you win. You’re the best pupil of and most fit successor to chef Jeanne. I’ve only been doing whatever I feel like, and I’ll just keep it up.”

“Ufufu... So you’re taking the modest route, Sous-Chef?”

“Nah, nah, nothin’ like that. And I haven’t been a sous-chef in a long, long time.”

“You don’t seem to understand, Sous-Chef,” Hezmoch glared. She folded her slender arms and continued, “I’m having you take responsibility. Once upon a time, I attempted to defeat you using only my own abilities. I tried to eclipse you as a chef. You, the invincible sous-chef of the Blacks Restaurant.”

“...”

“But what happened? You ran away to live free and do whatever it is you fancied and left me behind. I was just handed your position, like it was a consolation prize. I was *robbed* of the satisfaction of taking it from you personally.”

“No one thinks of it like that...”

“That had always been my goal, Dennis! I worked myself to the bone to surpass you! Yet you never even noticed that, did you, Dennis?! Did you?!”

“Hezmoch, yo—”

“You will take responsibility for what you’ve done. I can’t progress as a chef until I beat you. This town shall be our battleground and your burial site. When I’m through with you, nobody would even dare see me as being beneath you!”

“This isn’t a battleground,” a complex hodgepodge of emotions flooded Dennis’s rugged features. “This isn’t... cooking.”

Before long, Dennis and Bibia were walking back home from the Diner of the Exiled.

“I suppose you, erm... never got along with Hezmoch?” Bibia asked as he matched Dennis step-for-step.

“Nah, I thought we got on fine. Hell, I even saw her as a little sister and thought she felt the same. Guess I must have leaned too hard into the older

sibling role..."

"A chef's life is... more complicated than I had initially thought, isn't it?"

"I probably half-assed too many things, and I ended up hurting her because of it..."

"You are putting more thought than is necessary into this, Dennis."

"Anyways, you think she's actually turnin' a profit? There's no way the price is enough to even cover the costs of those ingredients, is it? Though she looked to be doin' alright for herself..."



Many years ago, in the capital. As the sun was beginning to wake from its daily slumber, two figures mulled about the back of the Blacks Restaurant.

"Why are you always working out, Dennis?"

Dennis was naked from the waist up, his chest glistening with sweat. He was presently in an upside-down position performing a handstand. He repeatedly tilted his body forward to the point that his chest was nearly touching the ground, then lifted himself back up again. Hezmoch watched him with a wrinkled brow.

"This is what chefs do, isn't it?" he said between reps. "You don't do this type of thing?"

"No, I don't."

"Why don't we exercise together, then? Nothin' like getting the ol' body moving first thing in the morning."

"You say that as if I'd be able to keep up with you at all."

Dennis dried his body off with the towel that Hezmoch had graciously brought him and joined her on the stairs behind the restaurant. They both sat there, silently sipping on some tea.

"Lately, it's like I've got nowhere to go with the muscle training, y'know?"

"You mean like you've reached your limit?"

"Exactly. I don't really get tired no matter what I try. Man, nothing feels heavy to me anymore."

"Well, obviously. You're shredded as heck."

"Feels like the weights are made of paper. I've been trainin' since I was a kid, so yeah... think maybe I've reached my limit."

"More than just the limits of a sous-chef, yeah? Kind of like the limits of

humanity, perhaps?"

In response, Dennis simply downed the rest of his tea and stood up, firmly slapping his knees in the process.

"Alright! What are we cookin' today, Hezmoch?!"

"Um, Dennis?"

"Sup?"

"I think it's about time you told me."

"Told you what?"

"Your secret. I mean, don't you see that it's a little weird? You never attended a culinary nor a magic school, and as far as I know, you haven't even received any sort of technical training... so how did you become so skilled?"

"Ohh, like that kind of secret, huh?" Dennis made direct eye contact with Hezmoch, and she returned his gaze with equal intensity.

"It's like if I knew such a thing, then I could develop as rapidly as you did, you know."

"Whaaa...? So you really wanna know my secret?" Dennis paused dramatically. "Okay, I'll tell you."

"Please."

"Promise not to tell anyone, okay?"

"I promise."

A mischievous smile spread across Dennis's lips, and he slowly stooped forward until he was at eye level with Hezmoch.

"My secret is this: I do whatever I want, whenever I want. Got it?"

"... What?"

"That's it! Now, let's get to work!"

"Th-That doesn't clarify anything! Dennis!"

"Hahaha, that's all I've got for ya!"



Back in the present, Hezmoch was dozing off in the main hall of the Diner of the Exiled after an exhausting day of work.

"Boss? Boss?"

She turned, bleary-eyed, to look at the worker who was requesting her attention.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Here are our sales for the day."

“Ah, thank you. Good work today,” she stifled a yawn as she momentarily reviewed the sales sheet before handing it back to her employee. “Keep these up to date. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Oh, um... Boss?”

“What is it?”

“Is this going to work? We didn’t break even again today. If we keep this up, we’ll end up deep in the red.”

“Nothing to worry about, we’re just running a promotion for the opening period. It’ll all be okay.”

She waved him away, and although it seemed as though he wanted to press the issue further, he relented and left quickly afterward.

Hezmoch knew better than anyone that defeating Dennis would be impossible without executing a full-frontal assault. Her strategy was to capitalize on initial customer interest by drawing them in with food of impeccable quality served at low prices. She would build a faithful customer base and pull in all of the “loyal” customers of the Outcast’s Restaurant.

Profit was secondary until she had utterly crushed Dennis. Regardless, funding was far from a major issue for her. After all, a rich benefactor had invested an obscene amount of money into her venture. She’d ensured that no matter how much debt she accumulated, she would still be able to claw her way out when the time came.

Am I actually winning? she thought to herself. Sure doesn’t feel like it yet... No. I am. Do not let weakness sway you. You’re better than him in marketing, in interior design, in the quality of your food, and in your skill as a chef. Losing is unimaginable. Winning alone won’t suffice. I must completely and utterly destroy him.

Only after that can I finally be free from his curse.



The capital.

Piercing, bestial cries rang out from within Lostchile’s mansion. The room was as disorganized as ever, filled to the brim with clothes, cages imprisoning rare beasts, and other assorted paraphernalia.

Within the walls of this raucous room stood Lostchile, casually slipping into his outfit and preparing for an outing.

“Harm, what would you say differentiates those who can achieve their

potential, and those who cannot? That is to say, winners and losers?"

"I do not know, Master Lostchile," replied Harm, who had appeared next to the nobleman, his belongings in hand.

"The attitude toward success, Harm," Lostchile clarified with a wild smile, then turned to face his butler. His cheeks were populated by deep wrinkles, making his head resemble a large, wadded-up ball of paper.

The roaring cacophony happening around them would surely be enough to drive any normal person to madness, yet the affluent pair carried on with their conversation as though nothing was amiss.

"A winner works hard, Harm. He does not simply drift through life, waiting for a latent talent to present itself and blossom into success. Instead, he combines experience and hard work to achieve that success himself. You understand, to him success isn't some abstract, ethereal concept that may or may not bestow itself upon him... It is nothing more than the expected result of his efforts."

"Naturally."

Lostchile broke from the conversation briefly to look over his collection of beasts. Many of the lamentable creatures stuffed into his fitting room had pelts of rare and exotic colors. Here, many a beast met such a caged fate as them.

"Losers, however, think of success as something akin to a blessing that comes down from on high. They are oblivious to the countless years of work that success requires, no, demands! They expect it to come to them in a single night. They hop into the air to grasp something so obviously out of their reach and come crashing down in a fall so destructive that they are unable to ever recover. They do not understand that not a single person in this world is capable of reaching the stars on their first attempt."

Lostchile smiled strangely to himself and straightened his bowtie in the mirror.

"To put it another way, the losers are gullible, Harm. They spend their entire lives searching, yearning for that one opportunity. 'If only it would come, then I would become great!' Not a chance. They're simply waiting for some knight in shining armor to prance along with a ladder and hoist them up to greatness."

A considerably loud cry erupted from within the labyrinth of cages. One of the creatures must have managed to wound itself while adjusting its position within its cramped confines.

“One who simply climbs a ladder to a height that he could never have ascended to alone would do well to throw himself off and save the rest of us the trouble.”

Lostchile checked his bowtie one last time before leaving the room with Harm in tow.

“Sir, if I may,” said Harm, “I have a question about some recent decisions of yours. Is it truly necessary to employ such roundabout methods as you have been?”

“They are. This situation must be approached with delicacy. There are items that I wish to collect with as little damage as possible.”

“The magic doll, I presume?”

Lostchile smiled. “Yes... She is something even more valuable than Yujitt’s manuscript. She personally bore witness to his life! She is an artifact that may even hold the key to the Royal Sword Skilgram! I am of the strong belief that an understanding of this country’s history is commensurate with an ironclad control of it,” he guffawed at the promise of power that he was picturing in his head.

Lostchile was nearly out of breath as they hurried down the maze-like hallways of his residence.

“Now, let us away! I had made plans to use that silly little girl to take control of the Blacks Restaurant, but as it turns out, there is something of much, *much* greater value outside the capital. I must have it! The most treasured item in human history! An intact memory of a bygone era! On my honor as a collector, it will be mine!”



“This restaurant’s really livin’ up to its rep!”

“Never thought bumpkins like us’d get to eat stuff like this! Heard the owner traveled all the way from the capital itself!”

“True, but I think I like the ol’ one better.”

“Nah, this one’s better! Food’s way too good! I’ve always dreamed of trying aristocratic meals like this! This chef’s definitely a cut above!”

Conversations such as this were occurring all throughout the long-as-ever line outside the Diner of the Exiled. Meanwhile, inside it Hezmoch watched over the proceedings and felt a small wave of relief pass over her.

Things are going to plan, she thought. We’re gaining more and more

regulars, so surely that means we're pulling some away from the Outcast's Restaurant by now. If I keep this up, victory is in my grasp.

Her victorious daydreams were interrupted by some kind of commotion that was taking place outside.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir, but I'm going to have to ask you to take your proper place in line."

"Oh, don't say that. I've come all the way from the capital, after all. Could you summon the owner, please?"

Hezmoch stealthily eavesdropped on the exchange from within the kitchen. *All the way from the capital? Has word already spread so far that the wealthy elite are making their way here just to taste my food?!*

She'd certainly expected something like this to happen eventually, but not quite so soon into the diner's lifetime. She cautiously peeked out of the kitchen to try and get a look at the source of the clamor, and her blood immediately ran cold. She swiftly sprinted out the door to greet the customer in question.

"M-Master Lostchile?!"

"B-Boss?" said the employee who had been dealing with the situation. "Is this someone you know?"

"Someone I know?! Get some hors d'oeuvres ready this instant!"

"Things are going well I see, Miss Hezmoch," said Lostchile with a sickening little chuckle. His smile accentuated the numerous wrinkles running along his large face. Contrasting him greatly was the tall, pale, expressionless butler standing next to him.

"Y-Yes sir, everything is going as planned. Thank you. We will have a table ready for you posthaste. I sincerely apologize for my staff's rudeness."

"Kuhahaha. Not at all, don't worry."

"Forgive me, but I must say that I would have preferred to have been made aware of your visit in advance. S-So that I could have been better prepared for your arrival, of course."

"This was entirely unplanned, you see. I have some other business to attend to in this town, so I figured I would just drop by and see how things are going," Lostchile said with that same smile. "So tell me, how do you like running your very own restaurant instead of being a mere employee?"

"I am grateful for the opportunity. We are still working on finding our footing, but I believe we are doing well. Though at some points it has been rough going, we have been able to overcome any challenges that have stood

in our way.”

“Rough going so soon after opening? That’s strange,” he said as he leaned right into her personal space. “Normally, restaurants see a large spike in profit during their opening periods. Perhaps something is wrong, Hezmoch?”

“N-No sir, I don’t think there is anything wrong. Everything is going according to plan. There is no need to worry. I have no intention of disappointing you.”

It was all she could do to maintain her composure. Cold sweat coated her the entire time Lostchile was near, and tiny beads as cold as icicles trickled down her forehead.

The round man before her held significantly more power than his appearance suggested. Yudaswell Lostchile had held control of the entire nation’s financial center ever since Joseph had fallen. In just a single generation, he had managed to revive the disgraced Lostchile family while simultaneously building the largest trading union in the country’s long history.

Not only was he a successful entrepreneur, he was also excruciatingly cunning. He had masterfully levied his power to gain considerable influence in various foreign countries via the tactics of financial manipulation.

Yet all those above board accomplishments paled in comparison to his seedier dealings. It was an open secret that he was at the apex of the country’s black markets to such a degree that none would ever dare challenge his throne.

Suffice it to say, Hezmoch couldn’t help but be terrified in his presence.

“Hm, good to hear then. Hezmoch,” he paused to take a slow, theatrical sigh. Hezmoch desperately held her breath as she waited on him to carry on. “You can do this. Have some confidence in yourself; you were once the sous-chef of the Blacks Restaurant, after all. This venture will surely fare well under your command.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

“I’ll offer up as much capital as I must. Please understand that I trust you as much as I do because I know that you *will* be able to get it together and pay me back in the very near future. You don’t want to prove my convictions wrong, do you?”

“N-No, and I won’t. I can assure you. I thank you again for your kind words. I am not worthy.”

“Now then, how about you prepare a nice lunch for me? Make enough for two.”

Hezmoch turned on her heel and retreated back into the kitchen.

It'll be alright. I can do this. Nothing is wrong. Everything is going according to plan.



“No customers.”

“It looks that way, Mistress Atrielle.”

Atrielle and Olivia stood alone in the deserted Outcast’s Restaurant. It was in the middle of lunch rush, and by all rights the place should have been packed. Dennis, who would normally be rushing to get dishes out as fast as humanly possible, was instead reclining in a chair and enjoying his novel.

“Is this acceptable?” Bibia asked from his usual spot at the counter. “At this rate, won’t they genuinely deprive us of all of our customer base?”

“Like I said,” sighed Dennis, “Panicking’s gonna get us nowhere. We’ve just gotta grit our teeth and bear it.”

“Sometimes I struggle to understand if you’re stubborn or simply indolent, Dennis.”

The chime of the entrance bell alerted the crew to the arrival of a new customer. It was an old man who was well-known among the town’s population for selling carriages.

“Oh my! A customer!” exclaimed Olivia. “Welcome, welcome! Please allow me to lead you to your seat!”

“Hello, Olivia,” said the man, looking slightly embarrassed. “It’s been a while.”

“Ooohh, what do we have here?” An evil smile rose to Dennis’s face, and he folded his arms dramatically. “Been a hot minute, old man.”

“Hahaha, yeah. I’ve been dining at that other place lately. Sorry, sorry.”

“You can eat over there if you want. Their cooking’s the real deal. I give it my full endorsement.”

“Mhm. It really is delicious, and I was going there a lot for a while, but...”

“But what?”

“It just wasn’t the same, man,” said the old man with a troubled expression. “Country bumpkins like me are just more suited to what you serve.”

“What? You tryna say my food’s only fit to feed the rabble?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Atrielle, don’t take this old fart’s order, okay?”

Atrielle daintily threw up a peace sign at Dennis, managing to convey a mischievous spirit despite her perfectly still face.

“Oh come on. Gimme a break here, Dennis.”

Dennis barked out a laugh, and the old man soon joined in. A light atmosphere slowly but surely returned to the empty little restaurant.



At the same time, in the main hall of the Diner of the Exiled, the accountant approached a worn-out Hezmoch.

“Boss, there’s something we need to talk about.”

“If it’s about our losses again, there’s no need to worry. We’re still on track.”

“Actually, it’s something else. The Outcast’s Restaurant looks to have been regaining a fair few of its former customers.”

Herzmoch’s eyes narrowed, and her tone instantly turned cold. “Do we know what’s causing this? Are they running some new promotion or something?”

“No, it’s nothing as extravagant as that. Actually, um...”

“What is it?”

“People keep saying that they prefer that place after all. They seem to view our establishment as more of an occasional treat...”

“Do they have a problem with the food?”

“No, not at all. Based on what I’ve heard, the issues lie more with the overall ambiance and the management here. I guess they find the more ‘homey’ feel of our competitor preferable. Well, that’s just what I’ve heard... mostly.”

Hezmoch pressed a finger to her furrowed brow and shut her eyes.

“...never understand you,” she mumbled. “This is why I hate...”

“Is something the matter, Boss? I think if we chan—”

“We will further lower our prices. Call our suppliers, and order even more luxurious foodstuff. Oh, and move that advertising idea we thought of ahead in the schedule.”

“Boss... But—”

“Please, just do as I say!”

Once again, her employee didn’t feel that this was an appropriate end to the discussion, but he eventually backed off after some hesitation.

Once she was alone again, Hezmoch allowed herself to lean on a table. Both hands gripped the edge of the surface, and the color of her knuckles slowly shifted to a pale white. She stayed like that for a long second, then suddenly slammed a fist down onto the table with all her might.

“No! No!” she yelled, her voice cracking with desperation. “What am I doing wrong?! Why?!”



Business at the Outcast’s Restaurant was beginning to pick up again. The mage with the twintails was trying to use the commotion to sneak to a table without anyone taking notice. Unfortunately for her, Dennis caught sight of her and called out with a smile.

“Hey, Twintails! Been a while.”

“Ah-Hahaha... Hey, Dennis, sure has!”

“Been stuffin your belly at the Diner of the Exiled, haven’t ya?”

“Ummm! Well, I just wanted to try some fancy food, you know?! I wasn’t cheating or anyythiiing. I have the right to choose!”

“I’m just messing with ya; you can eat wherever you want. Actually, I heard they cut down on prices again. Couldn’t be me. I got mouths to feed.”

“Hmm, how should I put it...” the mage girl grabbed a seat at the counter and cupped her chin in her hands. “Like, it’s crazy delish but like... that’s it? It feels kinda standoffish, yeah? Like I realized that I don’t wanna have to worry about manners and all that stuff while I eat.”

“Ah!” exclaimed a nearby customer. “I thought the same!”

“Me too!” chimed in another. “And this place has got Atrielle *and* a sexy maid!”

“Oh! Oh!” cried out Olivia. She had been happily busying herself with the returning patrons. “I heard a valued customer call out to me!”

Atrielle stood alongside Dennis in the newly revitalized restaurant. She proudly displayed her trademark peace sign that positively exuded the pride of victory.

“Yeah, hehehe,” said a familiar voice. “This kinda homey place really does suit us a helluvalot better, hehehe...”

“... Hehehe... Olivia and Atrielle sure sweeten the deal, too.”

Dennis’s face twitched involuntarily at comments such as those.

“They’re a lively bunch, I’ll give ‘em that...”

“I can’t help but wonder if Hezmoch’s place will be able to continue operations, however,” chimed in Bibia. “I can’t imagine that it was a very inexpensive undertaking.”

“She’ll think of something. They’re comin’ up on some big milestone or something. She’s always been the more intelligent between us, so she’s gotta have somethin’ up her sleeve.”

“Even the ones with,” Bibia paused to make sure he had Dennis’s attention before continuing, “Even the ones with the most intellect are not immune to the burden of stress.”

“Since when are you an expert on the matter?”

“I am not, no... but... I do not know, Dennis. I cannot help but have a bad feeling about this.”



“Hmmm...”

Lostchile hemmed and hawed to himself as he reviewed the sales record of the Diner of the Exiled. Sat across the table from him was Hezmoch, who looked like she wanted to curl up into a ball and disappear as many of her customers had.

The restaurant wasn’t completely empty despite it being so late in the day, but the smattering of customers could all feel the unusually cold atmosphere emanating from the table Lostchile and Hezmoch were seated at. The eerie tall man quietly sitting alongside them and observing their interaction only served to further exacerbate the unpleasant tension.

“This is unacceptable. How do you plan to rectify this situation?”

“Th-This is only a temporary setback, sir. You need not worry about it.”

“Answer the question,” Lostchile said with a predatory smile.

“... I-I expect the restaurant to become big news soon enough,” Hezmoch stammered. The sweat on her brow felt colder than ever. “Once we achieve that, we will begin to attract customers even from outside of town. At that point, we will launch our new menu geared toward a wealthier clientele. I believe that we will bounce back quickly after that is put into effect.”

“Hm. Well, your cooking certainly matches that kind of price point.”

“Th-Thank you...”

“But I’m afraid this ends here. I’m cutting you off.”

“Wh-Wha—?” she floundered, completely at a loss for words. Only when Lostchile rose from the table and Harm retrieved his master’s coat did she find the strength to speak further. “I-I’m sorry, but what do you mean? What do you mean cutting me off? You said you believed in me, that you would lend as much as I needed!”

“It is true that I believed in you, but I only make investments that are sure to have returns. My own feelings about you have zero influence on what is clearly the most reasonable course of action. Don’t you fret, though. I think of myself as quite the kind, sensible man. You do not have to pay me back immediately. Of course, it goes without saying that I will be charging a significant amount of interest on the loan.”

“Wh-What?! But if you do tha—”

“No need to panic, Hemozch. You will be able to pay me back, I’m sure of that. You may have to go crawling back to that head chef of yours, but is that really so unacceptable? Are you too ashamed to show your face to her now that you’ve ignored all that she’s taught you?”

“Guh... hnnhgh,” Hezmoch bit her lip in a futile attempt to hold back the tears that were forming in the corners of her eyes. A sharp, metallic taste slowly filled her mouth.

“If you’d prefer something else,” Lostchile pressed on without the slightest concern for her feelings, “I know a place where an educated and beautiful girl such as yourself could make a great deal of money in just a single night. I can introduce you to that world quite easily.”

Hezmoch hung her head. *This was his plan from the beginning*, she had finally realized.

“To be honest with you, I care not what choice you make. Whether you run back to the warm bosom of chef Jeanne or take your rightful place in society as a night worker... Yes, both would be very entertaining. Although I must admit that the latter suits my tastes a tad bit more. Oh yes, when some sordid fellow inevitably rips your body asunder, I will be there to pick up the pieces.”

Lostchile leaned in close to the trembling girl and whispered creepily into her ear.

“You understand, I’ve always craved the chest of a first-rate chef. The sight of those dainty little hands of yours suspended below your severed head

floating inside a tank of formalin would surely be one to behold. Your poor, lifeless eyes gazing listlessly back at me and the rest of my collection... Yes. Rest assured, I will think of many more exquisite uses for you. I do hope you are looking forward to it as much as I am, Hezmoch."

Despite his discretion, some customers rose from their seats with righteous indignation.

"H-Hey! You can't talk to her like that!"

"I don't care if you're a noble or whatever. You're takin' it way too far!"

"This is none of your concern," Lostchile addressed the growing mob with a cold glare, "These are simply the consequences of her failure."

"B-But yo—"

"I what? Perhaps you all want to share in her debts?"

The customers all fell into an uncomfortable silence. Hezmoch's mind began to go numb. Nobody was coming to save her.

It only makes sense, she lamented. This is entirely my fault, after all. It's always been my fault. I never listened to what anyone else told me and just chased my own stupid dreams without even stopping to consider the consequences. She quietly collapsed to the floor, the sound of her entire world coming apart at the seams reverberating inside of her head.

A shout interrupted her doomed train of thought.

"Yeah, I'll take it! I'll take on her debt! Who's with me?!"

With great effort, she managed to raise her head.

"Yeah! We'll pay it back together!"

"I'll go let everyone in town know!"

Hezmoch didn't understand what was happening, but she wasn't the one wearing a shocked expression.

"What... are you saying?" Lostchile sputtered, a rare look of disbelief on his face.

"This is our town! You can't push us around, you highfalutin bastard!"

"Wh-Why... Everyone..." she mumbled, unadulterated confusion overtaking her very being.

"She came all the way from the capital to make food for us!"

"She's one of us!"

"We've always stuck together! Just like with Dennis, we look after our own! There's nothing we can't overcome if we work together!"

All of the customers were now on their feet, encircling the aristocrat. The tables had been completely turned on Lostchile.

“What is the meaning of this? Is this town filled with nothing but idiots?”
Hezmoch watched the scene unfold before her eyes in a daze.

No. You've got it all wrong. I came here because of my own warped pride. I used you all to feed my own ego. So why... The tears had finally begun rolling down her cheeks. I was stupid. Such a moron. Who cares about winning or losing? There are people who actually want to eat my cooking... They were right here in front of me the whole time, and I... I...

Her tears were now splashing onto the floor in earnest.

I still want to keep cooking... If you'll all forgive me... I still want to make food here, for all of you.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Looks like this fancy little place really came into its own while I was gone.”

Lostchile whirled to face the newcomer's voice, as did Hezmoch from her position on the floor.

Dennis was standing confidently in the entrance of the Diner of the Exiled. A wheezing employee stood with his hands on his knees next to him, trying to catch his breath.

“D-Dennis... why are you...”

“I went and got him, Boss!”

Dennis had a strong, earnest expression on his face.

“Dennis... Dennis Blacks!” Lostchile exclaimed with an awkward smile. “You're the main dish! I was certain that this girl would make for fine bait to lure you out. I was convinced that these imbeciles were about to muck everything up, but I am so truly pleased to see it all work out!”

“Huh? You wanted to see me?! Why didn't you just come down to my restaurant?! Didn't think you were that much of a wimp!”



“Finally, Dennis Blacks. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I've had an interest in you for a long, long time,” Lostchile said. As he spoke, he retrieved a small red comb from his coat and began to brush it through his raggedy hair without once breaking eye contact with Dennis.

“Just up and outing yourself as a stalker right off the bat. Okay,” said Dennis, returning his stare. His pose was reminiscent of the one he'd displayed at the Yujitt Academy, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders tensed up.

The previously raucous customers had once again fallen silent as they anxiously awaited the inevitable confrontation. It was obvious that Dennis had arrived at the diner fully prepared to fight. He had been informed that the tall, pale man who was always shadowing Lostchile was no mere butler, but the infamous Harm. Though he didn't need any prior knowledge to plainly see that Harm was a capable fighter.

It was almost as though Harm was hiding behind Lostchile, but no matter how much he tried to avoid drawing attention to himself, he could not hide from Dennis. Even Lostchile looked to be at a pretty high level; they were clearly a dangerous duo. Dennis couldn't be sure of their classes, or what skills they possessed, so he was keenly aware that a two-on-one battle could end badly for him.

"Please don't get the wrong idea," said the nobleman as he once again secreted away his comb. "I am not here to stalk you. I was simply discussing the issue of this girl's debts to me. Nothing illegal is happening here, far from it."

"Got it. Besides, Hezmoch's totally in the wrong here."

"Indeed. I was the one who funded this establishment out of my own pocket, and now have simply made the decision to withdraw said funding. What is so especially evil about that?"

A chorus of boos began erupting from the angry townsfolk yet again.

"What the hell you on about?!"

"You were plannin' to trap her the whole time!"

"You highfalutin bastard!"

Even though Lostchile was fully capable of dismissing such jeering, his eyebrows couldn't help but twitch a little. Dennis was thrown off by the seemingly uncharacteristic reaction.

"Well, you heard 'em."

"And what?" retorted Lostchile. "What was your brilliant plan after you made your grand entrance?"

"That girl over there is like a little sister to me, so it's only natural that I help with her debt, as well."

"Are you even aware of quite how large the sum total is? I doubt a small business owner such as yourself could even dream of making a dent in it."

"Then I'll beg chef Jeanne to help. If that's not enough, my buddy Earl in the capital will definitely spare some of his cash. And if that's *still* not enough, I will personally knock on every door in town and beg for money.

One way or another, we will come up with the cash.”

“What a wonderful bond you share with this farcical big brother of yours, Hezmoch.”

“D-Dennis... I,” Hezmoch stuttered in a voice so tiny that it was almost imperceptible. “I... don’t know what to do...”

“Hezmoch,” Dennis addressed her without taking his eyes off Lostchile. “Everyone makes mistakes. No one’s perfect, yeah? Each of us lives on in spite of our past screwups.”

“I thought... taking responsibility for all that... was the adult thing to do,” she managed to eke out between sobs.

“Wrong. Your real mistake wasn’t this, Hezmoch. It was,” Dennis halted to carefully consider his words. “It was keeping it to yourself. It was not letting anyone help you. It was tryna do everything on your own. You were so busy blaming yourself that you didn’t think of anyone other than yourself! You’ve gotta let people help you when you’re down! That’s what this town taught me.”

“Are there... still lessons you’re learning?”

“Learning is all I ever do,” he cracked a light smile, all the while continuing to face Lostchile. “All day, everyday.”

Excited cheers erupted from the crowd.

“Good one, Boss! That was so cool!”

Lostchile’s slow clapping soon joined the sounds of the rambunctious cheering filling the room.

“Marvellous. Simply marvellous. Scenes as beautiful as these are a tragically rare sight. What a valuable experience. Monetarily speaking, of course.”

“This isn’t some show for you to gawk at.”

“Now, I have a proposal for you, young Dennis,” Lostchile said with a crooked smile. “A proposal that will make everyone happy. If you accept, then not only will I write off the entirety of her debts, but you yourself would actually profit from it.”

“I doubt I’ll agree to anything coming out of your mouth, but I’ll hear you out.”

Lostchile’s eyes had a sinister gleam to them as he seized this opportunity. “You see, a certain detective informed me that your restaurant houses a rare magic doll.”

Dennis did not answer, opting instead to simply remove his hands from

his pockets and cross his arms across his chest.

“I want you to lend that magic doll to me. Only for a short while, and a short while is all it shall be. That is all you have to do for all this debt nonsense to be forgotten. It goes without saying that I will donate a large sum to your restaurant, no strings attached.”

“No thanks,” Dennis’s reply came instantly. “First of all, she’s not just an object to be passed around willy-nilly. She thinks and lives exactly like a human. Second of all, and most importantly, she’s one of my employees.”

“You clearly fail to grasp quite how valuable that doll truly is. It contains within it the capability to shake the very foundation of magical history as we know it, as well as to... overturn the rule of this entire nation.”

“Like I care, man. Sure, she’s a bit of a knucklehead, but she’s a hard worker, and the customers love her. She is one of my valued employees, and that’s that.”

“So you have no intention of handing her over?”

“Why don’t you try asking her about it yourself?”

“That would be a fruitless endeavor,” replied the nobleman with a click of his tongue. “Once that droll thing has chosen a master, it becomes incapable of defying said master’s orders. In case you’re not aware, that master is currently you. Therefore, it is imperative that you give the command.”

“You’re even dumber than you look. I am not her ‘master’ or whatever. This conversation’s over.”

“What a contradictory man. You’re full of surprises, and yet somehow exactly as I had expected. You’d be a worthwhile addition to my collection as well, you know.”

“Is your collection all you think about? Don’tcha know that avarice only leads to ruin?”

“Listen well, young Dennis. Has it crossed your mind why exactly I would go out of my way to be so cordial to you?” Lostchile tilted his head slightly and clenched his hand into a fist. “I could have ripped that thing from your clutches by force if I so desired.”

“You mean if you could.”

“I went out of my way to be as diplomatic as possible for your sake so that you could save face. I went out of my way, Dennis. I didn’t just ask; I didn’t demand; I offered an equitable trade. Yet now you’re throwing away your only opportunity to help your little sister here, all for the sake of that machine? Please understand, I truly only need her for but a few days.”

"You're quite the persistent one, aintcha?" Dennis sighed. "I'm not taking the offer. I'm not forfeiting one of my employees as collateral for a loan. And we'll probably pay you back sooner or later anyway. That's all there is to it."

"You underestimate me. I am not some incompetent bufoon like that recently fallen Joseph Workstat."

"Yeah, you sure do have your wits about you compared to him."

"I could turn this backwater town into a vacant lot if I fancied it," Lostchile said. He drew a large, protracted breath through his nose. "I could just simply take it. The only thing your obstinacy is accomplishing is a progressively dire outcome for you, not to mention for these hospitable townsfolk. This will end much worse than you can imagine. I have somewhat of a reputation for leaving behind charred bodies and pillaged homes in my wake when I am denied what is rightfully mine."

"You're confident, but you should know you're not the first to pull that kinda thing in this town. Other guy's in jail now, by the way."

"You will grow to rue your choice, young Dennis. I always get what I want, and I do not leave matters unfinished. I will turn this town into a smoldering aspect of hell."

Dennis continued to stare Lostchile down with a fiery intensity.

"It speaks volumes of my tolerance that I am, even now, willing to give you a chance to reconsider," continued the smarmy aristocrat. "I am ready to forgive all of the rudeness you have inflicted upon me, the great Yugaswell Lostchile. Please understand that you are not the only one who will suffer my wrath should you continue to defy me. Is it truly wise, is it truly *compassionate* to make this decision all by your lonesome? Are you content with having the blood of these innocents on your hands for the sake of your meagre pride? If you'd like to go and ask each of them personally to lay their lives at my feet for you, then I am happy to wait patiently here. Go and knock on every last door in this town, then return to me with your answer."

Dennis stayed silent, and his arms slowly made their way down to his sides. In a flash, he summoned a chef's knife from the air next to his hand, clutched it, and swiftly swung it down on Lostchile. Before anyone could process this sudden turn of events, a piercing clang rang out as the blade stopped just short of its target.

Harm had managed to rush out in front of Lostchile and stop the knife using only his fist. The two men struggled in a contest of strength for a long moment.

Just his fist? thought Dennis. Then he must be some kinda martial artist. He managed to negate the force of my swing somehow, too. Maybe I should make some distance with my ultimate skill?

“Whoa there, young Dennis. That was the gravest of mistakes.”

“You were askin’ for it.”

The crowd once again exploded into loud cheers as the men began to square off.

“Right on, Boss! Fuck him up!”

“Trying to act all big in our town... Who d’you think ya are?!”

“We chased off the Night Fog Battalion! What’re you compared to them?!”

“Right! This is our town! You ain’t getting your hoity-toity hands Olivia!”

“That sexy waitress belongs in the restaurant!”

“She shows off her panties sometimes!”

“I certainly didn’t expect you all to be this foolish,” Lostchile said incredulously, his brows furrowing even more.

“I don’t give a shit what you were expecting. I’ll beat you so bad that you’ll have no choice but to use our payments to pay off your hospital bills.”

“It looks like negotiations have broken down. You understand that this is a declaration of war, young Dennis?”

“I’d start figurin’ out the best place to buy yourself a wheelchair if I was you!”

Dennis had already alchemized a second knife and was focusing on unleashing his special level 100 skill. He was purposefully not moving at his usual speed, ensuring his attack would hit its proper target so as to avoid any collateral damage. Of course, Harm took advantage of this and disengaged from Dennis, taking Lostchile a good distance away from the irate chef. A strange, purplish light winked into existence between the two villains and slowly increased in power.

“You’ll come to regret this, young Dennis. I always get what I want, no exceptions. I will have that magic doll, and I will turn this backwater town into a pit of glass.”

“Yeah, yeah, you already said th—”

Dennis was interrupted by the faint light exploding into a full-size violet vortex, which swallowed Lostchile and Harm whole.

He can cast teleportation magic?

“I will...I keep my promises... and I promise... this town will... feel the wrath of Yutaswell Lostchile.”

His voice echoed as it grew more and more distant before disappearing altogether.

Dennis dashed outside, but saw no sign of the villains. It seems that they were capable of long-distance teleportation and were now impossible to find for.

Wonder what his level is.

Inside the Diner of the Exiled, Dennis was greeted by loud cheers.

“I knew you could do it, Boss! You sent him running with his tail ‘tween his legs.”

“That’ll show him for meddling with our town!”

What’re we gonna do if he wasn’t bluffing with all those threats? Dennis was too lost in thought to respond to the furor. Now wasn’t the time for coming up with solutions, however. He shelved his pondering for now and rushed over to Hezmoch, who was still a mess on the floor.

“Hezmoch, let’s close this place up for now. Come with me.”

“... Where?”

“My restaurant. We’ve gotta get everyone together and talk strategy.”

“Why... I—”

“You’re Hezmoch. Hezmoch Pebble. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders and skilled fingers on your hands. You’re prideful, a hard worker, and maybe a bit awkward. You’re my junior.”

“I...” Hezmoch looked like she wanted to say more, but was struggling to find the right words.

Dennis wasn’t too concerned by this and knelt down next to her. He then proceeded to pinch and pull on her soft cheeks.

“Ugh! Wh-What are you doing?!?”

“Hahaha, you always got so pissed when I did this.”

“P-Please don’t! Now’s not the time.”

“Listen up, Hezmoch. Like I said, everyone gets knocked down. What matters is that you get back up and keep moving forward.”

“...”

“You can get started by standing up. Or do you want me to carry you, eh?”

“I’ll stand...”

“That’s the spirit. Now then, looks like we’ve got one helluva situation on

our hands.”



A few years ago, in the capital.

Dennis and Hezmoch moved through a dark throughway in the middle of the night.

“Good grief, I never thought having a junior would be this much trouble,” he said.

“Please let me down.”

“Not happening,” came his immediate reply as he carried her through the dusky city.

“What were you thinking, picking a fight with those punks? What would’ve happened if I hadn’t shown up?”

“It was no big deal. They were bothering some lady, and I told them to stop, that’s all.”

“I took you for the more cool, cynical type. Makes me happy to see you do this kinda thing, too.”

“... What? Helping those in need is only natural.”

“Hahaha, I like the way you think. I’m gonna grab some food when we get back. How about you?”

“... I’ll have some, as well.”

Hezmoch gently poked at the wound on her forehead as Dennis carried her forward.

I can’t tell him.

She couldn’t tell him that she’d only done such a thing because she was trying to be like him.



This is a tale from a long, long time ago, set once again in the capital.

The twilight was nearing its end, and the red sun was giving way to the haunting colors of night. A boy named Yujitt gripped a paper bag in his hand as he snuck around his own home, searching for a quiet way in.

The crystal blue headed boy crept slowly through the house and into the living room. Just as he took a seat, the maid with the short-cropped blonde hair spotted him. She had been dutifully awaiting his return. With her master

now home, she practically jumped and giddily skipped over to him.

“Master Yujitt! Please allow me to prostrate myself and apologize profusely for my careless destruction of your prized research ma—”

“N-No, it’s fine, Olivia. It’s fine. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Really?! Then will you allow me to continue serving you?!”

“Y-Yeah... that’s fine.”

“I’m so relieved. I have been running endless simulations about the picture-perfect method which would allow me to suitably atone for the calamitous sin that I had committed. I concluded that the best course of action would be to produce an abundance of fried rice. I am aware of your undying love for said dish, hence I made lots in anticipation of your return!”

“Your fried rice is always terrible, though...”

“Please inform me of your thoughts! I, Olivia, spent countless simulated eons deliberating between creating fried rice and committing suicide. As you can see, I have decided upon the fried rice!”

“It was fried rice or suicide?! Are you right in the head?!” he exclaimed. At his wits end from his creation’s unpredictable thought processes, Yujitt simply thrust his paper bag toward the maid.

“Hm? What is this?”

“I, um... I crossed the line the other day. I’m sorry.”

Olivia peeked into the bag and was surprised to find a blue crystal ring inside.

“Oh my! This is stunning! This crystal is almost the same color as your hair! What is it called? It is truly gorgeous!”

“H-Hahahaha! There! You’re happy! Now forgive me, Olivia!”

“Thank you so much, Master! I’m so overjoyed!”

“Waagh! Don’t hug me, Olivia! You’re too damn strong!”

“Please let me serve you forever and ever, Master!”



Back in the present day, a solitary carriage rattled toward the main gate of town in the dead of night.

“We have arrived, my lady.”

The carriage carried all the hallmarks of an upscale capital business. The driver hopped off his box seat and opened the passenger door with the utmost politeness.

“Thank you. I paid you in advance, I believe?”

A woman with impeccable posture and flowing black hair emerged from the carriage. She appeared rather tall in her fashionable blue coat.

“I’m sorry, but do you mind if I ask what business you have in a nowhere town such as this?”

“I’ve got some idiot pupils I need to sort out. It’s a long story.”

“Do you require assistance in gathering information? I am acquainted with an old man who works as a carriage driver here. I’m sure I could get you in touch with him.”

“That would be helpful, thank you. Take care on your way back.”

“I’ll be seeing you,” said the man as he climbed back into the driver’s seat. “I bid you good luck, Jeanne Blacks.”

Head chef Jeanne Blacks took some time to see off the carriage before she finally turned around and took in the town’s surroundings. The main gate itself was in good shape, but the walls surrounding it were worn down and in dire need of repairs. They offered the bare minimum of protection from the beasts and bandits calling a nearby dungeon their home.

Jeanne’s ears twitched at the clip-clopping sounds rapidly approaching the town from the direction she herself had come from.

“Oh, what’s this? What business would anyone have here on a night like this?”

Two women sat atop the horse. The one holding the reins was clad in red armor that glistened even in the moonlight. She and her horse progressively slowed down as they approached, eventually coming to a near stop next to Jeanne.

“Um, Miss Kately?”

“What’s up, Bethel?”

“You keep saying things like ‘my Dennis.’ Uhm, do you two have... *that...* kind of relationship?”

“Oh no! I’ve been busted! You’re spot on, though! It’s exactly like that!”

“H-Haha... So that’s how it is...”

“Well it’s pretty much like that. When you really think about it, it’s like that.”

“I wouldn’t expect that kinda thing from the Boss.”

“Hahahaha! The Crimson Blade Storm Kately and Professor Bethel, on the scene! Now how’s about we get ourselves some Hamburg steak?!”



Chapter Seven

Reconciliation Before the Decisive Battle

This is a story from a long, long time ago.

It's a tale from a time before a boy named Yujitt had returned home with his peace offering. A girl named Nachura was accompanying him, irately shielding her eyes from the dazzling, late-afternoon sun.

"Isn't that cruel?" she asked.

"I don't know," came his solemn reply.

"Humans won't ever change, no matter how many hundreds or even thousands of years pass."

"I think they may. A day might soon arrive where beasts and even machines will be able to live in harmony and mutual respect."

"I can't see that happening."

"You try so hard to wear the facade of an airheaded klutz, but in truth, you're actually quite the realist, aren't you?" asked Yujitt, eliciting a broad smile from his companion.

A particularly tall building fractured the sun's rays into bizarre shadows and refractions which helped to render his already strange hair an even more unusual color.

"There may be thousands of years until then but... things will surely get better, Nachura."

"I wonder about that."

"Humanity is prone to making mistakes, but even now we are moving toward a better world day after day."

"I think we're going to need to do more than simply move, though..."

"Aren't Olivia and I a defining example? Look at us, we serve as the ideal microcosm. We had a major misunderstanding, but we are now going to mend the situation. That is a world in and of itself, albeit the smallest possible one imaginable. If the two of us can settle things, then there's no reason why three can't. If three could, then so could a larger group. A country, the entire world, all of it operates on the same principles. After all, if lone individuals can reconcile, then why can't groups of individuals do the same?"

"Everyone wants different things, Yujitt. We all push and pull in different directions; that's what we are at our core. We're just as likely to murder each

other as we are to love each other.”

“That’s certainly how we’ve been until now... and it may likely stay that way,” he said quietly. He tightened his grip on the paper bag he was holding, suddenly doubting if Olivia would truly forgive him. “But I maintain my optimism. Some day, in some far off, distant future... change will come. Blunders are inevitable. We will hurt each other, then hurt each other again, but then we will make up proper. We will regret our actions and climb back to our feet over and over again until we finally better ourselves.”

“And exactly how far off do you think all that is?”

“I have no idea.”

“It’s irresponsible to speak like that, you know.”

“I do.”

This is a fable from a long, long time ago.

And this is the point where this tale ends... for now.



“And that’s basically it, Boss!” exclaimed Bethel. “But anyways! Yeah! Here we are!”

Dennis stared beyond her, mouth half-agape, at the two individuals who stood at her back.

“Hold up.”

“Huh? What’s up, Boss?”

“Right, I get why you’re here, Bethel... but what about those two?”

“Oh, them? Hmm...”

“I rode her with Bethel!” announced Katey.

“And I came here to check up on Hezmoch. I met these two along the way, so we elected to travel together,” added Jeanne.

“Feels like Satan and his spawn both decided to pay my restaurant a visit,” Dennis mumbled in a defeated tone as he held his head in his hands.

“Um, Boss? That magic doll... Olivia, was it? Can I get a look at her real quick?”

“Oh right. That’s why you’re here, after all. Oliviaaa! Get down here!”

“Dennis!” exclaimed Jeanne. “I thought I taught you better than this!

Why is your workspace such a pigsty?! Where did you learn to leave so much useless kitchenware lying around?!”

“C-Can it, you old hag! Who let you into my kitchen in the first place?!”

And they've got their uses... sometimes!"

"Deenniisss!" Katey joined in on the cacophony. "I want a Hamburg steaaak!"

"I'll whip one up later! And quit getting all comfortable!"

"Did you request my presence, Master?!" exclaimed Olivia, who had suddenly appeared at Dennis's side. "Perhaps there are customers to serve?!"

"No, Olivia! J-Just sit down over there!"

Meanwhile, Hezmoch had stuffed herself into a corner as far away from the commotion as she could. She was practically curled up into a ball and was rocking back and forth.

"Why... Why is she here?!" she cried to no one in particular.

"Hezmoooooch?!"

Hezmoch visibly jolted when she heard her name being shouted. She whirled around and found herself face-to-face with Jeanne, who wore an ill-intentioned smirk.

"So even after all of that obnoxious grandstanding, you still failed?!"

"Y-Yes..."

"C'mere a second, Hezmoch."

"Dennis! Save me! I'm too young to die!"



Dennis failed to step in before Jeanne dragged Hezmoch off to who knows where.

"Ummm... So this is... She's... Are you sure she's the real deal?" asked Bethel.

"I am, indeed. I am a maid-model magic doll of the name Olivia."

"Your skin is beautiful... Jealous."

"I am honored by your kind words! I am much obliged!"

Katey and Bethel became engaged in an impassioned discussion as Dennis looked on.

"Olivia, do the thing," he commanded.

"Proceeding to do the thing, Master," Olivia stated with a resolute nod.

Her left arm suddenly whirred to life. It completed one full revolution, then the back of her hand and fingers burst open with a metallic crunch. As expected, the inside was not made of flesh and tissue, but rather consisted of countless cogs and gears all turning and grinding in order to maintain an

innumerable amount of simultaneous complex processes. In addition to the inhuman constructions, rods and other pieces analogous to true human anatomy were littered throughout. In place of joints were gemstones shining with an odd gleam.

“Whoa... She’s the real deal. Those are genuine memory stones.”

“Yep, I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“I am once again honored by your gracious compliments! I am truly thankful!”

“Is that a ring?” Katey noticed. “What’s up with that?”

At once, all eyes honed in on Olivia’s hand. A ring affixed with an azure gem wrapped around the metal support rod that corresponded with her ring finger. It seemed to be the only one of its kind on her body.

“Oh,” said Olivia quietly. She was clearly as perplexed as everyone else was. “I myself must wonder... Why do I possess such a ring?”



“I’ll cut to the chase, Boss,” started Bethel. “This here Olivia is a magic doll made by none other than the King of Contraptions himself, Yujitt. It don’t really feel like we’ve got a legendary, nah, a proper *mythical* magical artefact right in front of us, but she ain’t anything but that.”

“Who in the world is this ‘Yujitt’ guy?” sniffed Dennis. “He some kinda big deal or something?”

“A big deal doesn’t even begin to describe it, Boss,” replied Bethel. She spread her arms out in a grandiose gesture. “In the age where humanity still struggled to conjure up a proper understanding of magic, he essentially managed to codify the entire magic system all on his own! Each and every school of magic could even trace their roots back to him. He is unquestionably the greatest mage in recorded history. Other great kings such as the man who was the creator of skills, Yungfrey the First King, and the one who discovered all the world’s dungeons with a Fenrir by her side, Nachura the Queen of Adventurers, all pale in comparison to Yujitt.”

“Wow.”

“Of course, there are some researchers who doubt his very existence. You see, his achievements are simply too unrealistic for many. Nowadays, the most commonly held belief is that while there’s a good chance he did exist, all he truly did was make advancements in the fields of metal or stone

manipulation magic. Everything else is somewhat up in the air. And that's why we call him the King of Contraptions, or simply a Machinist!"

"Huh. Is this true, Olivia?"

"That name instills a strange nostalgia in my bosom... However, my memory banks contain no information about this particular matter."

"Hey, is her possible status as a legendary-mythical-super-old magic item all that important right now?" asked Jeanne, who had casually made her return alone.

"Where's Hezmoch?" asked Dennis.

"Raked her over the coals, then sent her packing. She'll get over it by tomorrow, I'm sure."

"Anyways, I agree with Jeanne. We can put this matter on the back burner for now," interjected Katey. "Right now, we've gotta figure out how to stop Lostchile. He made a lot of awful threats, didn't he?"

"Yep. Makes my blood boil too much to repeat 'em," said Dennis in a muted rage.

"Mhm. He probably wasn't bluffing either, so we gotta stay on our toes."

"Is he really as dangerous as he's made himself out to be?"

"Seems more like a forgettable weirdo to me. Still, I blame myself," said Jeanne with a bitter smile. "I should've put my foot down when I heard Hezmoch was in talks with him. I thought she'd just end up using the opportunity to pay off her student loans or whatever, but well... we all know how that turned out. Hence my presence here."

"I don't think you should blame yourself too much, Miss Jeanne," said Katey. "Even if Hezmoch hadn't gotten involved, he surely would've come up with some other nefarious plan. Hell, the fact that you got dragged into this is more a good thing, broadly speaking."

"I don't really consider myself a fighter, though," said Jeanne quietly.

"Does he have a private army or something?" asked Dennis.

"He's a high-ranking aristocrat, but he doesn't exactly have the kind of manpower needed to wipe a whole town off the map," Katey answered with a quick shake of her head. "And say he was insane enough to try raising an army against the town; it would be viewed as a declaration of war on the monarchy or a coup d'etat at the very least. Don't get me wrong, he's crazy, but he's not *that* crazy."

"So that means he's plannin' something else," said Dennis.

"I'd imagine something way out of left field."

“What do you mean?”

The door to the restaurant flung open with a bang to reveal Green and Porobo. Dennis stood, waiting for them to speak.

“Well?” he finally said.

“Hehehe... Come out and see for yourself,” Green said along with his trademark chuckle. “They’re all raring to go, hehehe.”

Everyone made their way outside and met with what seemed like nearly the entire town on their front step. Each citizen was decked out in makeshift armor and wielded all manner of weaponry. Some held swords and cleavers while others were armed with the pointiest farming tool they could find. They were all shouting in unison, and familiar-sounding barks periodically rang through the crowd.

“Hey, Boss! We heard you’re going to war with a noble!” one of the throng shouted.

“Course we’d come help! We’re just as pissed off as you are!”

“The old carriage driver!” exclaimed Dennis. “Jewelry store guy! And Porobo, you brought that dog we gave you! Oh, the old lady from the smithy! And everyone else! Can’t believe y’all actually showed up for this!”



“So that’s the long and short of it. Because of us, you guys are all in kind of a very, *very* dangerous situation.”

The ructious townspeople listened intently to Dennis’s explanation. Once he was finished, they once again erupted into a chorus of loud cheers.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it, Boss! We won’t let our sexy waitress be snatched away by no nobleman!”

“Hear, hear! We’re not handing over our sexy waitress to anyone!”

“We’ve done it before, we’ll do it again! Let’s mess this noble guy up! For our sexy waitress!”

“Good thing you’re so sexy, eh Olivia?”

“I simply cannot thank you all enough for all you are doing for my sake!” exclaimed Olivia. If it weren’t for her inherently stoic nature, one would think she was on the verge of tears. “Thank you! I am forever in your debt!”

Katey and Jeanne exchanged ominous smiles as they watched the scene unfold from where they were seated.

““Done it before,’ eh?”

“This is on a whole ‘nother level compared to what happened with that idiot Joseph...”



Lostchile and Harm were hidden away in the nobleman’s mansion, solemnly discussing their upcoming plans.

“I have contacted Heath and the other tribunes,” said Harm.

“What did they say?”

“Do as you please.”

“Splendid. Now we have essentially been granted royal approbation.”

“There was one more thing,” Harm cut in. He paused for a moment before continuing, “Make sure you are able to finish the job. I will be sure to contribute in any way I can. I am disappointed that I will be not be present to witness the show myself, but I do look forward to the outcome.”

“That is quite like him. I suppose he’s too preoccupied meddling with the royal succession to attend these proceedings, isn’t he?”

“That seems to be the case, yes. I contacted his right-hand man, Fiorenza; however, I have yet to hear anything back.”

“Hahaha, pay it no heed. He can do as he likes, just as long as this little alliance we have fostered doesn’t fall to ruin.”

“Sir, you promised to raze that town to the ground, but... is that truly necessary?” asked Harm.

“Of course it is. We must pull the weeds out by the root. I have no intentions of breaking my promise, but I will not allow myself to devolve into foolish villainy. I shall be quick and thorough in my exorbitance. Does that displease you, Harm?”

“No, it does not. I apologize, I have overstepped my bounds.”

“It is nothing to fret over, Harm. I like you. Besides, I view this as a mental health issue above all. I do not take kindly to being the laughing stock of some dirty pile of yokels. I am capable of remaining composed in the moment, but after the fact, I may only find peace if I expunge those responsible.”

“How are our preparations proceeding?”

“They are already complete. I would not have visited that place if everything had not been properly planned out,” Lostchile replied as he sunk deeper into his chair. “Now, let the genocide begin.”



The next day, at the Diner of the Exiled. A large sign sat out front, indicating that the place was closed for business.

The spacious main hall was vacant except for a lone, pink-haired girl. She sat at an empty table and gazed around at the barren and silent building that had once been her restaurant. Its current desolate state was a stark contrast to the energy and fervor that had filled it just a few days prior. The silence felt deafening, and she felt it prickle her skin.

“... Boss?”

Hezmoch nearly fell out of her chair at the unexpected voice from right behind her.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, grasping her chest. “You scared me half to death.”

Her former accountant merely smiled in response.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “This place is done. If you’re worried about severance pay, don’t be. It wasn’t much, but everyone should already have been properly compensated.”

“Oh no, it’s not that, Boss. Are you going to return to the capital?”

“I can’t go back just yet. I’m responsible for this whole mess, after all. If Lostchile isn’t bluffing, then it’s only right that I lay my life on the line and fight.”

“Um, Boss?” said the accountant as he took a seat at Hezmoch’s table.

“Yeah?”

“I like you a lot, and, um... I like to think that I know your good traits by now. For example, how diligent you are, how much you value what is right in the world, or how you know when to quit.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

The accountant smiled warmly. “But one of your not so positive traits is that you always try to tackle everything all at once.”

“All at once?”

The accountant nodded before elaborating, “We probably can’t balance our books or recover from this slump all at once.”

“...”

“We have to take it one step at a time, Boss,” he said. He wore a serious expression that wasn’t particularly matching the tone in his voice.

Hezmoch dropped her gaze down to her hands for a brief moment before glancing back up at the accountant.

“You certainly talk big,” she finally muttered.

“I’m sorry—”

“But I’ll take your advice. If I’d listened to you in the first place, maybe all of this could have been avoided.” She opened her mouth to say something else, but stopped. “If this restaurant opens again someday... I hope I can count on you,” she said instead.

“Of course, I’ll be there,” said the accountant, a smile blooming on his face like a flower during springtime.



An electric atmosphere was coursing through the Outcast’s Restaurant. The building was brimming with townsfolk who were all excitedly discussing what roles each of them would play in the upcoming operation.

“Hehehe... We’ll be keeping watch at night, no problem,” chortled Green, who sat at a table with one of his underlings.

“That’s an important role,” his flunky replied, “You’re our first line of defense, hehehe...”

In the meantime, Bibia was joined at his table by the two rare-haired mage girls.

“I’m taking the rear guard!”

“Me too! What about you, Bibia?”

“Me? I will likely elect to remain out of the way. Although I will of course remain in contact with both Entmori and Sestapich, so perhaps that is what my contribution will be...”

Dennis was standing at his usual spot behind the counter. Katey sat just across from him, hungrily digging into a Hamburg steak.

“I’ve got a pretty good feeling about this,” he remarked.

“Not like you to be optimistic. Has all that time away from the battlefield made you soft or something?” she asked in between mouthfuls.

“Just saying I hope it goes well.”

“I think some people are bound to die,” Katey stated matter-of-factly before taking another sizable bite.

Dennis didn’t reply.

Katey chewed noisily and gulped down her bite before glancing sideways at the road outside the restaurant.

“Not like we can do much about it,” she repeated her sentiment.

“I won’t let anyone die.”

“You can try all you want, but that’s just how these things play out.”

Dennis and Katey locked eyes as the happy voices of the regulars filled the quaint restaurant.

When night finally fell, Porobo joined Green and his lackey at a vantage point. The three of them each took turns keeping watch with a pair of binoculars. The underling was settled cozily under a blanket and snoring gently as the other two men passed the time chatting quietly.

“Haaa, looks like they’re not coming, eh Porobo? Hehehe...”

“Hehehe,” Porobo had found himself mirroring his new buddy’s manner of speech. “If it was me, I’d wait ‘til everyone let their guard down, then *wham!*!”

“Hehehe. By the way, can I ask you something?”

“Hehehe... What is it?”

“You’re like a master tradesman, right? Hehehe... Why are you still knocking around here? Was jus’ wondering...”

“Hehehe... Well, the thing about that is...”

Porobo began to regale Green with a tale of a time long past. A tale from when Porobo was still quite youthful and was just starting out in the capital. A tale from an age before he had even a single roll of fat on his now-rotund belly. One fateful day, he met a slave girl on a street somewhere...

A strange noise brought an end to his reminiscing.

“Hehehe... Hm? What was that?” asked Green.

“Hand me those binoculars.”

As Porobo peered through the binoculars, he was keenly aware of the sound growing louder. It was a very bizarre sound, almost as though a large swath of something was ploughing through a field somewhere off in the distance.

“What in the hell is that?!?” he cried out.

“Hehehe, what’s up?!?” came Green’s nervous reply.

“Ring the bell! They’re here! The enemy’s arrived!”

“Hehe, they’re here? Who is?!?”

“Take a look for yourself!”

Green pawed at the binoculars and stared at the direction Porobo had indicated. There they were, on the other side of the town’s main gate.

“Th-That’s...” he croaked weakly.



“This is how it all happened,” began Lostchile. He stood with his hands behind his back, calmly staring at the far off moonlit town. His surroundings reeked of unwashed beasts, and of blood.

“A large-scale black market transaction of strange and wonderful beasts was made. The greedy seller elected to transport his wares to the buyer while the moon was high overhead. However, the men who he had contracted to guard the caravan were rife with inexperience and did not keep as close an eye on the cages as they should have.”

At his feet was a litany of bodies. The grey moonlight reflected dimly off of their still-warm blood. They were the corpses of thugs he’d rounded up from the capital. They had brought with them many horses, carriages, and cages. Cages which were now void of their former occupants.

None of the men had expected the fate that awaited them. They were of a low level, so it was only natural that they were kept in the dark about the scope of the operation they were hired for, yet they were Lostchile’s hirees nonetheless. Now they were nothing more than piles of meat and bone who had met their end at their master’s hand.

“You understand, they skimped on the cages. The old, rusty, *defective* cages that they had purchased failed, and as a result, every member of the convoy perished. How very unfortunate. Though I suppose it *is* quite abnormal that not one cage remained closed,” he said with a greasy little laugh. “Well, these things happen, do they not? The real tragedy of it all is that the caravan just so happened to be passing by a nearby small, defenseless, and unknown town right in the middle of nowhere.”

Lostchile plopped himself down on top of one of the shredded bodies and gleefully watched as a horde of starved beasts barreled toward the unsuspecting town.

“The emaciated beasts assaulted the town, naturally. All of the townsfolk were slaughtered and eaten alive. In but a single tragic night, the town became a ghastly mirror of hell itself.”

“Master Lostchile, a question.”

“What is it, Harm?”

“You have elected to use the entirety of your collection of beasts for this operation. We will likely be unable to reacquire most, if not all of them. Is that okay with you?”

“Of course! This is my master plan, after all,” he said with a chuckle. A broad smile spread on his lips as he explained, “After this tragic accident, I expect the Royal Authorities will wish to crack down on the black market sales of mythical beasts. Someone will surely have to take the reins, so to speak. A noble will be selected to govern the crackdown. In fact, it will be *the* noble who filled the void left behind by the fallen Worstat family. The one recognized as the country’s leading aristocrat. Certainly the hopes of the entire population will be placed upon him.”

“In other words...”

“Yes. The head of the Lostchile family, Yugaswell Lostchile. Scilicet me.”

“I see. I expect that you intend to leverage your control over the legal elements as an effort to advance the black market that much more, correct?”

“Hahaha... In order to gain something, one must always be prepared to make sacrifices. Winners are able to wager everything they possess in an effort to procure an even greater prize.”

“I don’t geetttt ittttt,” squeaked a high pitched voice from the back of one of the carriages.

“Hahaha... Come now, Candy,” said Lostchile. It didn’t take much more than a glance at her to realize that she was bored out of her mind. “Let us join the assault, as well. I expect that some in the town may just be strong enough to cause us issues, and it is our duty to rid ourselves of such nuisances.”

“What about the magic doll?”

“Steal it. I care not if you break it.”

“And the townspeople?”

“Kill them all. Let us make this a night that will live long in the memory of all. This will be considered a turning point in history itself! Remember, the world is divided into those who take, and those who are taken from! Those who kill, and those who are killed! The strong and the weak! We are the strong! Our existence is predicated upon domination and slaughter! Our very beings are defined by blood and agonized screams! Hahahahahaha!!!”

Lostchile’s maniacal laughter rang out through the chilly, starry night.

Those who take, and those who protect. Thus began the long, anguished night. Yet, hope glimmered some ways away from the soon-to-be battlefield. A shadow darted through the woods, its eyes fixed on the town.

An outcast.

“...”

Chapter Eight

The Battle in the Night

The mythical beasts swarmed the area just outside the front gate of the town. Fueled by ravenous hunger, they came across more as an unstoppable, writhing mass bashing itself against whatever it could find rather than a collection of individual monsters.

These heinous creatures had been confined to cruelly small cages for nearly the entirety of their lifespans, and they were eager to exact revenge and gorge themselves on the humans they deemed to be responsible. Pure instinct drove them to barrel toward anything that bore even the slightest resemblance to their so-called enemies.

The shabby walls of the town were more or less capable of repelling petty bandits and the typical wildlife of the area, but they presented nothing more than a slight inconvenience to these ferocious beasts. A group of deer-like beasts dug their hooves into the dirt, stomping and snorting in a murderous display of rage. Their bodies were too muscular, their muscles wound too tight, and their glistening red eyes dispelled any remaining notion that these were mere deer.

All at once, they galloped toward the walls, using their supernatural muscles to bound effortlessly over them. Just as they reached the peak of their arcs, they were suddenly blown violently back down to the ground.

"Enforcement: Kick out any and all undesirable customers!"

A certain chef shouted out the name of his ultimate skill as he leapt from a nearby rooftop to confront the oncoming attack. In but a single swing of his carving knife, the entirety of that horde of beasts was vanquished. However, his breath caught in his throat as he gazed over the impromptu battlefield. There must have been over a hundred beasts roaming the dark of night, and the ones he had seemingly incapacitated were already struggling back to their feet.

"... Shit, this is bad!"

"It most certainly is, young Dennis. Here I am, as promised."

Dennis was brandishing his knife in the direction of the unexpected voice before his brain had even finished processing the greeting. The purple swarm of bats and fog that emerged next to Dennis was much swifter and had already floated away by the time he had reacted. Once it was at a safe enough

distance away, it began to condense into a more solid shape, eventually revealing the upper body of Lostchile.

"Your magic's just as ugly as you are!" mocked Dennis.

"My breathtaking beauty is of no concern to me at this moment. My one and only concern is ensuring you remain here so that you are unable to meddle elsewhere."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but that ain't gonna happen! I'll make quick work of you."





Meanwhile, there was a commotion near the plaza located in the center of town.

"Wait, wait, wait! Where is that idiot Dennis?! He better not have gotten held up somewhere! And why the hell are there so many of these things?!"

Katey stood at the front of the rear guard, the very last line of defense between the marauding monsters and the defenseless civilians who'd already locked themselves away in their homes. It was the innumerable mass of monsters that had brought about this outburst.

"What do we do, Miss Katey?!"

"We're in a bad spot for a defensive line here! Rear guard! Fall into tight formation, and retreat! I'll do my best to stall them here! Bethel, Ponytail and Twintails, and anyone else who can fight! Listen up!"

"Yes!"

"H-Here!"

"Yeah!"

"Protect them as they retreat! Once they're far enough away, meet up with Jeanne! She's in charge of the refugee area. If necessary, prioritize repelling incursions! This is do or die!"

"What if they push us back to the refugee area?!" asked an adventurer, his hands trembling nearly as much as his voice.

"If they make it that far, it's game over! We cannot let that happen!"

"You gotta be kidding!"

"Get moving! That's an order from the Crimson Bladestorm!" Katey shouted. She ensured that the retreat had begun in earnest before she turned around, unsheathed two blades, and glared defiantly at the fast-approaching horde. A nervous sigh escaped her mouth, and she began mumbling to herself, "This isn't gonna be fun... I think skills and some buffs like Auto-Evasion, The Early Bird Gets the Worm, Definite Double, and Two Attacks, One Kill should do the trick."



The Adventurer's Guild was nestled safely in the northernmost part of town, and all its staff were currently busying themselves evaluating the

situation and coming up with viable strategies. Jeanne sat directly outside the building in a folding chair, brewing some tea. She elegantly poured it into a small cup and took a sip. Her gaze was cold and steely as she stared toward the raging battlefield on the other side of the town.

"Things aren't looking good out there," she said.

"Um, would it not perhaps be pertinent for us to provide at least some semblance of assistance to the defending parties?" asked Olivia. She stood next to Jeanne, looking terribly worried.

"No," said Jeanne as she crossed her long legs, "We're staying here and providing support as per the plan."

Panicked voices arose from near to where they were. A group of townsfolk who were supposed to have been in charge of managing the refugees in different parts of town had suddenly appeared at the guild, clearly struggling to catch their breath.

"Aren't you guys supposed to be monitoring the east?!" exclaimed Jeanne. "What the hell are you doing here?! You ditched your posts, didn't you?!"

"But! But I..."

"If you aren't there monitoring the situation, how are people supposed to know where it's safe to evacuate to?!"

"Is something the matter?!" Olivia came running over to the man in charge of the evacuation procedures. He was holding another man by the scruff of his neck, but still turned to acknowledge her.

"The evacuation of the eastern sector isn't over!" he shouted, "There are still people out there!"

"D-Do you know how many?!"

"Not yet! We haven't checked the register! Bibia! How many are left?!"

Bibia was busy rushing around the packed waiting room of the guild, a clipboard tightly gripped in his hands. He raised his voice to make himself audible over the clamor.

"I do not yet know!" he yelled, "Are the blacksmith couple present?! Please raise your hands if you are! Ah, yes, thank goodness! Next, where is the jeweler's son?!"

Many other people joined Bibia in scurrying about, performing the exact same duties. There was yet another throng of noncombatants waiting outside the guild's doors, as well.

"Curses! This is chaos!" spat the man in charge of evacuations.

"I will go!" Olivia said to Jeanne.

"To the eastern sector?"

"Yes! I am a capable combatant!"

"You familiar with the lay of the land here? I heard you haven't been here for long."

"I... I think it will be fine! No! I am certain it will!"

Olivia's words did not inspire much confidence. Atrielle—who had apparently been shadowing Olivia this whole time—reached up and tugged the hem of the maid's skirt.

"Mistress Atrielle?"

"I'm coming."

"But—"

"We can't spare more people. Those without assigned duties must find something to do. Those who want to work have to work. We can't argue. We can't wait. We can only act. I walk through this town every day. I have it perfectly memorized. Let's go together, Olivia," said the young waitress. She stacked short sentences one on top of the other until she had delivered what was essentially a diatribe for her.

Olivia shot Jeanne a troubled look. Jeanne simply shrugged in turn and readjusted her position in the chair.

"Do whatever you want," she said, "Here might not exactly be the safest of places, after all."

"U-Understood! We will conduct reconnaissance operations throughout the eastern sector!" said Olivia as Atrielle clambered onto her back.

"Okay, next is Atri—Wait, where's Atrielle?!" exclaimed Bibia, "She was just here! And where has Olivia disappeared to?!" The poor mage boy had heard none of the earlier discussion. He was left standing in the middle of the waiting hall, completely dumbfounded.



The rear guard was comprised of adventurers new and old. Those who had retired to a comfortable life in the town, and those who had been eagerly awaiting their next foray into a dungeon marched side by side northward up the main street. They were dutifully following Katey's orders to fall back toward the refugee area. They were flanked by Bethel and the two mage girls, who were running alongside and keeping a watchful eye out for any danger.

“Uhh, I didn’t think it was gonna be like this! Like, no one told me it was gonna be like this!” exclaimed the twintail-haired mage.

“This is bad, right?!?” replied the one with the ponytail. “I can’t imagine this was on the menu for today!”

“If you’ve got time to complain, you’ve got time to run!” shouted Bethel.

“I am running, okay?!?”

As they were bickering, something briefly blocked out the moonlight above them.

“Wha—? Ah! It’s them! Up on the roof!”

“Wh-What?! What’s up?!?”

“Ponytail!”

“What, Twintail?!?”

“Let’s go! It’s them! Sorry but we’ve gotta, like, deal with this real quick!”

“Wha—?!”

“Wait a sec, you two! Agh! Fine, I’m coming too!”

A petite figure in a brown jacket and signature tweed cap raced nimbly along the rooftops. She squatted down at the edge of the roof that used to house the Night Fog Battalion’s headquarters and surveyed the carnage.

“Hmmm... Guess that’s where the refugees are hiding...”

Candy stuck her tongue out and poked its tip with her thumb, seemingly lost in thought.

“Thooo... Harm’s gonnah ‘andle dat part... Geth I’ll take deeze retreatin’ guyth ‘ere...”

A shuffling sound behind the little detective caused her to turn around and quickly assume a fighting stance. Stood in front of her were the two mage girls, challenging her. Bethel appeared behind them just moments later.

“Found you, you tweed bitch!”

“Got you! What do you think you’re doing?!?”

“Uh...” said Bethel. “Who’s this?”

“That’s the girl who took out Olivia! She’s also my love rival!”

“Oh?” said Candy as she slowly rose from her crouched position, “Are you trying to start something? With me?”

“We’re gonna whoop your ass, you damn homewrecker! And get even for Olivia, obviously! Let’s get her, guys!”

“Yeah! No way she can take all three of us at once!”

“Three puny adventurers? Um... I used to be the head of intelligence-

gathering for an order of knights, so... Hmm. What should I do? Guess I'll start by massacring these three dorks. Candy the Outcast Detective never refuses a fight! That's my motto!"

"Uh... We're the rear guard. *Just* the rear guard, sooo..."



Olivia and Atrielle arrived in the eastern part of the town.

"Olivia, turn right," dictated Atrielle, still holding onto Olivia's back.

"Here?! Hello?! Is anyone present?!" shouted a panicked Olivia. "Is there anyone who has yet to vacate this area?!"

Though the center of town was beginning to become overrun by the beasts, the eastern sector seemed relatively calm. Katey and her rear guard had been fairly successful in maneuvering the creatures away from innocent civilians. Since the beasts were instinctually seeking out large gatherings of people, they inadvertently charged through the most deserted parts of town in the center.

The two waitresses of the Outcast's Restaurant used this to their advantage as they conducted their search-and-rescue operation. Atrielle made for the perfect guide to Olivia, whose inhuman strength and stamina allowed her to easily cover large swathes of the area. The maid poked her head into a building that had been boarded up in preparation for the oncoming invasion.

"Olivia?! What's happening?!" squeaked a scared voice from within, "The evacuation people never showed up..."

"Everybody has convened at the Adventurer's Guild in the north," replied Olivia.

"But we were meant to have a guide..."

"They have already fled the eastern sector! Please make your way to the guild as quickly as possible!" pleaded Olivia. She and Atrielle began to gather as many people as they could. "I will act as your bulwark. Everyone, ple—!" Olivia suddenly cut herself off.

At some point, a tall man garmented in black formalwear had appeared across the street.

"Olivia!" shouted Atrielle, who was the first to notice his presence. Her warning came seconds too late, as the man was already sprinting toward them at a terrifying speed.

"Ah, um, Mistress Atrielle?!"

“He’s a bad guy. I’ve never seen him before, though.”

“What should I do?!”

“Shoot first. Questions later.”

“Very well!”

Atrielle threw herself from Olivia’s back and somersaulted away. Olivia simultaneously pulled a cord hanging from the shoulder of her maid uniform, which activated the armaments lodged in her shoulders. She dropped down to one knee and aimed the large twin gun barrels at the man.

The cannons violently roared to life and began firing off a continuous volley of shots. As he continued to close the distance, he activated an unknown skill, crossed his arms in front of his head so as to protect it, and pressed ever forward. Many of Olivia’s shots hit their intended target, exploding and leaving behind large plumes of smoke, yet they did nothing to slow his advance.

Realizing the ineffectiveness of her bombardment, Olivia took a standing position and drew her arms close to her body. The man was already upon her and ready to unleash a barrage of fists merely a few seconds after Atrielle had sighted him.

Olivia dodged the onslaught of blows to the best of her ability, but the strange trajectories along which they flew threw off her coordination. His punches were nearly instantaneous and appeared from completely incomprehensible angles. A powerful blow connected with her collarbone before she could even begin to comprehend his technique.

She let out an involuntary squeal as the sound of something crunching and shattering within her neck and chest reverberated through her mechanical eardrums. She fell backwards and recklessly opened fire on the man, who was initiating yet another attack.

Despite the short distance separating the two, he predicted the oncoming volley and effortlessly dodged backwards to avoid it. Olivia used this momentary respite to put some more distance between them with a backflip, her cannons remaining trained on the man throughout.

“I haven’t a clue why, but I feel a strange affinity toward you,” said the tall, intimidating butler. He once again assumed his unconventional stance with his arms crossed in front of him. “I sense a robust aura of loyalty from you. You would lay down your life for your master without a second thought. We are alike in that sense.”

“I do not understand...”

“It is a blessing to be able to battle with someone so similar to me in this rotten world. Unfortunately, I have no choice but to destroy you, as per Master Lostchile’s orders.”

“I... still do not understand. I cannot make sense of many a thing. This world is flush with incomprehensible things... But regardless, I shan’t allow you to fulfill your orders!”

“I’m sure you have your reasons to so dutifully serve your master, just as I do. I am Master Lostchile’s blade! He made something of me when I was naught more than a mad dog!”

“I am able to sympathize with such a motivation! However, you are an evil person! I will do just as Master Dennis has taught me: I will proceed to beat the shit out of you with every ounce of effort I can possibly muster!”



The situation was dire throughout the town, from the southern tip to the northern sector. Dennis ran along the thin, southern walls of the town near the main gate. He was doing his utmost to repel as many beasts as possible while simultaneously focusing on handling Lostchile.

“Fuck! Quit dodging!”

Dennis pushed off the ledge of the wall and pounced at Lostchile. He swung his blade directly at Lostchile’s head, but the aristocrat’s body emitted an even stronger purple glow and seemed to fade and flow around the weapon, allowing it to pass through him without injury. Dennis’s skill, however, sent aftershocks along the trajectory of the blade which effortlessly blew away a portion of the town’s wall.

“Shit!” exclaimed the chef.

What kind of magic is this?! he thought. Is it something like that teleportation magic he used last time? Looks like it, but what if it’s something totally different? Does that mean he’s a master of multiple schools of magic?!

Lostchile drew the mist closer to himself and floated away from Dennis. His torso rose menacingly from the cloud once again, and he scratched his chin in thought.

“So this is his level 100 skill?” Lostchile muttered to himself, “It would seem as though it is capable of influencing both the corporeal and incorporeal alike... I would do well to maintain my distance.”

“My skills don’t need your puffery, you wrinkly old prune!” Having gotten that off his chest, Dennis turned his attention to the horde of monsters. He had but a moment to assess the situation on the ground before Lostchile once again demanded his attention like a petulant child.

“Oh, excuse me, young Dennis. I must insist that we continue our duel.”

Lostchile’s torso split into a loose mist and proceeded to spread in all directions only to reform above Dennis’s head. Dennis gave no indication that he had noticed the aristocrat’s descent, but as soon as the scoundrel had materialized, the chef swung his weapon at him. Unfortunately, Lostchile was as quick as he was irritating; his smokey form was drifting away long before Dennis’s swing could make any sort of contact with him.

“You’re really startin’ ta piss me off!”

“Hahaha! Keep your composure, young Dennis. Is this your first time facing someone of my caliber? Strength is not the be-all and end-all solution, you know. Besides, all that is required of me is to keep you occupied here, and it’s game over for the entirety of this useless little town.”

“I’m so gonna kill you!”



Katey was backing up slowly near the center of town. Wave after wave of ravenous beasts rushed after her, but she managed to take the bulk of them on by herself. Still, she had no choice but to retreat or else she would be completely surrounded.

Sweat trickled down her forehead as she felt a wall press against her back. She allowed herself a quick glance up and behind her. It was the clocktower that served as the vantage point for Green and Porobo earlier that night. The very same structure that Bethel had attempted suicide from so long ago. And the building where Katey now made her final stand, alone.

Further north stood the former headquarters of the Night Fog Battalion, which now served as yet another battleground among the numerous other spontaneous arenas that had cropped up all throughout the town. A group of three mages circled around a lone detective atop its rickety roof.

“Radiant Arrow!”

“Deadly Hand!”

The ponytail mage’s spell summoned sickly white hands rumbling from the ground, while the other mage girl’s magic arrow cracked through the

night sky at Candy. The little investigator gracefully backflipped away from the hands' clutches and out of the arrow's path. She landed right on the edge of the roof and immediately squatted down to maintain her balance. Though the three mages were not aware of it yet, Candy was using this brief reprieve to build up power in her toned legs.

"Judging by your looks," she muttered to herself, "The most dangerous one here is definitely that dumb-looking brunette in the back..."

"Quit dodging!" demanded one of the mage girls.

"Oh, so you're an acrobat now, too?!" exclaimed another.

"Guile of the Detective," Candy muttered the incantation to herself with a devilish smirk as her form quickly melted into the darkness.

"What?! Where'd she go?!"

"It's some kinda skill!"

The mage girls with the fun hair began to panic, but Bethel's voice sliced through their hysteria with ease.

"It's a stealth skill!" she shouted, "She's foolin' our senses! Be alert, she could come from anyw—!"

Something pressed into the pit of Bethel's stomach.

"Baritsu: Secrets of the Detective."

Bethel hardly had time to process what felt like an iron ball smashing into her gut before she was blown backwards, nearly falling off the roof in the process. She crashed into the roof tiles hard and left behind a trail of shattered ceramic leading up to her resting place at its edge.

"Whoa! Bethel!"

"Bethel!"

"Hahh... Gugh..."

Candy's blow had connected directly with Bethel's solar plexus, knocking the wind completely out of her. She couldn't breathe properly, and her vision darkened as she felt her consciousness slowly slip away. She was dimly aware of a stinging pain in the tips of her fingers, which were likely shredded when she tried to claw at the tiles to prevent herself from falling. Yet even that biting sensation felt distant, almost as if it was happening to someone else.

Candy dashed over to Bethel's battered form with a wicked grin. The hairs on the back of her neck stood as she pulled back her foot to send the professor falling to her death. She trusted her instincts and immediately planted her foot back down, however. She then activated her stealth skill and

disappeared from sight with a mocking whirl of her body.

“Wah! She’s gone again!”

“Bethel! Are you alright?!”



Even further north were the rear guard, who were still actively marching toward the refugee area. Further north still was the Adventurer’s Guild, which currently housed every able-bodied adventuring party ready to tackle the night’s quest.

Jeanne was continuing to lounge in a folding chair outside, her legs crossed. Her ear twitched, and she jerked her head toward a man who had just emerged from within and called out to her.

“Miss Jeanne?”

“How’s the evacuation going?”

“It’s going well for now. But...”

“But what?”

“That restaurant’s... Miss Hezmoch. We are unable to locate her whereabouts. Her employees don’t know either.”

“Hezmoch?”

“You didn’t know?”

Jeanne remained silent and only sunk deeper down into her chair.



The beasts had yet to fully infiltrate the eastern sector; however, there was a more pressing threat. Olivia continued her dire battle against Harm. She cried out and fired both of her cannons. The barrels glowed a myriad of colors, and tiny particles seemed to be drawn into them before the bright muzzle flash lit up the night.

Olivia was not hoping to land her attacks, but rather she was doing her best to ensure Harm would not get any closer to her. The butler, however, soldiered on in his unusual cross-armed stance. He ducked and weaved his head effortlessly beneath the cannonfire, which did not hinder him in any way.

When he was within range, the maid raised her fist clumsily in preparation to bring down a powerful overhand punch, but Harm took

advantage of this opening and delivered three blazingly fast blows to her abdomen. Olivia's deceptively dense body was lifted high into the air by their power, and it was as if she was floating among the stars for a protracted second.

Despite her slender form, Olivia was composed of heavy ores and metals that fare much better against blunt force damage than a fleshy human body would. Yet even her metal plating did little to stop the force of Harm's blows from shattering many of her internal components. The blows reverberated through her body and cracked several memory stones as well, wholly erasing what memories they had hosted from her mind. Had she not been the magical doll that she was, her internal organs would have been reduced to nothing more than a gelatinous mush.

Just before she came crashing back down, a right hook connected with her jaw.

"Olivia!" screamed Atrielle as the maid's body careened off to the side.

Once again, the advantages of her inhuman body were made apparent. Her neck would have been shorn clean off if not for her metallic construction. She smashed into the ground with a harsh, metallic crunch. Harm was already nearly on top of her, but the maid had enough presence of mind to aim her guns at him. She fired wildly until she was able to regain her footing, and the butler was compelled to stay clear by her unpredictable firing patterns.

Harm forced himself to take a deep breath and calm down, to reign himself in somewhat. He had gotten too enthralled in the bloody thrill of hand-to-hand combat. *There is no need to end this in one blow*, he determined, *A war of attrition is a perfectly viable strategy*. He resolved to once again close the distance and whittle down her mobility.

Olivia's maid uniform was in tatters, and she became keenly aware of the numerous wounds plaguing her entire body, screaming for relief.

"Hah... Hah... Gu—"

"You've fired those cannons quite a lot, haven't you?" Harm said with a curious tild of his head.

Olivia didn't answer.

"You cannot possibly be able to ceaselessly fire without end, can you? From the looks of it, they are merely magical energy conversion machines, am I wrong?" Harm taunted her, the smug aura practically dripping from his words. "If I am not mistaken, magical energy is what's responsible for ensuring your body stays operational. Certainly they must have some sort of

limit.”

“I do not know... I do not understand my inner workings...”

“Which will come first, I wonder? Will you expend all of your energy before I tear you limb from limb? You are already quite sluggish, oh loyal magic doll.”

Olivia once again remained silent. She wiped her mouth as a certain nagging thought kept coursing over and over again through her mind. *He's fast. Too fast. I cannot hit him; I cannot dodge his attacks... There is an overwhelming gap in our combat prowess...*

“That girl,” Harm drawled as he shifted his gaze to Atrielle, “If I am not mistaken, she is the rightful heir of the Workstat family, is she not?”

His subtle threat was met with more silence.

“Once I render you non-operational, she will be next. A single girl is hardly a risk to trifle over, but the blood that courses through her noble little veins is... troublesome, to say the least. You see, there are still those who revere her family, so I have little choice but to nip this problem in the bud, so to speak.”

“Mistress Atrielle... run. Please,” pleaded Olivia.

“A futile appeal,” snapped Harm. He slowly approached Olivia as he spoke, “You are already barely functional. How do you suppose she will be able to escape?”

Just one hit, Olivia thought to herself, If I could only land one proper attack...

“Do not underestimate me, evildoer!” Olivia shouted and once again assumed her battle stance. Though her cannons were trained firmly on Harm, his prediction was most likely correct in that she certainly did not have much energy remaining.

“I will protect her! Even if I become a dreadful pile of scrap! Even if all that remains of my being is a singular cog! I will beat the shit out of you!”

“My apologies, but the chances of you besting me are negligible. Essentially zero.”

“Negligible, huh?! That is not zero, is it?! That is all I need!”



The majority of the mythic beasts had already penetrated the town's defenses and were stampeding northward away from the main gate. Lostchile

shot Dennis a self-satisfied smile as he watched the last of the stragglers clamber over the town's wall.

"Well, how about that, young Dennis? It won't be long now until all those foolish townsfolk become naught more than monster kibble."

"You... I really *am* going to kill you," Dennis's voice was bubbling with barely-restrained rage. He felt a sick impatience in his chest that made him nauseous.

Lostchile sensed Dennis's worry and spoke to him in a sickly voice.

"It matters not how strong you are, not even if you are the strongest the world has ever seen. In this world, brute strength is tantamount to nothing," Lostchile monologued. He clearly sensed Dennis's growing anxiety, and his bilious tone reflected that. "Look, young Dennis. You are powerless. You cannot protect anything at all, let alone this town. With your physical strength, the only thing you even have hope of protecting is yourself. Even if you somehow manage to get the better of me, it would still be too late. It would all be useless... Useless!"

The vile nobleman was so pleased with himself that he couldn't help but break out into a giddy fit of laughter. His feet returned to their mist-like form and slid along the surface of the wall toward Dennis. Once he had recomposed himself, he raised his index finger and stared intently at the chef.

"However, there is one remaining way to save them. Just one," he continued.

"...?"

"I am in control of the beasts. I can render them all immobile if I so chose. Their traders had equipped them with a failsafe... I mean, of course they did!"

"What are you getting at?"

"This can all be over right now. If you fulfill one condition, that is."

"You get off on bein' cryptic or something?" Dennis once again felt a pang of impatience resonate in his chest.

"Serve me, Dennis," said Lostchile, his face crinkled into an evil smile. "Save everyone, and serve me. How does that sound to you?"

"... What?"

"There exists a certain devious collar, one that can wrest one's free will from his grasp. In ancient times, they were used to corral slaves, but they are almost entirely outlawed in our modern, *civilized* society. Of course, I am in possession of one," he explained.

Lostchile licked his lips and retrieved a weathered collar from his pocket. It was affixed with a gray jewel that gave off an odd glint in the moonlight. He waved it tauntingly at Dennis.

“I will use this on you and have you serve me. Like a pet.”

“What are you talki—”

“What other option do you have, young Dennis? You can choose to serve me, or we can remain here in limbo, listening to the delightful cacophony of screams rise into a crescendo before being snuffed out one by one. I am wholly content with whatever choice you make.”

Dennis didn’t respond as immediately as Lostchile had hoped, so he seized his opportunity to continue with his soliloquy.

“Come, let us save those townsfolk. Together. I will keep you miserable, locked in a cramped cage for the rest of your days. You will be stripped of your clothes and bound, and the only thing you will have time for is regret. Regret that you ever dared to defy me. You will never be able to make that wretched fried rice ever again, let alone taste it. You will feel lucky to be fed my putrid leftovers. So choose, young Dennis. What will you do? I am so very eager to hear your answer!”

Dennis looked out over the town, taking in the brutality caused by the monstrous swarm streaming northward. He was entirely unsure of himself.

Have I lost? He hasn’t actually beaten me, though... and I’m heaps stronger than him. Still, what options do I have?

“Answer, Dennis. You are out of time. Make your decision,” Lostchile’s voice nagged at the periphery of Dennis’s awareness; it seemed to him like it was miles away.

There’s no other way, right? If I do it... If I do what he says, will everyone be saved? These unanswerable questions flooded the chef’s brain.

“You swear that if I put that damn collar on, you’ll leave this town alone, right?”

“Of course. It is my promise, and I do not break my promises.”

“Well...”

Lostchile’s unseemly face scrunched up even more as his hideous grin widened nearly to his ears. Dennis wavered slightly. The fight had been drained from him, and he was about to limply drop the kitchen knife he was wielding. Just as all was nearly lost, a new chef suddenly appeared from the darkness behind Lostchile and flew at the nobleman.

“Huh?!”

Lostchile heard the rushing air and desperately tried to disperse his body back into mist. It was too little, too late, however. The small chef swung her knife with all she could muster, and though it seemed to effortlessly pass through the aristocrat's hazy form, it had managed to nick him nonetheless.

Blood arced through the night air, the moonlight reflecting idly off of it.

“Guaaghh?! Aghhh?!” cried out the anguished nobleman. He flew desperately higher in the air in an attempt to distance himself from the newfound danger.

The miniature chef's small knife was coated in a thin, viscous layer of blood.

“Hezmoch?!” shouted Dennis in disbelief.

“What are you playing at, sous-chef?!” screamed Lostchile.

“You... Why?”

“You really are such a meathead, Dennis!” ranted Hezmoch as she dashed over to Dennis. “He's a famous swindler, and you were just gonna buy into his bullshit?! How did you think he was going to stop all those beasts at once, huh?!”

“But... what else was I supposed to do, Hezmoch?”

“Obviously not that! Let's get over to the refugee area while he's hurt. There's nothing else we can do here, but *they* need our help! Are you planning on dancing to this tune forever?!”

Lostchile materialized some distance away from them. He clutched his bloodied face, which now sported a large diagonal gash. His eyes were brimming with burning malice.

“You... You wounded me... You shed my blood... You, you meddling kids!”

“So, Dennis, what'd you say we bring back the old Blacks Restaurant one-two punch?” asked Hezmoch as she helped Dennis steady himself.

“I didn't think the day would come where *you* would be the one lecturing *me*. Let's do it, Hezmoch! Just like old times!”



Several black silhouettes darted back and forth across the deep-blue night sky. The moon shone brightly through the clouds, outlining them with an eerie silver glow. High-pitched voices echoed throughout the town.

“She's, like, *really* strong!”

“Geh! Hagh!”

“Bethel, hang in there!”

The two mage girls worked together to carry Bethel away from Candy, who was in hot pursuit.

“How are you gonna tease me, then just run awaaayyyy? That’s so not cool... Be nice and die already, okaaayyy?!”

“That tweed bitch is way scary! She’s actually trying to kill us! Remind me to not judge books by their covers!”

“We won’t mess with you anymore! We promise!”

The girls used magic to propel themselves from roof to roof. A beast’s drooling maw snapped at their legs from below.

“Oh no! They’ve already made it this far?!”

“Oh crap, oh crap! There! Follow me, Twintails!”

They landed on the next roof and pivoted toward a window in the clocktower itself. A short, magically-boosted leap later, they found themselves in a winding stairway that led to the spire of the tower.

“Let’s go down!”

“What’re you saying?! She’s still after us! Up! Go up! The beasts are down below anyway!”

“But it’s a dead end up there!”

They cast a quick glance out the window they’d just come crashing through and ended up locking eyes with Candy. They decided that going upwards was the correct decision just as she positioned herself to leap at them. By the time they had carried Bethel to the very top, the two girls were entirely out of breath. They stumbled across a trembling Green and his terrified underling hiding in the cramped gear room.

“Agghh!”

“They’ve come for us!”

“Aaaghhh!!”

“Oh, it’s Green! What’re you doing here?!”

Green let out a shaky sigh of relief and picked himself up off the ground.

“Hehehe... We weren’t scared and hiding here or anything. This was uh... all part of our plan.”

“Save it! I know what you guys were up to! Look, there’s a super strong person coming after us! Can you guys fight?!”

“What?! No, I can’t fight! No! I only know about bodybuilding and stuff!”

“Hehehe... Well, I can fight,” a new voice spoke up. Porobo had appeared from a shadowy corner in the room.

“Oh, it’s Porobo the pervert! *You* can fight?!”

“Hehehe... Dunno ‘bout all that pervert stuff, but... y’know, back in the day... in the capital...”

Porobo wound up to tell a tale. A tale from a time when he had not one modicum of fat on his stomach. In fact, he used to have a gloriously chiseled six pack. At the time, he had met a buxom slave girl when he had entered the royal boxing tournament.

Twintail cut him off impatiently, “Okay, this is do or die time, people! We’ll take out that tweed bitch right here!”

“Let’s goooo!! She kicked three of our asses, but all six of us?! No chance in hell!”



Back near the town’s main gate, the two chefs continued their assault on the nefarious nobleman. Dennis leaped through the air at him, butcher’s knife grasped tightly in his hand.

Lostchile faltered for but a split second as he attempted to come up with the best way to dodge the oncoming attack. He had lost his composure. Everything had been going just as he had planned, and this single, unforeseen slip-up had thrown him wholly off-balance. His mind racing to figure out how to regain the upper hand only served to fan the flames of his panic and dull his movements.

He desperately wished to teleport away and regroup, but that would mean allowing Dennis free reign over the onslaught of creatures. He could not let that happen, so turning to mist was his sole remaining option. Yet, then he would be trapped in said useless mist form because Dennis would immediately assault him with all manner of unconventional skills the second he corporealized.

The aristocrat finally made his decision and split into two vast, airy clouds on either side of Dennis’s blade. The follow-up attacks that came were unable to harm him, as well. He couldn’t properly retreat in this form; however, he knew that all he had to do was wait for a break in the offensive. He would use that opportunity to reform only slightly and get away. That strategy had worked to keep Dennis in gridlock before, and it would surely be

just as effective now.

Lostchile eventually realized that he was too focused on Dennis. He quickly scanned around just in time to spot Hezmoch throwing salt and pepper shakers at where his feet would have been.

“Hm?”

The shakers clattered open, causing the spices to sprinkle all over the ground. Where the two substances intermixed, Lostchile’s mist form faltered just the tiniest amount.

“I knew it!” shouted Hezmoch, “His magic is founded on the ability to assemble and disassemble particles. He can dismantle his body into individual particles and move them and reassemble them where and when he pleases! That’s how his teleportation works, too!”

“Ya just carry seasoning around with you on the regular, too?!” exclaimed Dennis, “I like your style, Hezmoch!”

“Because it’s so difficult to control something so tiny and plentiful, we can easily introduce ‘noise’ to the system!”

“Girrrlll!!” growled Lostchile.

The salt and pepper particles prohibited Lostchile from reforming. Under normal circumstances, this paltry amount of interference would mean nothing to him. Dust and other airborne garbage had no effect on the effectiveness of his magic, after all. This was a novel situation for Lostchile, however. The world’s strongest chef was facing him down, and the added spicy stress was genuinely hampering his ability to concentrate. Said chef didn’t spare a moment and pressed his newfound advantage.

His attack speed is increasing, thought Lostchile, He’s no longer wavering!

He managed to avoid Dennis’s attack through sheer luck and instinct alone.

It cannot keep progressing this way! I need to get away!

Hezmoch approached the panicked Lostchile from behind. She crossed her two knives and with a metallic *shink* summoned one pot’s worth of water. Her magic was nothing impressive compared to the two veritable titans duking it out in front of her, but Hezmoch had a knack for thinking outside the box.

This spell was the first thing prospective chefs tended to learn in culinary school. It was the most basic spell imaginable, and even a goblin would offer a smug snicker at such a useless spell. It would certainly not be of help to an

adventurer hoping to conquer a dungeon. Nevertheless, it *does* allow the user to boil pasta wherever they so pleased.

“Cooking Skill, Level 20: Boiling!”

The water she had dumped all over the ground immediately began to simmer and then erupted into a full-on boil. The newly-released water vapor in the air paired with the change in humidity added just another modicum of interference for Lostchile to contend with. His mist became just a smidge harder to control, and that added hindrance was all Dennis needed.

“Cooking Skill, Level 100!” he shouted as he swung his knife. He felt it connect with something and evoked his ultimate skill, “Enforcement: Kick out any and all undesirable customers!”

“Guuaaghh?!”

Working on pure instinct, Lostchile attempted to squirm away from this threatening combination. He mindlessly maximized the dispersal of his cloudy particles, but Dennis simply drove his blade deeper.

“I’ll blow you away!”

“Uuuggghooaahhh!”

The purple mist exploded outward in every direction. Dennis’s skill impelled it backwards into a violent implosion. All that was left was Lostchile’s true form, prone on the ground.

At last, everything was perfectly still.

Suddenly, Lostchile’s body elevated off of the ground and began flying directly upwards at increasingly alarming speeds. His body cut through the cold night air, burst through the fluffy clouds, and shrank further and further into the endless sky.

“Guauahh?! Wh-Where is this taking mee?”

“Somewhere! Consider yourself banned! From the planet, that is!”

“You did it, Dennis!”

“He’ll probably land in some mountain range somewhere. Doubt he’ll still be breathin’ by then, though!”

“Ah! There’s no time! We need to hurry to the refugee area! Chef Jeanne must already be in the midst of her defensive maneuvers.”

“Alright, let’s get moving!”



“You scurried all the way up heeereee? I bet this, like, must be what a rat

feels like when a cat's huntin' it..." Candy's voice dripped with malice as she slowly ascended the stairs of the clocktower.

She studied the gear room, appraising the situation she'd just walked into. Bethel was no longer incapacitated and looked prepared to fight. Flanking her were the two mage girls, with Green and his underling standing slightly in front of them. Leading the rag-tag group was Porobo, and each and every one of them was tensed in a fighting stance. Candy frowned.

"Who's this fatso?"

"Hehehe... I apologize if my belly offends you. I haven't been getting much exercise lately, you see..."

"Yeah, that's pretty obvious," Candy was just about to follow up her remark when Porobo's movement caught her attention. He had slid one leg out behind him in some kind of stance, so she preemptively raised both her fists in response.

"Let's go, Pervy Porobo! Give her the ol' one-two!"

"Yeah, get her!"

Porobo and Candy stared each other down. The distinct weight difference between the two of them only became more apparent as all eyes fell on them.

"Ugghhh... I like manly guys like Dennis thooughhh..."

"Hehehe... Beggars can't be choosers, little miss."

Candy rushed in quick as lightning and shoved her shoulder into Porobo's flabby stomach.

"Baritsu: Secrets of a Detective," she said flatly. *This is suuuuch a letdown*, Candy whined to herself.

Candy's fighting style worked equally on opponents of any mass, so Porobo's size wasn't as much of an advantage as he probably believed. She waited for his massive form to be blasted backwards through the clocktower wall and down into the street below.

"Hehehe... I figured your skill would be something like this, considering you're such a tiny, close-quarters fighter."

"Huh?"

Candy realized that her shoulder had been grabbed hard. The very next moment, Porobo was finally sent flying up and backwards, and Candy was taken right alongside him.

"Ngah?! Let go of me, fat ass!" she shouted and struggled, but it was far too late.

Porobo smashed through the roof, and the pair were launched out of the

top floor of the clocktower.

“Hehehe... Unexpected, right?”

“Fuck you, fatso! You planned this from the start!”

The two reached the peak of their arc far above the clocktower and then began to plummet quickly toward the earth. Candy finally managed to wriggle free of Porobo’s grasp and pushed away from him. Meanwhile, the twintail mage and the rest rushed in the direction of his rapidly descending form.

“Whoa! Waaatt!”

“Soft Palm!” casted Bethel.

“Green!”

The twintail mage lept from the opening and caught Porobo’s oily hand in hers. Her ponytailed friend followed close behind her and grabbed hold of her legs. Green and his underling were last in line and managed to grasp the second mage’s legs at the last moment. The three of them dangled over the ledge as Green and his henchman clung desperately to anything they could to gain some sort of leverage.

Bethel had meant to use her Soft Palm to catch Porobo in its comfortable embrace, but it was possible that the spell would not have held due to his mass and velocity. The mage with the twintails had been quick on her feet and lept out after him just in case. It seemed to be a good decision in the moment.

“Gyaaa! My arm’s gonna rip off! Guaranteed I’m growing a few inches after this!”

“Hold on! Ah! Green! Where are you touching?!”

“We’ve got you by your thighs! What else were we supposed to do?!”

“Waahhh! What now?! How do we get him up?!”

“Hehehe...”

Candy crashed through the roof of a nearby house. Though she’d managed to dampen the impact with the use of her skill, she was nevertheless reduced to a crawl.

“Guh... Haagh...”

She looked down at her legs. Her right one was bent at an unnatural angle. The adrenaline pumping through her veins staved off the pain for the time being, but she wasn’t sure how long that would last. Candy shuddered at the thought of what could have happened had she missed the roof and splattered onto the road below.

“Haahhh... Looks... like this is as far as I go today. I’ll kill them... I’ll return, and I’ll kill them all.”

She tried to crawl forward and promptly realized that she didn’t possess full control of her right arm, either. She cursed under her breath and forced herself onward, dragging her broken leg behind her in search of something to fashion a splint and sling from.



“Hah... Hah... Okay, this is bad...”

Katey was surrounded by an innumerable amount of mythic beasts. She had been fighting the horde by herself for what felt like an eternity, and it was clear she was almost at her limit. Soon, this one woman line of defense would have to fall. Many beasts had already found their way beyond her. She had only truly been successful in properly holding back the first wave.

The beasts slowly and carefully encircled her. Starved and wrathful as they were, they had now begun to realize that mindlessly rushing at her one by one would only contribute to the burgeoning pile of bodies that surrounded her. They refused to simply ignore her and were keen on finishing her off because even they all sensed her exhaustion.

“Why are y’all looking at me like I’m nothing more than prey? I’m the second generation head of the Silver Wings Battalion, y’know...” she mustered, trailing off as a troublesome realization dawned on her. She could no longer even summon the strength to raise her swords.

Looks like this is the end of line for me, she thought, I always wanted to die by that that stupid chef’s side, though...



Several beasts had begun to encroach far north to the Adventurer’s Guild. Jeanne and the rear guard had their hands full repelling the vanguard.

Jeanne was no longer settled comfortably in her chair. Rather, she stood proudly on the forefront of the battlefield with her arms crossed. She was surrounded by the men from the rear guard forces, each of whom nervously clutched their weapons. Not a single soul dared to speak.

Each of them was acutely aware that if the horde of beasts made it this far, they would all meet their end. Despite this despondent mindset, not one

of them tried to run, let alone voice a concern. It was likely that this was because they did not have any other choice. There was nowhere for them to run, nothing for them to say. All they could do to pass the time until they met their untimely ends was wait.

“Good grief. So this is where it ends, huh?” sighed Jeanne. She readied a skill and stepped forward, but froze in her tracks as a loud howl rang out from behind them.

“Wha—?”

Jeanne’s calm demeanor shattered in an instant, and she whirled around to face the imminent source of danger along with the rest of the rear guard.

From behind? It can’t be...

A single grey wolf stood proudly on the roof of the Adventurer’s Guild. It raised its head to the moon and howled once again. Numerous other howls joined the unnerving chorus.

More wolves began to appear on the roof, their fur a similar muted gray that shone in the moonlight. It was an entire army of Fenrir.

Jeanne locked eyes with the Fenrir leading the pack. Unlike the others, it was covered in wounds, and half of its fur was nearly sloughing off. Each of the beasts Jeanne had encountered until now had nothing but mad hatred in their eyes, but this wolf stared at her with a clear, serene intensity.

“Are they the enemy?”

“No... That’s the dog that Atrielle was always walking...”

The wolves all howled once more. This must have been some sort of cue to them, as right at that moment, they all bounded over the rear guard in unison and charged the onrushing horde of monsters.

“What the...?” Jeanne mumbled to herself. She held back her buffeted hair with one hand and stared, dumbfounded.

The wolves clashed with the beasts, and chaos erupted. Some of the beasts tucked tail and ran as soon as they caught sight of the canine monsters. After all, Fenrir were lords of the deep forest. Even these mindless beasts had an instinctual respect, an intrinsic *fear* of them. The Fenrir were much larger than most of the monsters in the horde and made quick work of them. They effortlessly stomped them into the ground or mauled them with their enormous fangs. Before long, the marauding horde broke apart and began to run.

The wolf covered in gnarled old wounds exchanged some telepathic words with a younger wolf in the middle of the battle.

“This is the final time, mine son...”

“... I know, I am sorry.”



The fierce howls echoed throughout the entire town. They even reached the eastern sector where Olivia and Harm were still duking it out. They reached Olivia's ears, and she turned around with a jolt.

“Pochi!” exclaimed Atrielle.

She wasn't the only one startled by the howls, though. Harm ceased his assault for a brief moment, a strange expression beginning to form on his face.

“Fenrir? I didn't think we had any of those in store...” He didn't know exactly how, but he understood perfectly well that the situation had changed. “What is happening...?”

Olivia struggled with every remaining ounce of her strength to stand while Harm hesitated.

“It seems,” she rasped, “It seems that the situation... has changed, has it not?”

“Don't be foolish,” Harm said. He was trembling. “No. Those howls are of no concern to me. My mission remains unchanged, doll!”

“Come at me, evildoer!” Olivia said and assumed a defensive stance, fully aware that she no longer had the strength to back up her tough words.

This was going to be her last stand. She had no other way to stop him. And yet, she would not give in, not even if her body was rendered a pile of scrap metal and parts. Only after Harm had fallen would she do the same.

They glared at each other.

The final blow was but a few seconds away.

Chapter Nine

The Outcast Maid is Unbreakable

The unexpected appearance of the pack of Fenrir sent many monsters running for the hills, their tails tucked between their legs. Many of them stampeded through the main plaza at the center of town where Katey was.

She had collapsed to her knees and was watching the ruckus unfold. She couldn't make heads or tails of the strange sight she was witnessing, but she understood enough to know that the tables had turned.

Thank goodness, she thought, I can't even hold my sword anymore...

Dennis passed through the town center, jumping from rooftop to rooftop. He spotted Katey and shouted down to her.

"Katey! You alright down there?! You sure don't look alright! Glad you're safe, though!"

"Hah... Y-You're late..." she managed to get out as she shot a pained smile up at him.

Her voice was too weak to reach Dennis now. Just like that, she finally collapsed to the ground.



Meanwhile, the final battle was only just beginning in the eastern sector. The terrified cries of the fleeing beasts ravaged their ears as Olivia and Harm faced off.

Olivia's plan was simple: don't lose.

Her body had certain advantages over that of a regular human's. As long as she protected the gem nestled in her chest, she could keep moving. A dozen spears could be run through her, her neck could be pulverized, but she would still be able to move. She would survive Harm's onslaught no matter how fierce it may be, and she would get at least one mighty blow in.

Harm approached, poking at prodding at Olivia's defenses. His own guard had no openings. He took a few small, light steps and stood just clear of Olivia's reach. He stepped in and feinted, throwing off Olivia's rhythm and allowing him to close in in earnest.

"Hah!"

As soon as Harm was in reach, Olivia shouted and launched a powerful

right straight. He skillfully parried and latched on to her outstretched arm. He crossed his own arm over hers and drove a counter blow directly into her pristine face.

“Ngoh!”

Olivia felt the metal construction of her jaw crunch and grind against itself inside her oral cavity as the joint cracked and shattered. She let out a pained groan as the force of the impact sent her head flying backwards. The weight of her head pulled harshly on her cervical joints, and she felt the memory stone nestled there begin to crack.

Another memory gone.

Another precious memory.

She could no longer recall what that memory had been, but that no longer mattered. She raked her head forward through sheer force of will despite Harm’s fist burrowing deep in her face. She glared defiantly at him over his fist as she took a determined step forward.

She was now making full use of the durability of her metal body; she completely ignored the insistent pain and the perilous damage and pressed onward. She twisted her body awkwardly to throw a hook, but the motion was hopelessly slow and full of many unnecessary movements. Harm saw it coming a mile away and avoided it with a single effortless step. Olivia followed up with yet another hook, but his counter crashed into her nose long before her attack could find its mark.

The metal facade that lay beneath her face cracked, and her damaged back creaked painfully from the strain of her punch careening uselessly through the air. Yet in spite of all that, her eyes never once left Harm.

She was still standing.

She once again twisted her body and threw yet another punch at Harm.

“It’s over, doll!” he shouted. He didn’t even bother parrying this time. He simply ducked as he stepped in and the punch sailed over his head. “This is the end!”

Harm’s full-power counter found its mark on Olivia’s chest. He activated and paired a striking skill with his attack to make it his most powerful straight right yet. All of that power slammed into Olivia and sent devastating shockwaves throughout the entirety of her small body. Of course, the force of the impact reached her core.

Olivia’s eyes widened as she heard a faint cracking sound radiate from the core of her very life.

Harm's straight bore through Olivia's chest. His hand, which had violently erupted out of her back, had gracelessly split her core gem in two. Suddenly, the two of them simultaneously shared a vision.

The destruction of Olivia's core gem, in turn, shattered the seal on her final memory.



The inside of a small wooden house viewed through a pair of eyes. The interior of the house was perfectly clean and organized: not so much as a single spec of dust was out of place. The sullen rays of the full moon shone in through one of the windows. The house felt lonely and close to death. The many smiles and memorable debates that had once filled this house were now gone, never to return. Such times are never eternal.

The eyes shifted their attention away from the dreary room and onto a cup being carefully filled with tea. Arms reached out from the eyes' periphery and gently placed the cup onto a tray. A scene such as this must have played out a thousand times throughout this now desolate home, yet the forlorn atmosphere that accompanied it now was clearly a recent development.

The eyes' point of view moved through the gloomy house until it entered what seemed to be a bedroom. Within lay an old man on a large bed covered with thick blankets.

"Master Yujitt. Master Yujitt," called a kind, feminine voice from beneath the eyes.

The man weakly turned his head and slowly raised his eyes to meet the new arrival's. His hair was a pale white, though it had a peculiar blue undertone permeating throughout. It didn't look like he had been sleeping, but rather simply waiting for her. With great effort and pain, he managed to lift his head up. Nearly every slight movement he made sent him into horrific coughing fits.

"Olivia, I don't have long," he began.

"What are you saying, Master Yujitt?" replied the kind voice, "Are you not a great and powerful mage?"

"Be that as it may... time waits for no man. I can feel that mine has come."

"Please do not say such things, Master. This is not like you."

"Nachura passed a long time ago, too. Everybody dies, Olivia. I just

managed to eke out a bit more time than the rest..."

The man shifted slightly so that he could gaze out the window at the plump full moon resting in the sky. He remained silent for a long while.

"Olivia," he finally said, "I release you from your duties and cast you out from this house."

"I... I am afraid I do not understand your command, Master."

"I should have placed harsh restrictions on self-destruction when I built you," he sighed. He pulled his eyes away from the moon and once again locked eyes with the maid. "You were planning to die by my side, weren't you, Olivia?"

"Wh-What? I do n-not understand... what you..."

"You can't lie to me, Olivia. I know."

"I really d-don..." she tried to squeeze the words out, but they simply would not come. She could not lie. "I have always served you, Master Yujitt... Were you to leave me, I would not know what to do. Please... let me die. Take me with you, I beg of you. Do not leave me alone... Master..."

"No, Olivia. There are still things that you must do."

"Please do not be so cruel, Master... I must remain at your side..."

"You are free, Olivia. Thank you for everything. Truly, thank you," he said. He slowly reached out and tightly gripped Olivia's hand. "I have no need for you anymore. This is where we part."

"No... Master Yujitt..."

"Please do not make me repeat myself, Olivia. I am about to die, and thus I no longer have use for you. That does not mean that you are useless, however. There are people out there who do need you. There are people who you will bring joy to merely through your presence. Olivia... you will go, and you will live freely. I cast you out, so you have no choice but to go out into the world and seek out a new role to fill. Watch over humanity. I want you to see if they will continue to make mistakes, or if they will slowly nudge the world toward betterment."

"What have I done to deserve this, Master?" she pleaded, clinging desperately to her master as if her life depended on it, "Have I served you for so long only to be discarded? It is simply too cruel to bear. I will die by your side."

"I will seal your memories so that you may begin a new life. Memories of me will bring you nothing but pain, and I fear you will never be able to move on. I will destroy any records of you, and not even a scrap of evidence will

remain of our relationship. I will protect you from those who would mistreat you because of me.”

“Master...” she cried, her head hung low, “I was made by you. I lived with you. Of course I had planned to die with you. Please allow me this one kindness. Please.”

“I won’t, Olivia. I hereby cast you out. Your memories of me will fade, and you will live a wonderful life. Please... keep your chin up and move forward.”

“If that is your order, then I shall do what you say. Crystallize these cruel words as your final order to me.”

They stared into each other’s eyes, each of their faces entirely unreadable.

“Then it is so, I shall become an outcast and wander the cold world without you. I will abide by your last order, for that is my duty as your loyal servant,” she muttered these words while maintaining her grip on his hand, “It may take countless millennia, but I will cross paths with you once again. I will find you, and I will remember you... You and your callous cruelty toward me... I will never forgive you... and... I will always love you...”



Their shared experience came to an end. It was a unique experience, one that had yet to be named. Time had frozen for both combatants. The memory that had been stored in the maid doll’s core jewel had flowed ceaselessly into them.

Olivia was the first to recover from her stupor. She, of course, had more experience with the manipulation of memories than Harm did. Though his arm was still stuck through her chest, Olivia jutted forward and wrapped both of her arms around him. When Harm finally came back to his senses, he tried to break free from her grip to no avail. Since his right arm was immobilized by Olivia’s inner machinery, he could only move his left. It was not enough.

“Wha—?! Let go! Release me, magic doll!”

“I have trapped you, evildoer! I remember everything now! I remember him!”

“Stop! Let me go!”

“I will not! You will not escape from me!”

Olivia focused every ounce of her meager remaining strength into her arms. This mechanical strength differed from simple muscular power. She

used all that she had to squeeze Harm as hard as she could.

“Agghh! Ughhh! S-Stoooppp!”

The bones in Harm’s body began to gradually pop and crack as Olivia’s inhuman metal joints compressed around his fleshy human body.

“Haaaagghhhh!”

His ribs snapped one by one and scratched at his lungs, but somehow he continued to scream.

“Guuaagghhhhhh!!”

With the last of her energy expended, Olivia let the villain go. Harm collapsed to the ground, unconscious and drenched with sweat. The sudden fall of his body ripped his arm from Olivia’s chest. She managed to remain standing for a fraction of a second before collapsing to the ground as well.

“Olivia!” screamed Atrielle. She sprinted over and slid on her knees across the ground to Olivia. The maid’s eyes snapped to look at Atrielle. It seemed that they were the only things she had the power to move anymore. Dennis happened to arrive at this exact moment.

“Whoa, whoa! What happened?!”

“Dennis! Olivia! She’s...”

Dennis dashed over to the two girls, hardly sparing a glance at Harm along the way.

“Olivia! You okay?!”

“I... Did I... do well? Was I... of use?”

“You did! You did so well, Olivia! You’re amazing!”

“Th-Thank goodness... Is... Is everyone...?”

“Pochi brought a bunch of Fenrir with him and saved the day! Everyone’s safe, Olivia! There’s nothing to worry about!” Dennis said, his tone desperately insisting that Olivia feel better.

She remained silent, but her destroyed face twitched strangely with a sickening mechanical crunch in response to Dennis’s words.

“I’m gonna help you, okay?! You’re gonna be fine! You’re gonna be okay, s-so just hold on!”

“Master Dennis... Mistress Atrielle...” she slurred her words, which were now barely above a whisper, “I know now... I wandered for so long... and now I know...”

“Save your strength, Olivia! I’m tellin’ you, you’re gonna be fine! Don’t close your eyes! Hey!” He picked up her body, her weight barely registering to him, and dashed toward the refugee area.

Olivia continued to mutter as he held her in his muscular arms, “At the time... I believed it all to be a mistake... that it was the end of everything...” her mutters took on a strangely happy tone, though she felt each of her bodily functions shutting down one by one. “I did not understand... I thought I was a mistake... that I was useless. I knew that I needed to stay alive... until I understood. Despite the immense suffering... despite it, I needed to understand.”

Her eyes fluttered, then clinked shut. She slowly lost sensation in each part of her body, as though she was moving away from this world. Though maybe it was the world that was moving away from her?

She felt the world begin to close off from her. She felt her story coming to an end.

“I am glad... I was not a mistake,” she whispered, relieved, “I am glad I was made to live... Master Yujitt... Your order was heart-rending, but... I am glad for it...”

She smiled warmly in the darkness.

“I am glad I did not meet my end back then... I was able to live... I was able to come to this town... I... met everyone... I am glad. So glad...”

Epilogue

The Outcast Maid and the Ancient Dining Table

A few weeks had passed since the decisive battle in that small country town. The news had yet to reach the capital, however. A disheveled man shambled through the streets of the capital. The hot midday sun reflected brightly off his ragged, dirty coat. The man's face was a grotesque mass of wrinkles and wounds, as though he'd been robbed by some brigands and left for dead. People stopped and exchanged whispers as he passed by.

"Haahh... Guh..."

The man dragged his legs as he walked, groaning in pain all the while. He arrived at a coffee shop and collapsed heavily into one of the outside chairs without so much as acknowledging the staff.

"Lostchile... What on earth happened? You look horrible," came a voice from behind where the man sat. There sat a well-dressed man with slicked-back black hair reading a newspaper with his back to Lostchile. He hardly looked away from it as he spoke.

Lostchile laughed weakly and said, "Heath... I figured I'd meet you here."

"I enjoy my daily visits here to drink tea and read the paper. Habits like this are quite wonderful, wouldn't you agree?"

"I did not come here for small talk, Heath... I almost died on the way here. He sent me flying to some forsaken mountain in the middle of nowhere... I lost count of the number of foolish highwaymen I had to put down to reach this place," Lostchile coughed weakly as he finished speaking. He sat awkwardly in his chair, as if he no longer had the strength to move a muscle. He took a short breath and said, "I failed this time, but... no matter. I have already formulated my next plan..."

"Your next plan?" Heath said with a smile from behind his newspaper, "There's no need for all that, Lostchile."

"I am glad to hear that. Surely that means that you must have some sort of plan of your own?"

"No, no. You misunderstand me. I'm saying you're done. Therefore, there's no need for you to fret over another plan."

"Excuse me?" croaked Lostchile. Somehow, he found the strength to turn and stare at Heath's back. "Please understand, Heath: the knights and judges are not an obstacle to us. I can manipulate them all one way or another, so

Dennis is the only problem we truly have.”

“No, he isn’t an issue either. My little brother... Dennis, he’s already put you out of his mind. Everything has been wrapped up tidily.”

“Little brother?” Lostchile parroted the words back at Heath, dumbfounded.

Heath ignored the bedraggled man and instead chose to change the subject entirely, “Do you know of the author Entmori? I used to love her writing, and I’m overjoyed to hear of her unexpected return.” His tone was suspiciously jovial.

Heath opened his newspaper wider so that Lostchile could peek at the articles over his shoulder. Lostchile was confused for a moment, but when his eyes found the grand headline printed in bold text his jaw dropped to the floor.

“The Dramatic Revival of the Outcast Author Entmori!”

“Entmori returns with a brand new exposé focusing on all of the dark dealings of the Lostchile family. Read her new book to learn all about how the family snaked their way to the top of the underworld, and how one unlikely town beat back their insidious assault! Bringing with it a deliciously enthralling slew of interviews, as well as abundant evidence, this return to form for the disgraced author is a must-read!”

“Lostchile, Soon to be Arrested?!”

“His Closest Associate Still Won’t Talk!?”

“The Public Consensus: That Great Aristocrat Did
WHAT?!?!”

“The Royal Courts Announce the Extension of the Manhunt
Outside the Country’s Borders in Order to Catch Lostchile,
Still on the Run!”

“What... in the...?”

“They got you, Lostchile. Isn’t that comical? Who would’ve thought that

this would be your downfall?" mocked Heath. He cleanly folded the newspaper and placed it on the table before calling out to a waitress, "The bill, please! Oh, also... Could I order a cup of tea for this man? It may very well be the last one he ever has the pleasure of enjoying, so make sure it's a good one, haha. I hear it gets rather cold in prison..."

"Heath. Heath, wait," Lostchile said, his voice quivering. A cold panic forced him to his feet, and he clung desperately to Heath, who simply stepped away. Lostchile fell pathetically to the ground, but still clung to Heath's pantleg. "Let me help you. I have power! Everything will go smoothly if you just keep me on board. I beg of you, please just secret me away at your place for a while. Just for a short while. Please."

"Lostchile," Heath said calmly as he smiled down on the wretch, looking at him just as Lostchile would have once gazed at his exotic beasts. "Hold your head up high when they slide the noose around your neck. There's dignity in that, and dignity is what all should strive for. Besides, I'll have you know that my plan has already reached its final stages. You have already fulfilled your purpose."

At that very moment, a group of knights burst onto the scene.

"There he is! It's Lostchile!"

"Looks like that tip wasn't bogus! Get him, boys!"

"Y-You... Do you really think you are able to catch me!? Me!?" he demanded. His expression resembled that of a toddler who had just tasted lemon for the first time. He broke apart into a cloud of purple mist, and many of the bystanders in the vicinity shouted in alarm.

The knights stopped in their tracks, and one shouted a command, "Slow him down with wind magic! You're not getting away!"

Lostchile floated away as fast as he could. His mist was recklessly spread out, and its movements were spastic and inefficient, making him much slower than he was when he fought Dennis.

Heath slid his hands in his pockets and strolled off in the opposite direction. In great contrast to the chaos that had erupted around him, he was calm and didn't seem to have a care in the world. He basked in the bright sunshine as he walked. When he arrived at his workplace, a small voice called out to him.

"Hey... mister?"

Heath turned to see a filthy little boy sitting by the side of the road. He had a small collection of framed drawings spread out on a cloth in front of

him.

“Hey, mister, buy something. You’ve got cash on you, right? Come on, buy one.”

The boy was terribly thin, but he was not a unique site throughout the capital. He looked like any number of unfortunate street orphans that could be found in any city in this world. This boy happened to be missing one of his legs. Heath walked over to the child and squatted down to take a closer look at one of the pictures.

“You drew this?” he asked.

“Yup. But no one wants to buy them. Even though they’re so cheap.”

“Where are your parents?”

“Don’t have any. Got a little sister, but she’s not doing so good, and she’s always sleeping.”

“How do you get food?”

“Used to steal. But I stole from the wrong guy one time, and he took my leg off. It’s been whatever we could find in the garbage since then. Hey, are ya gonna buy something? I heard that good drawers can sell their stuff for a lotta money. I wanna do that so my li’l sis can eat somethin’ that’s not moldy for once.”

“I’m not very well informed on art, but I like the colours,” said Heath as he continued to study a particular drawing. “Say, the cute girl in this picture... is she your sister?”

The boy nodded happily, “Mhm! This is one of my best ones. It’ll sell for a high price one day for sure.”

“Hmm, now that you mention it, I do get the feeling that you’ve got plenty of potential as an artist. Perhaps you have a talent for drawing. Come with me for a bit.”

“With you? Where?”

Heath’s eyes shone with the same kind of intensity as a certain restaurant owner’s, and he spoke to the boy with a smile, “To our world, of course. You are most welcome there, as are all outcasts who harbor talent. Won’t you join us in our wonderful mission to turn this world on its head? Won’t you join us in bringing all the sins of this world to light? Let us help each other bring about the happy end of this world.”



By some miracle, Lostchile had managed to outmaneuver the knights. He found himself in an empty alleyway and began to slowly pull in his dispersed particles. When he finally corporealized, he collapsed against the wall, completely out of breath and on the edge of total exhaustion.

“Ngh... Hah... Haah... H-How could this... Happen to me?”

“Hmm, this is delish! It doesn’t match up to the Chief’s cooking, but that store’s sandwiches are great!”

It seemed this alleyway wasn’t quite as empty as Lostchile hoped. A blonde girl with long hair emerged from a stairway at the back of a nearby building. Her knightly outfit clinked as she plopped herself onto the stairs and began stuffing her face with a scrumptious-looking sandwich.

She must have felt Lostchile’s eyes on her, because she stopped mid-chew to slowly look back at him.

“Umm,” she hesitated, then quickly redoubled her chewing efforts. She scarfed down the remainder of her sandwich and began to make excuses, “Um, well, you see, I’m not actually slacking off or anything right now. It’s just that I uh, yeah! I have two lunch breaks today... Um...”

Lostchile rose to his feet, but remained silent. Henriette rubbed the back of her head nervously and glanced around, only for a wanted poster hung right next to Lostchile to catch her attention. She looked back and forth between it and the disgraced nobleman for a long moment.

“You wouldn’t happen to be... that guy we’re supposed to be looking for, would you?”

Without a word, Lostchile turned on his heel and began walking away.

“Uhh... W-Would you, um, mind coming with me for a bit? Please? Is now not a good time? Do you have something to do? I just have a couple questions to ask you...”

“Silence, girl!”

“Hiii-agghh! This is interference with the duties of a public servant! Greatsword Dance!” As she shouted, she drew a large sword from its place on her back.

Lostchile was quick to explode into a cloud of mist, but his exhaustion was severely affecting his magical output. He moved to attack her, but since he was unable to fully disperse his physical form, the knight girl’s powerful attack skill blew him right into the wall on the opposite side of the alley. She rushed over to his freshly unconscious body.

“Waaa! A-Are you okay?! Um! If I got the wrong person, I’m so sorry! I

don't think I did though! Please don't sue me!"

The group of knights that had previously been chasing after Lostchile finally arrived on the scene.

"Henrietta! Did you do this?!" shouted the one that seemed to be in charge.

"Um?! Well, uh! I was just gonna bring him in for questioning!"

"Nice going, newbie! This is gonna look great on your record!"

"Eh?! Really?"

"Looks like you're gonna be making waves, newbie! You caught an internationally wanted criminal all by your lonesome!"

"Nice going, Henrietta! You're definitely gonna get yourself a bonus for this!"

"Yay! I'm not sure I get it, but yay!"



"... And Pochi chose to disappear once again. After all that," bemoaned Bibia, who sat at his usual spot at the counter of the Outcast's Restaurant.

"Pochi's got his pride to think about," replied Dennis while idly washing plates behind the counter.

"He could have stayed and lived a fine life here, though. Do you not agree, Atrielle?"

Atrielle was sitting at a nearby table and humming to herself, a rare sound indeed. Despite her unusually expressive mood, she didn't reply to Bibia's question. Instead, she simply showed him a vaguely positive inkling on her nearly expressionless face. He'd come to see her once before, so it was inevitable that they would meet again. She was content with that knowledge.

The doorbell chimed to announce the arrival of a small group of people. Everyone smiled at the sight of the new arrivals.

"Hey, hey, it's me!" exclaimed one.

"And me!" added another. The two unique-haired mage girls were joined by Bethel, who was eager to announce her own arrival, as well.

"And don't forget lil' ol' Bethel!"

A fourth person wheeled in after the three mages.

"Hello! Please forgive me for my absence!" said the maid girl as she maneuvered her wheelchair into the restaurant.

"Olivia! You're looking well!"

“It is thanks to your efforts!”

“Worked out super handily, I’d say. If your core gem had been smashed instead of cleanly cut down the middle, then you’da been done for,” Bethel walked over to give Olivia a hand and push her wheelchair while continuing her explanation, “It was definitely touch ‘n’ go for a while.

“I got all those professors and researchers from the capital to come down, but we couldn’t make heads or tails from your fancy, convoluted guts. We’re still researching, though, so there’s a chance we’ll get your legs working again eventually. And hell, if all goes well, then we could prob’ly start crafting artificial limbs for folks. The King of Contraptions keeps contributing to the world even now...”

“I’m really happy for you, Olivia!”

“Welcome home, Olivia.”

“You really are indestructible, aren’tcha?! You had us all worried!”

The crew all chattered among themselves for a while, catching up and reveling in the renewed calmness of the town. The doorbell chimed once again, and their attention shifted to Judge Sestapich, who had appeared in the doorway.

“Sestapich! Been a while!”

“Hello, Dennis. Did you hear that Lostchile has been caught?”

“No, I hadn’t heard... Did you come all the way here just to let us know?”

“No, I came to bring you this.”

Judge Sestapich took a step to the side to make room for Green and Porobo, who appeared to be carrying a particularly heavy box. They set it down in the middle of the restaurant with a thud, and everyone gathered around to get a better look at it. The box was filled to the brim with books that should have been destroyed in the fire that had threatened the restaurant so long ago. Many of them were stained with soot, and some even had singed corners, but they all looked to be in rather good condition.

“Not all of them could be saved, unfortunately... but we managed this much. Most of them have been donated to the royal library per Lady Atrielle’s request, but we have brought a small number of them here to you.”

Atrielle smiled.

“As you know, these books are worth quite a lot, so naturally I was ordered to accompany their delivery,” Sestapich finished his explanation with a single clap of his hands.

“Thank you for coming all the way out here,” said Dennis. “And thanks

for helping Entmori get published again.”

“Oh, no, no. Thank you. I got most of the credit for Lostchile’s apprehension, after all.”

“Master Dennis!” Olivia cried out as she fervently wheeled herself toward the box. “I can help with this new task before us! Allow me to place these books up on the shelf! I will pour my very soul into this duty!”

“I’m not gonna make the girl in a wheelchair do work.”

Atrielle put a hand on Olivia’s shoulder and said, “Let’s put them up together, Olivia.”

“Yes! Let’s!”

Olivia and Atrielle promptly busied themselves with the books. The expressionless girls worked silently, but it was clear to any onlookers that they were enjoying each other’s company. About halfway into their work, a certain book caught Olivia’s eye and caused her to stop dead in her tracks. Atrielle bent over to get a closer look at the book that Olivia was gripping tightly in both of her hands.

The book somehow seemed simultaneously new and very, very old. Its cover simply read *Yujitt’s Manuscripts*. Had Bibia been present to help, he undoubtedly would have devolved into an incomprehensible string of rants about the historical, scientific, academic, and personal importance of this book. Tangents about the King of Contraptions’ great contributions to the study of magic and history in general would fill the restaurant, and so on. Alas, he wasn’t here.

Instead, Atrielle simply pointed at the book and asked, “Olivia, do you like this book?”

Olivia seemed to regain her senses, but was still at a loss for words. Eventually, she mumbled, “Yes... I very much do.” She hugged the book lovingly to her chest and whispered to it, “I found you... Finally...”



This is a tale from a very long time ago.

A decent-looking house stood on the main street of the capital city. It wasn’t a particularly large house, but its state implied unsavory things about its shady owner. Or perhaps the owner was just bad at general upkeep. Paper and various objects of all kinds were strewn among a sea of general rubbish that was piled high everywhere around the house. One would be hard-pressed

to find a safe place to stand in this monumental mess.

Within the house, a small boy with bluish-blond hair fiddled with something. It let out a click, and he stepped away, satisfied.

“Hahahaha! I have done it!” he shouted at the top of his lungs as he waved his hands triumphantly in the air, “History’s first fully autonomous magic doll! Surely only a genius such as I could have created such a thing!”

He bent over the magic doll and pressed something. The doll, a beautiful maid girl, whirred to life and opened its eyes for the first time. Her eyes slid up and down the fidgeting boy before she found her voice and began to speak.

“... Um. Wh-Who am... Wh-Where...?”

“You are Olivia the Magic Doll! I have bestowed upon you the pleasure of being my very first servant! Hahahaha! Now rise, doll!”

“Umm... Ah! You are my master, aren’t you?! Master! Please order me to do something! It can even be something lewd!”

“Wha—No! I don’t remember programming you to be degenerate! Maybe one of those all-nighters got away from me? What the hell, me?!?”

“I understand, Master. If you do not wish to be lewd with me, then it is clear as day that you desire fried rice, right?! I shall serve some up!”

“It’s my favorite dish, but I don’t think you should place quite that much importance on it! It’s not a priority at all!”

Protest as he may, the boy had gone many days and nights without properly feeding himself. He had focused all of his time on the creation of this magic doll, and his rumbling stomach betrayed that fact. He grudgingly allowed her to cook him fried rice.

This was the first time that the boy could recall having someone to eat with. He could almost be excited about the fact if it wasn’t for the slop that lay in front of him. The bowl of “fried rice” was suspiciously gooey and certainly did not look at all appetizing. Still, he shoved a spoon into it and raised a spoonful of the slick mess to his mouth.

“The first order carried out by history’s first magic doll is... fried rice,” he sighed, “Something feels off about this.”

“Are you enjoying it?! Master Yujitt! Please tell me, is it delicious?!?”

“It’s gooey but... edible.”

“I did briefly consider that I should not have used the whole bottle of olive oil...”

“You must learn to restrain yourself, doll!”

“Of course! I will learn lots of things and dutifully store them all in my memory! I shall serve you for all of eternity!”

Happy voices filled the still messy dining room.

This is a tale from a long, long time ago. A story of a small dining table. And that happy tale has come to an end... for now.

Afterword

The lead outcasts of the first volume of *Welcome to the Outcast's Restaurant!* were Dennis and Atrielle. This time around, the maid robot Olivia took on the spotlight. She may as well be this volume's protagonist.

In truth, Olivia was originally the heroine of another story that I came up with a long time ago. It was a story about two people traversing the American continent after the perilous end of civilization. One was a young boy, and the other a maid robot. In other words, they were the prototypes for Yujitt and Olivia.

The two explored the continent together in search of the lost wisdom of civilizations long past. Their destination was a certain library that was rumored to house the entirety of human knowledge from every era of mankind.

Though those two characters share a lot of similarities with the two we have now come to know, their relationship wasn't quite the same as in this novel. In that version, Olivia was not Yujitt's creation, but rather his older sister.

I planned to have her die at the end of that story. I suppose that means that she was a character that was always going to meet such a fate. However, while writing this book, I waited until the very end to decide whether or not I wanted her to live.

In other words, even I was shocked to see that scene where she died. As I wrote that monologue about her world closing and her slow return to silence, I really felt as though everything was coming to an end. I felt that she genuinely was passing away. Luckily, when it was time for me to write the epilogue, I decided that she should live. And so she did.

I'm glad I made that decision.

By the way, I'd like to draw your attention to the theme of this volume. Unlike the first one, this one's theme is "the past."

Olivia.

Pochi.

Entmori.

Hezmoch.

All but one of these outcasts are ruled by their pasts. This book tells the tale of the pasts of these outcasts. I believe it's important to explore the pasts of such people. After all, what is an outcast but a person whose life is

centered around a pivotal point in the past?

The maid robot who was discarded in the past.

The Fenrir who chose the life of an outcast in the past.

The author who committed a grave mistake and became a pariah as a result in the past.

The cook who became an outcast in a fruitless pursuit to defeat her rival in the past.

Each of their characters is based in the past. It is the ways in which they confront that past that makes them so varied.

I wrote this second volume by carefully tracing the connections between their pasts and the present. Even I did not know where the story would take me. I believed that I'd have these characters face their pasts and search within themselves to learn how to accept this unchangeable part of their lives.

The final conclusion that Olivia came to was not something that came from me, but something that naturally appeared from within Olivia herself. All I did was lend an ear and faithfully write down what she had to tell me.

Those were her words. Not mine.

These things happen sometimes when you write books, and I'm very glad that they do.

So! The second volume of *Welcome to the Outcast's Restaurant!* has finally been published. I have so many people to thank for helping the story reach as far as it has.

Y-sama, who so patiently helped me with revisions and editing.

Gaou-sama, who produced such wonderful illustrations for both this volume and the first one.

Tsumumi-sama and the team of editors who were responsible for the manga adaptation of this story.

And of course, above all, the readers. It is only because of your support that we have made it this far. It is also because of you that Olivia reached her conclusion in this volume.

It makes me feel as though this is a story wherein everyone could use Dennis's restaurant as a kicking-off point, rise to their feet, and move forward. Or something along those lines, anyway.

Seriously, to all of you who picked this book up: I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Don't fret, the story of our loveable crew of outcasts doesn't end here! I pray that we can all meet again in the next volume.

Until next time!

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