

Cat and the Doll

by /a/non

I

Freezing Winter

The crackling of the fire was all I focused on. If I fell asleep now I'm afraid I'd freeze to death, I needed to use as little fire wood as I could. I needed to be smart with the usage, not too little and not too much. If there's too little, the fire would produce more heat than I need. If I put too much I would run out of warmth, and I didn't know how long this blizzard will last for.

Tucked inside a tiny pocket of rock, a natural opening within the earth showing a deep cave, I was attempting to outlast a deadly snow storm within. I was lucky enough to restock my firewood stockpile yesterday, otherwise there was a much more serious chance of me dying within the cold winter's grasp. Wrapping myself as tightly as I could with the dark colors of my cloak, and standing as close to the fire as I could without burning the fabric, I shivered and waited for everything to come to pass.

My impulsive decision to try to stake it out in the wilderness, and the arrogance in assuming that with my ability it would've be like taking an afternoon stroll, has come to bite me. For the past three weeks all I could do was gather enough food to survive, every once in a while managing to magically enthrall a squirrel in order to capture it. I never could stray too far from the sources of water I've memorized, and I'm absolutely certain I've lost weight. A lot of weight. I'm not fully grown yet, I still have time to grow. This isn't good for my future development.

But I had no choice. It was either try to survive out here in the wilderness or be killed by villagers while I slept. I was the adoptive daughter of a so called witch, a leper of the community and an outcast to all of society. She had not done enough to be killed by the enforcers, but neither was she truly so innocent as to not have earned her scorn. At least, this is what I've learned

throughout my years. Throughout my life I was protected and enveloped by her kindness. Kindness was all I knew of her. She had taught me rudimentary magic, as I was one of the gifted, and I had my own natural gifts within the craft to provide to her a decent amount of wealth back once I had matured enough to be able to trade.

But for all her kindness and her tutelage, she was old. Getting older by the day. Already one foot in her grave. Less than four weeks ago, it became two. She held property back when she was alive, and she had designated that property to be given to me once she had left. Me, who shared no blood relation to her. Me, who for most of her life provided to her only trouble. But when her death finally came, the property didn't transfer to me. I had no blood relation. I had no connection to the land, the villagers argued, and the land the witch owned should return to the village instead of me.

Apparently that argument was enough. So I was without land, and from that I had no more rights. A foreigner, a traveler that had decided to stay for more than a decade, they decided. I had no legal power beyond that, and they had given me an ultimatum. Leave or die. I left.

But this had felt like years ago. Now, I'm shivering, cold, perhaps a little afraid. I had enough firewood to last me one more day. I knew from experience that blizzards can last longer. Much longer. Once the fire ran out the only thing I could do was wait and pray. I had already collected as much wood as I could once I noticed the initial snow fall. There's nothing else I could do besides that. I had to wait.

That waiting turned to hours, and then to a day. The snow hadn't let out. My body was cramping from the pain of having to stay still, and I was hungry. But there would be no animals out there if I looked. Again, I would have to pray that the blizzard would finally let out. I had a couple more hours. The snow looked to have been letting up, but I feared that it was my mind playing tricks. When will the snow finally stop falling?

Apparently never. Even after the last of the embers had died

out the snow still continued. There was my lifeline, dead. Soon I will follow. It might take hours, it might take days. I wanted to get it over with.

I got up and stretched out my limbs. No snow could get into this little cave, although water certainly could. My butt wasn't wet, thankfully, as it was dry and the fire was far enough from the mouth of the cave so no snow was nearby. If I was to die I'd prefer to die on my feet, moving. So I walked outside, into the fierce winds. I put my hood over my head, my small and dark feline ears being covered from the worst nips of the wind. I had shoes, I had clothes. I could walk for a while, I think.

Perhaps someone would find me.

So for what felt like hours I trudged through the snow. The wind was fierce, at times. But the trees took the brunt of it. The snow was cold, but I had enough body heat to take care of it, and enough magic to produce some more when I didn't have enough.

And my will was still strong enough to carry me through the worse pangs of helplessness. I couldn't see the sun. I couldn't see the sky. I could barely see what was in front of my face, but little more than that. I had decided to commit suicide, and the thought had crept into my soul the more I walked. If I was smiling, I couldn't feel it. If I was frowning, the problem was still the same. If I was crying, my face had already frozen and the tears had done so as well.

My breathing was heavy, and limbs felt sluggish. I felt tired. Very, very tired. Now felt like a good time to rest. Eventually I no longer was caught by surprise by a tree manifesting in front of me, most likely I had walked into an open field. No wonder the winds were harsher now. I couldn't see my own hands, it was this bad. I've never experienced such a terrible blizzard. Perhaps the Lord had decided that in order to take me I needed to be brought down by nature's wrath.

I might as well give up. There's no hope, no one would be able to see me anymore. I had no one. The only one I had loved is gone now. I'm alone.

Falling on my knees, I played with the snow under me, turn-

ing them into balls until even their sensation I could no longer feel. I waited for the cold to take me.

II

The Catnap

Day I

In the next moment, I was looking at a ceiling I never knew existed. Is this the afterlife? It's a bit dirty. And warm. I turned my head to take in more of the surroundings and noticed a fire, cabinets made of some sort of white wood. I was laying on a bed, on a pillow of white and covered with equally white blankets. If this is the afterlife then it's filled with white. Which wasn't all that far from what I had expected.

The fire itself was contained within a fireplace, what a shock, and covered with stones. I moved the blanket off of my body and positioned myself out of bed. I checked for my clothes and was pleasantly surprised they were still on. I already knew this wasn't the afterlife. But now I knew that whoever had saved me didn't fondle me for compensation, and that my maidenhood was still safe. Probably. Hopefully.

Placing my, however, naked feet onto the floor I was taken by the coldness of it. I shouldn't have been, but I was still very tired and wouldn't mind resting a tiny sliver more. But I had enough rationality left in me to know that I should get to know whoever saved me first. And without a doubt, I was saved. Miraculously. I should be dead, by all accounts. And I doubt I was taken to be a slave, either.

Resolving myself I placed my feet onto the grey stone tiled floor, getting up off of the bed and once again taking in my surroundings. A fireplace, that one cabinet I had already seen, a door as well made of a similar wood as the cabinet. A light source that wasn't coming from a fire, too, was there. I could immediately tell it was magic both from the lack of fire and from the

mana signature it gave off. Whoever saved me might've been a magician, or was very wealthy.

Walking over to the door I opened the metal knob and peeked outside. As I thought, it was still inside outside. Heh. A hallway, to the left of me a staircase and to the right another door at the end. I didn't want to pry too much on my savior's own business, so I walked down the stairs and into the lower floor. The staircase was made of wood, so were the stairs beneath it. So not all of the floor would be wood, then.

The room downstairs was eerily familiar, yet foreign. Wood flooring was what presented itself at the end of the staircase. Two doors, one near the stairs and another on a raised platform of grey stone. Some amount of patterns were on the surface of the stone, deliberate. As if laid out, intentionally. Nice furniture, too. It felt as if I was in a wealthy man's entrance and in his kitchen at the same time.

I ignored all that for the moment and looked over the nearest door. A latch was attached. I unlocked the door and peeked outside. A blast of cold air assaulted me in retaliation, quickly I closed the door and redid the latch. Alright, I figured out two things from this. This is the exit, and it's still blowing heavy snow outside. That's good to know.

I walked over to the door on the raised stone platform, careful not to make too much noise by hitting any of the furniture or kitchenware. If there wasn't anyone outside, or anyone out here, then there was a possibility my savior, or saviors, was behind this door. I placed an ear on it and listened. I heard nothing. I turned the knob and peeked itself.

Darkness. I opened it gradually, letting light from the magical lamp in the kitchen fill in the space. Where there was nothing, now there was a lot of something. What looked like pottery, or something similar. Bits of what might've been animals were laid everywhere. Torsos with oddly overlapping segments, legs and feet neatly arranged. What looked like the figures of tiny people could be occasionally seen. But none of it was moving.

With some amount of trepidation I made a call. "H-hello? Is

anyone in here?"

I waited.

But nothing came. "Alright." I said, a bit softer in tone. I closed the door and made my way upstairs. There was no one down there, or at least no one awake. So all that is left is checking the only room I hadn't opened.

The floor didn't creak. Neither did the stairs, nothing did. This entire building must've been very well insulated, although the floor was cold it wasn't freezing. And it sure as hell was freezing out there.

Arriving at the pale door I decided to knock. No response came. I opened the door and let out the sound of my voice, but again no response came. The room was as dark as the last, if not more thanks to there not being any other source of light. I repeated myself again, but again nothing came. I slowly closed the door and headed back towards my room, to see if anyone might've been there.

Of course, no one was. The fire was still burning, and the magic lamp still on. But other than that, there was no sign of life. I went down stairs and started to inspect my surroundings.

All of the furniture was expertly crafted. Even my layman's eyes could tell, all the lines were straight and the curves elegant. Some amount of patterns and embellishments were present on some of the cabinets, and the table placed near the left wall was flat and, in some areas, held human like faces in various contortions of emotions flowing along the apron. It was a work of art, and the faces were, while stylistic, frighteningly human. I picked a chair, of which there were only two, and sat on it.

The table was made of a darker kind of wood. The chair shared the same type, or at least color, as the table as well. Neither of the chairs were as elaborate as the table they belonged to, but it was comfortable and felt both well used but incredibly sturdy. I didn't want to check any of the cabinets. I wasn't a thief, I was most likely the guest of either a very kind man, or kind couple.

I ran my fingers across the wooden faces. I felt their mana signatures, tasted it on my fingers. My sight could only give me so much information, and I knew from sight alone that everything here was in some way enchanted. Not heavily so, but without feeling it I wouldn't be able to tell what kind. On the table it felt like an enchantment to harden the wood a bit. It certainly could get harder, the amount of mana inside was not at its peak saturation point.

I watched the patterns the enchantment formed itself into. A person can vaguely tell how skilled the work is by either how dense the mana or how elaborate the patterns if it wasn't a deep and true enchantment. The patterns I could see within weren't marvelous, I've seen better. Rarely, but I have. But this was skilled. From the taste of it, the aesthetic of it alone, I could tell it was designed by a light-aligned craftsmen. Those people force things into shape rather than subtly move them. That had a lovely quality of its own, of course. It wasn't bad.

Certainly better than whatever I could make.

I moved my attention away from the chair and table and into the kitchen. Cast iron pans and iron knives could be seen. Some were hanging, others were laying flat on what looked to be a stone table. It was a small one, and below it there were stone drawers. The stone itself was the same as the stone below, and the stone that the walls were also made of. I didn't take a peek in there. A fire place was set up in the corner, a single spider pan nearby. That is, a pan with a couple of legs attached to it.

Everything felt lived in but tidy. I'm starting to like whoever lived here, whoever it is either very wealthy or very skilled and conscientious. Of course, also kind considering I was saved. I wonder how long he'd let me stay here for? Surely for as long as the blizzard lasts, at least. And if I can prove myself useful perhaps indefinitely.

But that all depends on the information I can get from him, or them. Sitting down on the chair once again I waited and began to lay out my plans. With nothing to do and me too courteous I waited for someone's, anyone's, arrival.

I played with my tail for a while. Groomed my hair as best as I could, not having a comb I couldn't do much with it. Touched my ears, they were still there. They weren't taken by frostbite, thankfully. Neither was my tail, its black fur as alluring as ever. Tens of minutes flew by as I waited. I was well acquainted with waiting and I certainly could stay here for a long time. But there are things to explore. And things to explore is something I can't ignore forever.

Deciding to break some courtesy I decided to explore the drawers. Foodstuff, mostly. Bread, what looked to be meat in another. The drawers themselves were probably enchanted to maintain freshness. Another drawer looked to contain some tableware, and another a couple of utensils. Everything but the utensils were common. I picked up what looked to be a fork, three prongs making up its pointy bits. I poked the tips and felt their sharpness. It didn't break skin but it was indeed very sharp.

"Prying on my things, dear wench?"

I shot to look behind me, placing the fork back into the drawer and then quickly redrawing my hands back as close as me as I could. A man, his eyes fiery and deep set, clad in colorful clothes and covered in particles of snow, watched me. He was in the process of removing his hood, letting long strands of hair to be revealed and his pale skin to become obvious. He wasn't near to me, but his presence was sudden. I didn't hear a thing. I didn't feel a thing, not a shift in the mana in the room.

"N-no, I was bored, and I had been waiting for so long for someone's arrival that I couldn't help but want to explore. I didn't mean to pry, uh, good sir." My voice spoke too quickly at first, but I managed to lay out a more spaced layering by the end. The man didn't respond, instead he continued to take off the heaviest of his clothes.

Laying his cloak and taking off his boots, almost ignoring my presence after instilling in me the fear of a snoop, I waited and watched. I didn't move. I was on my knees, as the cabinet to the utensils was low. I took the time he had decided to spend undress to take everything in. I needed some information, where I was,

and more importantly I needed to make him know I'm not a thief, and am actually very thankful for his help.

As far as I could be concerned, he was a godsend. I'm not so callous as to ignore genuine help.

"Uh, um. Good sir? I really didn't mean to pry, I—"

"I was merely teasing you, girl. I knew from the moment I touched your skin that you were a magician, and as a magician you'd know the importance of certain magics." Almost teasing if not for the monotone expression of his voice, I collected the information presented and paused to reconsider my words. He's right, I am a magician. A fork would not be what I would steal. The lamps are much more valuable, and seeing as I was inspecting the utensils rather than attempting to steal the lamps, I wouldn't be a good thief.

"Thank you for your frank forgiveness, good sir. I promise, now that you are here, that I won't snoop around your stuff."

The good sir finished taking off his boots, revealing his pale feet and lifting himself to his full height. I had thought the boots and cloak were making him more visually impressive than he truly was, but now I see I was mistaken. He was, by sight alone, a cultivator of the essence of light.. And further, he was a man of significant height. I nodded at his standing, for whatever reason. I felt the need to nod at seeing him stand.

"And when I'm gone," he turned to stare at me, "I assume you'd get bored enough to search my home?" No smile was on his face. Some unknown pressure started to well up inside me, the pressure of conviction. I had made a verbal slip.

"N-no, no no, no. Of course not. I didn't mean it that way, sir. It's just..."

A smile broke on his face. A small one. Barely noticeable, and I might've missed it if reading this man's mood wasn't the difference between getting kicked out and staying. I needed him to not see me as a threat to his property. A smile, however small, might have been a good sign. I want to get to know him better before I threw at him the worse of my tricks, and if I played my hand wrong I might end up with a very bad end.

He waited for my response, staring at me without moving. Only a tiny bit awkward. "It's just that, yes, I do get a bit bored at times."

A quick smile, a show of good spirit rather than genuine, broke through his face and as quickly left. "You'll have to make do with what I have and am willing to offer, then. My voice and words would be the entirety of it, sadly. There is little else you can do to pass the time. And I'm very interested in how you've wound up in the Morrígu Pianura, the open field between my forest and the country onward."

The good sir gestured for me to get up, which I hesitantly did. He drew out a chair, and then drew out another. Sitting on the one closest to the entrance door, he waited for me. Most likely to have me sit. I wasn't that comfortable doing so, the sitting position was a bit more intimate than I would've preferred given that it was right next to each other. I moved over and also moved the chair to face another side of the table. Then I sat down.

"Understandable." Was all he gave. I nodded. "Make yourself comfortable. I have some questions that I want answered before I serve you a meal, if you haven't already helped yourself to one." Running his hand through his hair he looked at me, an eye almost in the corner. His long, blond hair was beginning to cover his face with strands, it's understandable why he moved it so.

"Good sir, I do appreciate you helping me. Truly, by all rights I should be dead. But, I think these accusations of theft should be stopped. I'm not a thief and I do not appreciate being called one." I tried to place my best serious face, my back straightening and my hands on my lap. I am not a docile kitten for him to make fun at.

"Sorry," that was easier than I thought, "It's been a long time since I've interacted with anyone. Forgive me if I tried to have some fun at your expense. Let's ignore all that and get to the questions, I'd prefer them answered immediately."

I straightened out my back further and waited, giving him a nod.

“Did you intend to walk out into the plains within this blizzard?”

“No, I was caught within it one day and tried my best to survive for a couple of days. I had little wood, and little fire. Once it ran out, I had decided to die somewhere but where I had stayed shelter. I wasn’t thinking straight, I preferred to die walking rather than to die in a sad little forgotten hole in the ground.” This was all true, and I had no reason to lie to him with this. So I told the truth as I remembered it. He gave a polite nod, turning his eyes down to the table.

“I see. Perhaps you’ve been guided by the divine, I had been out walking my usual pattern of walking,” why the hell was he walking in a blizzard? “And I wouldn’t let a little snow break that habit. I sensed an oddly dense amount of mana and had decided to check it out. In little than a minute of walking I had found a small cat, black and cold bitten, laying and slowly being covered within snow.”

I nodded. Whatever eccentricity this man has could be overlooked for now. I’ll also assume the small cat was me, I was part feline after all.

“But this isn’t about me. To the next question. Are, or were, you alone?” I nodded. He nodded too. “I see. Then the last one, why are you alone?”

None of your business, that’s why. But I couldn’t answer him with that. I bit my lips, my sharp canine threatening to pierce through my skin. Do I answer him truthfully? A partial truth, but no lie. “I was driven out by my village. I am not an outlaw, on the divine I swear and oath to on this, but my circumstances are too personal for me to discuss to a stranger. Even when that stranger was my savior. Again, I give my thanks, and I beg your pardon.”

“I’m not one for prying myself. Very well, I’ll trust you. I had a final question but I think I already know the answer. I’ll ask anyway. Do you wish to stay until the winter storm breaks, kitten?”

I narrowed my eyes. I’m sure others might think it cute to

keep calling me by my feline qualities, but there's a limit of my tolerance. "If it wouldn't displease you, I would prefer that. And it's Eithne, good sir."

The good sir's eyes widened at that and he gave a slight chuckle, brushing his hair with his hands once again while looking away. As if bashfully. "Names! Names, I thought I was forgetting something. Sorry Eithne, I'll remember yours. Through the years I've gone by many names, but for you I'll give you the one given to me in birth."

Extending his hand out to me, as if to shake with me, he gave me his name. "Alfred." A gave him a smile and shook his hand. He perhaps was putting more strength into it than he intended, it sort of hurt.

"Good sir Alfred."

"Just Alfred, it's simpler that way."

"Alfred." He nodded his head and let go of my hand, to my relief. Getting up off his chair he moved on over to the kitchen, which was only a few steps away from him anyway.

"Now, you are my guest. And as your patron I'm obliged to serve you a meal. It's been a couple of days since the beginning of the snow storm, so forgive me if I don't have as much as you'd prefer." Alfred crouched down and lit a fire through magic alone. A short casting of a spell, no words were spoken, and very little signature could be seen from his magic. He was both skilled and knowledgeable on natural magic, then.

I gave a polite smile back. "Anything you can give would be fine. I'd be fine with eating nothing, but I'd prefer to have some drink."

He looked over at me and straightened his posture out. "If I've got your story correctly, you've been left alone in a hole for at least four days. I doubt you've had enough food on you to last you through all that time. Don't be so humble, girl."

How patronizing. I maintained my smile and nodded. I would've preferred if he didn't carry his kindness so heavy handily, but I can't complain. It'd be wrong of me to complain, actually. "Thank you, Alfred."

He nodded as he opened up a drawer and took out a bowl full of what looked to be cubed lard. He grabbed a cube, which was roughly an inch by inch in dimension, and threw it on a pan that had already been set near the fire. For all the technology he held the lack of a magically enchanted fire stove was evident. Those were costly to use in terms of mana, and costly in general. But from observing everything in this house I doubt cost was an issue.

"I have a couple of steaks and vegetables still left. Let's have you eat that. You don't mind, of course."

"Of course."

He gave a laugh at that. What's so funny?

I watched as he set aside the piece of steak out of the drawer and took out several other vegetables with it as well. Garlic, some sort of leafy herb, long green sticks that looked like asparagus. I watched as he seasoned and prepared the precut slice of meat, and I wondered how long ago was the last time I had meat from an animal larger than a squirrel. Maybe years? Or perhaps only a year, I had splurged once and decided to try out steak with mom.

Let's not think about those memories for now.

Alfred placed the slice of steak, sizzling becoming apparent, and also placed a couple of sticks of asparagus alongside it. He flipped it once he thought it was good enough, I guess, and added another more cube of lard on top of the steak. The lard melted, and eventually everything was done. Taking out a piece a dish from a drawer, he seemed to really like playing things in those drawers, he placed everything on a plate and then put the plate on the table, in front of me.

He gave me a knife and a fork, both of which I accepted. Then he sliced a piece of bread and gave that to me also. Looks like I'm going to be very full tonight.

With some amount of trepidation, and some amount of saliva control, I nodded at everything in front of me. "Thank you, Alfred. This might be too much for someone like me, though."

"It's all I have."

I looked over at Alfred, he deciding to ignore me and opened the door to the creepy room filled with strange miniature body parts. "I assume you've also went in here,"

"Yes. May I eat, Alfred?"

He turned to me with a quizzical look. He opened his mouth and lifted his finger, but closed it and reconsidered his thoughts. "You're being too polite with me, Eithne. Please, eat."

I gave no response and started to dig in. It had taken most of my self control not to inhale the meal the moment it was presented to me, rather than scolding me for my politeness he should be complimenting me on my level of self-control. Perhaps it was the hunger talking, or perhaps Alfred really was a good cook, but I've never tasted a meal so good and hearty in my life. If I were a man I'd ask for his hand on the spot.

"Enjoy the meal." I heard the clink of a door closing behind me. I ignored it, and I certainly was going to enjoy this.

The meal flashed by me, I don't think I truly tasted anything beyond the savoriness of the steak. Or maybe I had? I can't remember. It's certainly not that I was poisoned, I ate too fast and chewed too little. By the time I had gone back to my senses I was once again alone. I didn't know how Alfred dealt with his dishes, so I set the fork and knife down and considered my options. I could spend some amount of times thinking about my interactions with Alfred and what I can do to get in his good graces, hopefully for as long as he'd let me stay.

Or I could acquire new information. His lifestyle and what he does, and why he's out here, would be a good start. Light aligned cultivators are a rare enough sight, stories of these kinds of people living out in the woods as hermits isn't uncommon. Was he one of those? There were two chairs, after all. But that was all the evidence I had for that thought. I don't think finding out more information out of him before I try to decide my future actions would be bad.

That settles it. I can't go outside and from what I can tell, there was nothing to wash the dishes with. So I left the plate on

the table and knocked on the door that Alfred had walked into. An irritated voice came back.

"Come in." Did I do something wrong? How do I make up for this? Shit. What did I do?

I creaked the door open and peeked inside. Light was shining, and what I was presented with was a less creepy version of what I had peeked into last time. A lot of what looked to be clay dolls, body parts laid around. None looked real, all looked to have been made of clay. Most of it was white, some of it was darker, and very few red. This wasn't like any pottery I've seen or been to. I couldn't tell from the darkness, but all of these things look frighteningly real! If it weren't for their strange colorations and lack of blood, I would've thought they were real beings.

"Alfred?" I asked, keeping my voice sweet.

"Eithne. I should've told you not to disturb me, but not saying was my own fault. How was your meal?" Alfred was in the corner of a room, sitting on a chair. His hands looked wet and had some sort of white substance on it. In front of him laid another clay sculpture, the body of a doll. This one looked complete, frighteningly human from afar. I wonder if that would stay the same if I got closer?

But, I had disturbed him. That was the cause of his irritation. But given that he is still being polite it wasn't an impasse. "Sorry, Alfred. I'll remember that from now on. I wanted to figure out what you were up to, and to ask if there is a way for me to clean the dishes?" My voice lost some of its sweetness. Overdoing it backfires, and to begin with I don't think Alfred is being influenced by it much.

He gave me a look from the corner of his eye. "I don't blame you. Taken into a stranger's home after resolving yourself to death, and losing conscious in the middle of a snow storm, you've adjusted well all considering. Come here. Mind all the parts, don't break anything. For your own sake, not mine."

That was a genuine threat. I nodded and walked over to his seat, carefully making sure I don't step on anything on the ground. Not that there was anything there. My hands were kept

near my chest, and my tail wrapped around my hips. Even my ears were flat, not entirely of my own volition. My ears told me more about my moods than I could myself. I was a bit scared was what they were telling me now.

I arrived next to him and inspected his work. The figure looked more real up close than it did from afar. It was a cute thing, small and dainty. Its features were perfect, its face was enough to make me grow green in envy, if it weren't a sculpture, that is. "You've made this? All this?"

"Who else but I? Yes, this is my work. My life's work. My life's passion. No more words are needed for that, respect my pieces when you come in here. If even a single one were to be broken by you, I will throw you out into the snowy winds without hesitation. Do you understand?"

He fed me, saved me, and now is threatening to indirectly kill me? What a complicated man. I'd laugh if my ears weren't so tightly clutched to my head. I knew I wouldn't be able to fake confidence in this situation, and if all he asked of me was to not break his things, I'd be a savage to be offended. I nodded, "Yes, Si— Alfred. Understood."

"Good. Yes, I'm an artist. My life's goal has been to produce a lifelike piece of art. My friends say I'm getting closer by the day, but the more I adventure into these depths the more lost I feel in the amount I've yet to perfect." A solemn shadow fell over Alfred's face. "My passion is doll making. Specifically of articulated dolls, the more articulate the better. Ball joints are what I've rested on for the majority of my work, as you can see."

Alfred moves the right hand of the naked and bare doll, moving the individual fingers and the elbows. Even the shoulder could articulate up and down, both literally and within the socket. The amount of movement was lifelike.

"There's nothing more to me. You're a magician, yes? Then you've seen the enchantments I'm capable." Alfred moved his thumbs over the face of the doll, affectionately. "And my body I'm sure you've also seen. Not hard to piece in the puzzles."

"Yes...you're a light aligned cultivator, I can tell that much easily. Do you belong to any school?"

Alfred chuckled. "Lass, no school spends their time cultivating the art of non-lethal craftsmanship. I'm solitary, although I do have friends who share some of my passions."

"Do you mind my prying?"

Before answering Alfred took up a tool, what looked to be a paint brush, and began to apply paint on the doll. "Not so far, no. I'll tell you when I don't want to speak. If it's about my dolls, I implore you to ask," he said while applying a soft red to the lips of the sculpture. How pretty. That wasn't a feature common in any other of the sculptures in this room.

And, sure, they're pretty, and they're cute. But I can't care beyond that, and I don't want to force myself to. I smiled, but something in his eyes told me he knew that my smile was plastered on, not genuine. But I continued. "If you'll allow a bit of frankness, I don't have an interest in dolls or sculptures. But I am interested in you."

Alfred carried the look in his eyes, the beginning of non-friendly suspicion. "A shame. Eithne, if I'm to be frank too, your attempts to manipulate me aren't appreciated."

"Beg your pardon?" Shit. Should I stop, then? How?

"Your forced smiles, your gratingly sweet voice. I will not throw you away and neither do I have an interest in your body. Be genuine with me. I've not had human contact in a long while and I don't want to play the social mind games of women." I messed up. But he's giving me plenty of bait to hang on to. I let go of my smile and took a step back. I felt that now would be the correct time to let my frustration with his actions show somewhat. But I ruthlessly curbed the feelings, not now. Wait a couple of days, if ever.

"Very well. I'm sorry to bother you, Alfred. I'll...go do something else then. Anything."

"Giving up on the questions, then?"

"Reluctantly. I feel I've took too much advantage of your kindness, I appreciate your warning. I've never meant to offend."

Alfred smiled, a sarcastic one. "At least you admit it, even if tactically. The room you've slept in is yours. I've arranged for you new clothes. You stink, kitten, and unfortunately I've not designed my house to include an indoor bath. However, there is a towel and a bucket, along with soap. Use that, then change your clothes."

Now would be a good time to blush. I didn't respond, but instead carefully moved my way out of the room. That was plain rude, and uncalled for. Can you blame a girl for making herself pleasant and presentable? What a bore. I closed the door behind me, Alfred didn't say a word after I had left.

I'll wash myself. Obviously, of course. I'm a lady, even if I've only turned of proper age recently. I walked to and up the stairs and back into my new gifted room, Alfred had not told me where the clothes he had offered me were placed. If they were anywhere, it would be in this room, right? But where? I doubt he had went up the stairs and placed all the clothes after I had woken up. So, it would have to be in a cabinet.

The room was exactly as I had left it. The fire that didn't look to run out of flame, and the light that still shone. If I'm to sleep here I would need to figure out how to turn that thing off.

I moved over to the cabinet, which was placed next to the end of the bed, and opened the top drawer. A couple of black clothes were arranged within, matching the color of my own clothes. How considerate of Alfred to give me matching clothes, or to give me clothes at all. Too bad he had to insult me in order to inform me of it. Why'd he have to be so rude?

I took out the largest piece, a black dress that would probably fall down to my knees. Peculiar. Dresses should reach to the ankles normally, was I missing a piece? It was a frilly thing, some amount of white had been adorned around as pointless frilly decoration. It didn't look bad. I set it aside and continued to inspect the gifts. Strange and short trousers were inside, white and also frilly at the end. Alfred likes frills.

Another black cloth, not as long as the dress but looked to be a skirt. I guess that's where the rest of the dress was. A pair of

white socks were also inside. But nothing to keep my breasts behind another layer of modesty, I'm not sure if I should take that as an insult or something worse. Just because I didn't have as much fat on my chest on other women doesn't mean I don't need to wear bras, Alfred.

I'd have to remain without a bra, then.

Don't laugh.

That looked to be the entirety of the clothes I had been given. I'll have to figure out how to wear them, but later. I already got a rough idea of how everything is worn, for now I'll wash myself. But where would the bucket and towel be? I inspected the inside of my room. There was nothing beside the fire, and nothing next to the bed except for the cabinet. Next to the cabinet, then?

Ah, how did I not notice it? A wooden frame and iron loops, a bucket filled with water laid. A towel with a small, round bar of soap laid next to it. This is going to be a bit difficult and time consuming to do, but this is the best I got. I took off all my clothes, checking to see if no one opening or peeking through the door while I did so. No one was, neither did I hear footsteps. But from experience I know Alfred can be dangerously quiet with his movement.

I dipped the towel into the water and once it had gotten wet enough, took it out and began to rub it across my body. Once wet, I dunked the soap into the water as well and began to scrub myself. I did this for a while, until most of my body was covered, and then began to rub it off using the still wet towel. I did this as many times as it needed to be done, squeezing the towel to remove any dirt or grime on it, and once I was satisfied the water inside the bucket was dark and murky. I knew I was dirty, this didn't come as a surprise.

I hoped I'd smell better. I'd gotten use to my own smell, and given that I had been out for weeks in the wild alone and trying to survive it wasn't much of a problem. Up until now, that is. I moved over to the clothes which I had arranged ontop of the bed and began to think about the correct order of dress. The short trouser looking things would have to be worn first. So these are

underwear, then. I hope they fit, there was a lace at the top that could be tightened so I imagine I could make it fit.

I put it on, one foot and then another, and noticed that it had already fit pretty well. Just a bit of tightening and everything would stay. Next would be the skirt. How would I wear this? Another long belt like lace was at the end of it, so I'd have to repeat the pattern. It, again, fit rather well. The dress would be easy, I've worn plenty of dresses before. My old clothes, which were ragged, hole filled, and somewhat dirty was also a dress.

On closer consideration, perhaps Alfred was being more than polite in ignoring how unsightly I was. My ears once again were pulled close to my head. Shoot.

All that was left to put on were the socks. I should've put it on when I got this short dress in place, it's going to be a slightly more difficult to move myself into position to get them over my feet.

I sat on the bed and tried to move my feet closer to my body, getting the mouth of the sock inside and jamming my feet it in. Surprisingly I didn't feel any resistance from the dress. It was either made of something elastic, or just very, very well made. I did the same with both feet and then tried to stretch the dress on my body. It didn't have much elasticity. Which meant, it was very well made.

I got up and walked around my room, careful not to get my dress caught in the fire. It wasn't long, the skirt underneath only went to my ankles. But it was easy to move in, and stuck pretty close to my body. Not indecently so, it gave enough room for me to breath. But it was on the tighter side of things, all considered. But it felt snug, it felt right. Almost like it was measured just for me. The thought echoed in my mind once again. Measured just for me.

How long was I out for? What did Alfred do to me while I slept? Do I actually still have my maidenhood? There are ways to check for that. Some indecent, some very simple. I knew precisely one, and it was an intuitive as breathing for me, considering it was magical. I knew some rudimentary amount of healing

magic, and one method would be to observe myself through my magic flow. If something is obstructed or injured, I would know. Or if it moved in any different pattern, I would also know. Knowing yourself is vital for magic, after all.

I sat down again and entered into a light state of meditation. I trace along my nether regions to feel for anything odd. Nothing, it felt as it always did. I could be relatively sure I've not been touched by Alfred in that way. But that doesn't mean he didn't measure me while I was asleep.

When the weather has cleared up I'll confront him about it.

I don't know how long it'll last, however. I don't know what time of day it was to begin with. This is going to be a long and disorientating stay, I could feel it.

Alfred didn't want me to interfere with his work. And I don't know how long he'll be working for, it could be all day. Light cultivators could very literally work all day, everyday, if they wanted. Not even stopping to eat. I'm going to have to figure out a way to spend my time, even just sewing all day would be more worthwhile than this. Let's organize what had happened to me so far.

I explored the house, met Alfred, was told to wash and given new clothes. That's where I'm at so far. From the verbal cues given, I think Alfred had expected me to snoop around his house. There was a water bucket, soap, and clothes left for me in a cabinet that I had refused to explore out of politeness. And it was for me, as Alfred had said so. Would a bit of exploring be acceptable, then? I'll try it.

I got up and moved out of the room, keeping my gait casual and my posture loose but confident. The door didn't creak when open, although it was hinged. I wonder if even the hinges are enchanted? I could explore the enchantments when I'm bored enough.

The door to the end of the hallway contained a room I hadn't yet explored. I stepped over to the door and placed my hand on the knob. I tested it and it wasn't locked. I opened the door carefully and tried to see what was inside. Again, there was no light

to see anything with. It was dark. How could I get light going? Alfred in his strange doll making room had managed to turn on the lights. It must've had a magical switch.

Try to recall traditional formulas for magical lighting, Eithne. I've been to one before, the mansion of a family that I had been trading my silk fabric to. The little lady had shown me around her room and even taught me some basic spells. One of them was the spell for turning off and on the lights of her home. Perfect. I remember now. I flickered fire mana in my hands, extending it outward, and waited for the response from the lights. Eventually, it came.

It was a time thing. Flicking fire mana for a couple of seconds will turn off or on the light, depending on its current state. Looks like Alfred relies on some level of recent tradition, then. He isn't ancient, unlike some cultivators. Telling the difference can be hard when it comes to hermits.

But I'll ignore all that. The room inside was neatly furnished, rugs were laid under tables and on top were various tiny humans in strange postures. Some looked as if they were in the middle of a fight, others as if nothing at all was happening. Some casual, some graceful, some lazy and indolent. All were breathtaking.

But these weren't little people. They were dolls, most likely the dolls that Alfred had made. No, definitely Alfred had made these. I walked along, remembering Alfred's warning of not breaking anything, and looked at each of the dolls. They were on top of smooth and somewhat glossy wooden tables and cabinets, some were hidden behind glass planed doors within those cabinets. Their clothing were colorful, from deep black similar to what I wore, to vibrant blues, greens, and reds. This might've been the most expensive room I've ever walked into.

I moved my tail closer to my hips. I didn't want it to move and hit a doll.

Some of the dolls had odd features. One was deathly pale, wearing brown trousers and a green cloak of floral decorations. Her ears were long, and her eyes a deep green. She held an odd spear, mid spin in her fingers. The shirt she wore looked fancy,

as if a nobleman's. Even her hair was an odd color, green as if literally made of leaves. I've never seen a people like this.

A small group of these strange girls were collected together, all of them similar but each bore the mark of individuality. Some had different spear shapes, others different patterns or different cloak designs. One wore a skirt that reached only to her knees, like my dress had. Some of them even had a deep, almost oak like brownness to their skin, and odd colored eyes. Another group of little people with strange, almost knife like ears were a mixture of brown and white skinned people. None of these groups had spears, instead elaborately designed trinkets in hand.

I hummed. Moving on to another table, this time much more human. Swordsmen, spearmen, bowmen, all sorts of military men were standing there. Some were obviously cultivators, others obviously magicians. But this wasn't as interesting as the strange knife-eared folk, so I moved on. This isn't to say they were less quality, just much more mundane.

I moved along like this, noting the occasional strange people when I caught eye of them. At one point I came across one of my own kind, a catamarán with dark hair like mine. Her eyes were a green rather than a blue, but otherwise she looked strikingly like me. Except much prettier. How enviable. Her clothes were a similar black, but the hem of her dress was frilly and white. The only difference that I could see between her dress and my own. Did she wear the same underwear as I did?

Against my better judgement I gently lifted up the little doll's skirt and peaked inside. A white, short trousers greeted my sight. Her knees were lightly blushing and her skin was a nice pale, but not unnatural, color. Why am I doing this?

"Normally only young boys and teenagers would do that, Eithne."

A sharp inhale and a quick release of the dress came from me. I turned my head to the voice and saw Alfred standing closer than he had any right to, given that I hadn't heard him until he spoke. Why does he keep doing this?

We had a staring contest for a while. Me slightly hunched

over, having been trying to peek under the dress of a lady, and him with his hands behind his back and his eyebrows raised mockingly in a slight worry. I don't know what emotion I was feeling, either murderous rage or wanting to crawl into a hole and die. Why not combine both? No, move onto damage control.

"It's not what it looks like."

"I believe you. I bet you were wondering how much attention I put into the piece is all. I've heard that excuse before." Alfred nodded in sympathy, but that only exacerbated whatever strange feeling was beginning to well up in me. I straightened myself out and put my hands behind my back, looking squarely at Alfred's fiery eyes. I doubt I looked as confident as I was attempting to be.

"N-no, I mean, she's wearing clothes that are almost identical to mine. And, you know, she's like me and all."

"If you were tiny Miss Catamarán, would you accept that excuse?" If I were the catamarán? The doll, he meant? Uh, no. I stayed in silence, moving my gaze away from Alfred's accusing eyes.

Alfred chuckled. I'm growing to be annoy by that laugh. It was too smooth, too natural, too genuine and yet friendly. "Of course not. Just like I won't lift up your skirt to see if you wore the bloomers I had gifted to you, don't do the same for my children." Alfred fixed the dress of the catamarán and adjusted his posture.

Embarrassment assaulted me at my very core. This man was vexing. So what if I wanted to peak at the underwear of a doll? It's not alive. And calling them your 'children'? Even a skilled craftsmen should have a sense of shame and not call inanimate objects with that title. But I didn't say a word of that, instead continuing to avoid Alfred's gaze. I wasn't sure if he was still looking at me, and perhaps he wasn't.

I gave a hesitant glance over to Alfred. He wasn't looking, instead fixing up the hair of the catamarán and making sure her ears were perky. It was creepy how my clothes looked so similar to the little doll, did he purposely give me these? Of course he did.

"A-And, what about you? Why'd you give me these clothes if you didn't want to creep on my wearing it?" I gave my best glare. Neither my words nor my gaze seem to affect the composure of this perverted man.

"To an extent. Given your resemblance to Miss Catamarán it'd be a shame if I didn't dress you up in a similar fashion." Satisfied with the doll's hair he lifted his arms off and looked at me one again. "It'd be a shame to not take advantage of opportunity when idle and harmless curiosity can be satisfied, right?"

"And my own curiosity over the dress of the doll is shameful, hypocrite?" I raged at this, letting a bit of my anger through my voice finally.

Alfred smiled again and turned away, moving across the the floor and towards another section of figures, leaving me to fume on my own. He kept his eyes wandering around the dolls as he answered, "I've been nothing but sympathetic."

"You knew what you were doing."

"Maybe."

"And yet you chastise me for my own manipulation."

Alfred turned back to me, hurt almost in his eyes but a slight smile on his lips. "Have I? You've got me there, Eithne. But you're going to have to learn how to deal with my teasing if you're to stay here for long. A couple days visit by a stray cat won't change that, unfortunately."

I didn't answer, I stayed looking at him with my indignation at full show. He again looked away and asked, "Interested in an introduction to my works?"

"No, thank you, Sir Alfred."

"You hurt me. How do the clothes fit? I had to eyeball them, excuse my looking."

We're not going to change the topic, and I'm not going to let go of the pressure. "Calling on the crimes of another while having only recently done the same crime yourself?"

"You had no bloomers, or underwear to speak of. Not the same crime at all."

"You! Y-you! Perverted freak, deviant, lecher!" I've heard enough. I don't want to deal with this man anymore, and I have no way out of this wretch's home. I walked myself out of the room, careful not to hit any of the dolls while moving. I closed the door behind me, not enough to topple any of the dolls. I knew his threat, I knew his warning. He might be a lewd pervert, but he was still my savior. He'd be a fine man if he simply kept his mouth shut.

Alfred didn't say anything as I left. I leaned against the door and checked my breathing. It was a bit fast. My heart, too, was beating faster than it should've been. Was I this angry? I didn't feel it. My face was on fire, why was it so hot in here? There was no fireplace in this hallway.

Stupid. Idiot. I don't need this. I repositioned myself into my room, closed the door and threw myself into the bed. It was a nice bed, I could say that confidently. I wasn't tired but I wouldn't mind resting on it for a bit. But I couldn't handle the thought of myself having to interact with that man for too long. When will the snowstorm end? When would I get my release out of this sentence? I don't know. I don't even know what time it is!

I collected myself. I laid in silence, staring at the ceiling. Perhaps an hour had flew by the time I had rearranged my thoughts on this situation with a less emotionally distorted lens. Alfred had only teased me slightly for creeping on the underwear, or 'bloomers' as he called them, of one of his dolls. And he had said I stunk. Only the latter was much of a problem in the long run.

I need to remember my circumstances. So far I've been scraping by in the wilderness, barely getting enough food and barely any meat at all. I needed someone to rely on, and he has proven himself to be a generous, if slightly unpleasant, man. Swallow my pride. I can take a bit of teasing if it meant being able to stay under his roof. Get some information, maybe figure out a couple of tricks or spells, and when the time comes leave.

Nothing more complicated.

But I really wanted to know what time it was. I don't want to turn into a night owl, again. I've slept through the days and

awoke during the night, and none of that was a pleasant experience. Swallow your pride, girl. What do you want? I want to be comfortable, for once, under a roof. Once again. Let's go find Alfred and hopefully amend this situation before it escalates towards an outcome that is less than ideal.

I got off of my bed and left my room, my pace even and my posture not too confident this time. I gingerly made my way towards the room filled with dolls and knocked, but got no response. I went downstairs and maneuvered myself towards the doll making room, knocked on it and this time got a response. "Come in."

Opening the door, I looked inside and caught Alfred back in the chair he was on before. "Alfred?"

"Yes?"

"Mind speaking with me for a bit?"

Alfred didn't respond for a couple of seconds, but he placed down his tool and whatever else he had in his hand and got up. "If you're bothering me now then I'm sure it's urgent. Go sit down, I'll come."

I nodded, although he probably couldn't see. I left the door open and sat on the chair I had myself sat on before. The plate was no longer there, I don't know where it went. Alfred's been taking care of my messes as well. Does this man have to ingratiate me to him so much? What's his deal? What does he want from me?

Alfred's footsteps were apparent this time, closing the door behind him and then moving to take a seat on the other chair. Whatever has been silencing his footsteps must've been magic related, or perhaps it's a skill he's honed down through physical means. Somehow this infuriates me. Breath, Eithne, breath.

I didn't give him too much time to speak before I could. Swallow your pride. "I'm sorry, Alfred. I think I've been treating you a tad unfairly. What I said in the doll room I didn't mean, please forgive me. I should be thanking you rather than insulting." That physically hurt to say. But I had to say it, regardless of how forced it might come out as.

Alfred didn't respond. I kept my face aiming at his, a feat that required every ounce of my willpower, and waited for his response. But it didn't come. Instead he had his eyes downcast and his fingers interlocked on his lap. Waiting for a response was hurting more than my apology had. But he spoke, a small smile breaking on his face, "I accept your apology. I've acted overly familiar with you, I'd like to offer an apology of my own. I didn't mean to treat a guest in the way I had."

Overly familiar would be the wrong term but I won't correct him. "Thank you, and I accept your apology."

Silence was cast over our meeting for moments that lasted longer than any other moment I've experienced before. He wasn't saying anything, and I'm not sure he had anything to say. I do, so let's start gathering the important information I needed.

"If you won't mind the sudden shift, I have some questions about my usefulness to you, or possible usefulness for the foreseeable future." I waited for permission. Was I being too formal?

"Go on."

Let's start with questions related to hygiene and food, then. I spoke to him about my visit, where I could find water, how to clean for myself, how to deal with other more base business. It wasn't a long conversation, but it was dense. Eventually after going through everything that I would absolutely need to know in order to not make a fool or ingrate out of myself I went on to the more personal questions that I wanted answered.

"Thank you for the answers, that'll save me a much suffering in the future. I have slightly more personal questions I want to ask."

"Ask them." Alfred had grown to be visibly tired of all my questions. I'll make it short.

"Do you live with anyone else?" An important question, I didn't know if I should expect to interact with a jealous wife who's mistaken my presence for an affair or another man.

"No. I've told you it's been a long time since I've interacted with another person." Oh, I forgot. That'd make sense, then. I gave a smile and tried to clear my shame.

"Sorry, should've given more attention to that. The final one, am I to compensate you in any way?" Please, don't truly be a pervert.

"No. And I'm offended you've asked that, Eithne. I might be inconsiderate but I'm not a miser. Please don't ask those sorts of questions, it's an insult."

What? No, I've met these sorts before. Giving without wanting anything back, there's a limit to how gracious one can be before it's being a simple fool. "Right, sorry."

Again silence fell over us. I gave a nervous chuckle and started to play with my tail. "I didn't mean to offend. But, I think I'm tired now, and you look more tired than me, so pardon me. I'd like to go to bed, and thank you for your kindness, Alfred." Perhaps my smile looked genuine to Alfred, but regardless I saw him warm up at the sight of it. I knew it was genuine, I didn't mean to make it, after all. Felt nice to be treated with such overwhelming generosity. Reminds me of mom, but there was a masculine quality to it that I've not experienced before.

"May the divine watch over your sleep, dear Eithne. And have a good night." Alfred nodded with some slightly regained enthusiasm and walked towards the door. "I'll be working, morning come I give you permission to knock on my door. But if you'd prefer to make breakfast yourself, then you may."

I hummed in approval and watched as he disappeared behind the door. Some unknown tension escaped me and I deflated in my chair, not moving. What was I doing? Making friends with the one who'll decide my life and death, that's what.

I shuffled out of my chair and went upstairs. I wasn't lying when I said I was tired. I don't know how much time had passed, but I wanted to sleep. Sleep would be welcome. What should I wear while sleeping? Just my bloomers would work well enough. And I doubt Alfred is going to crawl into my bed to sleep, either. Would it be befitting of a lady? No. But on another thought, I don't know if Alfred will come into my room or not. I'd rather not expose bare breasts to him by accident.

I'll change into my old clothes, even if it'll be dirtier. Bet-

ter dirty than caught naked. I nodded and entered my room, greeting the same everlasting fire that worked as my fireplace. I should at one point try to figure out whatever spelled operated that fire. It'd be a welcome change of pace to lose myself in magic rather than in socializing and interacting with Alfred. And, of course, useful.

I took off all my clothes but my bloomer and put back on my old dress. It stunk, I could smell it once it was on. But it wasn't absolutely terrible, I've smelled worse. I hope Alfred wouldn't mind a smelly mattress and blanket, but considering I had been sleeping in this already I don't think he'll mind. Or maybe he will. A problem for tomorrow. How long was I asleep for? I forgot to ask that.

It didn't take much for me to fall back into the land beyond, into the ephemeral landscapes of dreams.

III

What Now?

Day 2

And it didn't take more than a moment for me to awaken once again to the sight of the fireplace. How long was that? Why did it go by so fast? Did I blink and mistake that for sleeping? It's incredibly disorientating being in this room. Not knowing the time of day, not being able to see the sun as there were no windows. This isn't going to be healthy for my mental health, I can tell. But no matter how long I stayed on the bed sleep wouldn't take me. Perhaps I had slept?

Worming myself out of the warm comforts of the blanket I placed my bare feet on the cold stone floor. The same cold floor I was already familiar with, there isn't a way to tell the difference between today and tomorrow with this. I undressed and dressed myself in my new clothes, socks and all, and walked out of my room. Looking between the stairs and the other room, there was nothing. I couldn't hear anything but the crackling of the fire.

I hate this. This is worse than being stuck in that cave.

The same pattern I'd already initiated before. I went downstairs and saw that no one was there. I wanted company. Being a bit rude in order to acquire it would be fine. I knocked on the door to Alfred's doll creation room and waited for a response. None came for a while, instead footsteps. I backed away from the door just in time for the door to open, revealing the calm face of Alfred.

"Good morning, Eithne. Sleep well?"

"I'm not sure I slept at all?" Was that a question or a statement? It was both. I'm not sure I had even slept.

Alfred tilted his head and went into thought, not moving

from the door frame. "Ah. The lack of sunlight is debilitating your sense of time. Rest assured you had likely slept. How about we both check outside, the sound of snow won't come through my walls or doors. Follow."

I forgot I could open the entrance door. I nodded and followed Alfred, first waiting for him to pass me. He was tall, his back broad, and walking next to him for some reason accentuates both of those features. Alfred arrived at the door and opened it, allowing a gust of wind and a torrent of snow to fall inside. He quickly closed it, not looking to mind the resistance the wind gave to the door. With a click it closed, and he turned to me once again.

"Still snowing. But, from the amount of light outside I'd guess it's daytime. That good enough for you?"

"It'll work. Thanks, Alfred. And about the breakfast you had promised me?" Alfred nodded and headed towards the kitchen, and I again followed him. I sat on the seat I had before sat on and waited. I knew it was odd of me to ask him to prepare the food for me when I could do it myself, but I can't forget the taste of the steak he had given me yesterday. If he's offering I'll take, no questions asked. And only a little bit of regret in doing so.

Again, the food was delicious. He had prepared it with the same diligence he had last time, I could barely tell the difference between the two flavors. I took my time to savor the meal this time, this would most likely be my only meal for the day. Or, perhaps I could steal some bread if I got hungry later. The real problem won't be hunger, it'll be boredom.

Regardless, I ate it. And Alfred again disappeared into his room before I could stop him. For all his generosity he wasn't much of the type to talk, is he? Another source of possible entertainment had left me, and with the dish empty I was prepared to wash and dry it. Turns out there's a reservoir of water inside the house in two places. The first is in a bathroom whose door was in the doll room, and the other was next to where Alfred had been sitting in his doll making room. I'll go wash the dishes where Alfred wouldn't be bothered.

I placed the fork and knife on the plate and picked the plate up, walking up the stairs and opened the door into the doll room. It was dark but with a little flickering of my mana the room lit up once again, revealing the same masterly crafted dolls I've been growing familiar with. I had to be careful not to drop anything, which was as easy a task as I thought it would be. The bathroom door was located in a corner and plenty of room was given for both the door to open and for anyone to walk inside comfortably.

I turned the knob of the bathroom door and opened it. It was as typical as bathrooms get, save for what looked to be running water and a sewage system. How rich is Alfred anyway? Asking that was impolite but seeing what he owns and what he's made, I'd imagine very. I walked over to the sink and placed the dishes inside, making note of the soap and beginning to wash using it. If there's this much running water inside why couldn't he set up his own shower or bath? He doesn't look to be the type to leave his house, although if that were really true I wouldn't have been saved by him.

There's still a lot I've not figured out yet. But does it matter? I won't be staying here for long anyway. I don't dislike Alfred, that'd be too strong of a word. I'll see how our relationship develops before I take too much of an interest in him and his life, and in possible future cohabitation. By now, the dishes have been cleaned and it was time to let them dry. There was a towel on the side that I could use to dry them manually but I have other things I want to do and I don't think the dishes would be missed for a while.

The dolls, for one, were something I wanted to look at more closely. Not to peek and see what they wore as underwear, of course. I won't repeat that mistake again.

At least not without first looking around the room.

I walked out of the bathroom and back into the doll room proper. The figures were as I saw them yesterday, nothing new was added and nothing had changed in the room. I had closely inspected only a handful of the dolls, and it'd be wrong of me to say that I lacked any interest at all in the rest. Like I had said be-

fore, I think they were pretty. Appreciating good pieces of art should be expected, I would think.

The dolls I was really interested in were of the daoine ainmhithe, the animal folk. There were more than the catamarán who looked strikingly like me, save for her eyes. Mine were blue, and I like to look at my eyes whenever I get the chance. Which was rare given that water didn't often serve as a good mirror. I'm sure that if I consider my eyes pretty, so did everyone else. Much better than the emerald green that little catamarán had, I could confidently say.

But I'll ignore her for now. I haven't seen much of my kind, only twice actually. My mother was one, but I've never met her, and adoptive mom wouldn't say much about who she was and why she had left me other than calling her a whore. I hope she wasn't actually one.

Too many digressions. I've not seen much of any of the ainmhithe, neither did I see much of the búraló, the wolf folk. I know there were those with the strength and looks of monkeys, and others with the know how and abilities of beavers. But those people were from a far off land, and it's only in recent years that they've entered into the population of this land. Out of all the dolls in this room, these of the ainmhithe interest me the most.

So I looked. I looked at what looked to be a strangely solemn girl with bunny ears and a poofy tail holding hands with what looked to be her child, and I looked at what was probably a some sort of deer folk given her great antlers. She was lazing around on a rock, chewing on grass. The amount of details on each of these sculptures was mind boggling if I was to be honest with myself. I can scarcely believe a human mind and hand had made these things.

Life like would be an understatement for some of these. It was as if they were alive, literally. Another girl, and most of these dolls were girls for most likely perverted reasons, with white feathers for hair and deep black eyes, and about to pull the tail of one of the tiger folk. Her face was contorted into a smile and one of her hands hiding that smile, the tiger hadn't yet noticed

her antics.

And besides the dolls, and if the catamarán could be used as a measure of accuracy then all of these daoine ainmhithe were probably accurate. The clothes each of them wore was exquisite all on their own. The bunny girl had worn a long, flowing dress that reached to the floor, a pretty pinkish-white with strange geometric decorations running along it. The little child holding her hand was dressed similarly, although her dress only reached to her knees rather than to the ground.

The deer girl wore significantly less, only something to give her breasts some modesty and what I would consider to be out in her underwear for the most part. Earrings decorated her ears and paintings, or maybe tattoos, rolled across her flesh. She was a bit more obscene than most.

And the weird bird person, maybe a parrot? Wore an odd hooded cloak that stretched and made itself into a sleeve for her arms to go through. Otherwise she was wearing trousers, a masculine display.

This room would satisfy my boredom for a while, I could tell. But even that would eventually get boring. I had looked enough at the dolls, and it was time to collect the dishes and utensils and head back into the kitchen. I have other curiosities I want to satisfy, involving enchantments related to the lights and fireplace. I've never been given the chance to sit and inspect such advanced enchantments before. This will be valuable experience, and time well spent all considering.

I wouldn't be able to learn much from watching dolls all day. I shouldn't get used to having so much leisure time.

I walked over to the bathroom and got everything I needed and got out. The dishes were dry, which wasn't much of a surprise given how long I'd been staring at the dolls, and I moved over and out of the room and back into the kitchen downstairs. I knew where the plates were taken from and where the fork and knives were as well, so I opened the drawers to their respective places and put them back. This is the first act of being somewhat useful to Alfred, even if I hadn't cooked the food myself.

If I could I'd prefer to have him cook, forever. But that'd be inconsiderate, if he could teach me that'd be fine as well.

Life was alright, for now. This isn't nearly as boring as I thought it would be, although I desperately did want to move around a bit. But there's no where to do that in, and most likely we were still in the middle of a snowstorm. I'll go check right now. I walked over to the entrance door and placed an ear next to it. I couldn't heard anything, a good sign. Excitement welled up in my chest, maybe I could finally go outside again?

I opened the door with a twist of the knob and was greeted by a gust of wind to my face. I tried to close the door again but the wind was too strong, and it took me several seconds to win against it. By the time I had closed the door, the entrance was covered in a light spray of snow. This door insulates sound very well. I should've figured that out already. Alright, let's move on to my original room then.

Walking up the stairs and to my room, I maneuvered myself into my room and next to the fire. I was interested in two things primarily, the first was the fire and the second was the light. The light was on a wall and I wasn't tall enough to reach it, so I couldn't directly observe it as I would if I were to touch it. But the fire was on the ground, and I could work with what was presented here.

The first step is to figure out if this truly was a magical fire. I don't know any general procedure needed in making sure something is safe to do, but I'll run through any idea that comes to mind that won't end in my combusting into flames, or the room exploding.

Time went on while I tested and played with the fire. I cast a fire resistance spell on myself and tried to feel for any mechanisms inside, while naked of course. The spell didn't extend to my clothes. I couldn't feel any wood, so it wasn't a natural fire. A pattern was etched into the floor of the flame so it was, in fact, a magical one using some sort of enchantment. I played with it, tracing my finger along the pattern until a mental image had formed.

But still I couldn't figure out how to turn it off and on. If Alfred walked in while seeing me like this, one of us would have to die. And it would in all likelihood be me.

But fortunately that didn't happen. Even after what had felt like hours playing with and in the fire, no one came. I had figured out how to turn it off, removing fire mana from the pattern would do the job. And adding some back in would relight the fire, but the strength wasn't proportional to the amount. Instead, the amount dictated the duration. The amount of mana in it was enough to last for months, it was an absurd amount. Maybe some sort of mana catalyst was used to fuel it?

But that's outside the aim of my exploration. I didn't understand the pattern much, but given time I'll eventually patch together a theory of how and why this fire works. For now I had satisfied my initial curiosity of how to turn it off and on. So I moved on to the light.

Getting it and not breaking it would be the problem I was facing now. There wasn't anything to stand on beside the bed, and it was slightly too far for me to get it even if I did get on the bed. It was on the wall opposite to where the door was, and the bed was to the left of it, the fireplace to the right. I could move the bed over, but that might scratch something. Oh well, if I wanted to figure out the mysteries of the magical light some sacrifice should be in order.

I grabbed the underside of the wooden frame of the bed and dragged. It wasn't heavy and even I, despite being on the shorter side, could drag it over. Once in a proper position I got up on the bed and inspected the lamp. It was bright and annoying, and I couldn't see it all that well because of that. The fire place would provide enough light so I turned the lamp off and inspected it once again.

I didn't know how to remove it from the wall, or whether I could. So I had to stand on my tippy toes and inspect it that way. It was tiring, but this one felt less complicated than the fireplace. The enchantment was simple, although smaller, and it was slightly more intuitive. It'd make sense, these products are

common among the nobility. It mustn't have been that complicated of an enchantment.

I spent hours going back and forth between the fireplace and the lamp. Eventually, at one point, I got tired beyond the physical tiredness that comes from standing on my toes for prolonged periods of time. Was it night, then? Did I act like Alfred and not leave my room? I wanted to speak to Alfred again, but not today. Maybe tomorrow I'll spend my time inspecting the enchantment on the table, just in case I can catch Alfred walking out of the room.

And hopefully he won't mind me asking for breakfast once again. That reminds me, I haven't eaten at all since the steak, but I wasn't hungry. A bit odd.

I shifted the bed back into its proper place and took off my clothes. Tonight I'll sleep with my bloomers only, since I doubt Alfred had snuck up on me yesterday night. Maybe I was being a bit stupid but I always liked to sleep in the nude rather than with clothes, although mom never approved of it. She didn't kick me out of the bed regardless, so I never stopped doing it.

Time to sleep.

IV

The Proposal

Day 3

Last night I was certain I had fallen asleep. I remembered the moment, and I remembered some of my dreams. I was interacting with the dolls there, reliving the odd moment of when I had peeked on the little catamarán's bloomers. Alfred hadn't interrupted me then. This was all I remembered from the dream. Did I want to look at her underwear uninterrupted so badly? Why? I've never swung that way.

But I was awake now. How else would I be able to recollect my dreams if not by being awake? There was no light in the room save for what the fire could provide, and I had left it on considering it would get colder if I didn't. I felt my chest and noticed that it was still bear, and felt for my bloomers and was relieved that too was still there. Looks like I wasn't assaulted. The next step would be to take off my bloomers and sleep as the divine lord intended me to.

I got off of bed and let go of my silly thoughts. Dressing myself up in the same clothes I had been gifted two days prior, and noticing that they're finally starting to smell distinctly like me, I left the room and went downstairs. I wouldn't check if it weren't snowing today, I didn't want a repeat of yesterday. It took all my strength to close the door back in place and I don't want to repeat that mistake.

Moving over to where Alfred usually works I knocked on the door. I heard no response. But, like yesterday, the door opened with the sound of a click, and behind the door stood Alfred. His face was as youthful as the day I first saw him, and if I didn't know better I would've assumed he hadn't stuck himself up in

a room all day and worked. He didn't smell, he didn't look tired, he looked like Alfred always had.

Alfred didn't have a smile, but neither did he look glum. I got the impression that he no longer had much interest in my presence, or was that it? It felt slightly more personal than that.

"Good morning, Alfred."

"Yes, if it is morning. How about today I teach you how to make breakfast, Eithne? I imagine you've taken a liking to my cooking, as a token of our meeting I think giving you a lifelong skill would be suitable." Alfred smiled finally. A sad one, or is it? I'm having a slight amount of trouble reading Alfred's emotions right now. He was much more somber than he was normally.

And he's willing to teach me how to cook the steak? Without even having to ask him myself? I'll forgive him calling me stinky, then. As long as he didn't do it again, or was more polite about it. "Really? A liking is an understatement. Your meat is the best I've had in my life, I'd be a fool not take you up on your offer." Alfred laughed and began to move past me, into the kitchen. Why was he laughing? "What's so funny?"

"Phrasing, little Eithne. I'll spare you the embarrassment. Come! I'll teach you to the best of my ability. I've trained in the craft of cooking under the tutelage of a dear friend many years back, although I'm a bit rusty on a lot of the recipes the steak is one that I'd occasionally enjoy on special, or sad, occasions."

"What did I say that was phrased funny?"

Alfred ignored my question. Instead he pulled back a drawer and took out the same bowl of lard he's been using and setting it down on the top of the table. "The first step is heating up the pan. That's easy enough, although figuring out how much heat is crucial." I decided to give up figuring out what had made him laugh. "You want the pan to be hot enough to sear the steak, but not hot enough to burn it. If you don't know how hot that is, you're going to have to experience tasting some subpar steaks and charred ones to figure it out."

I nodded, watching closely as Alfred moved the spider pan and pushed some coals from the already burning fire under it.

Its embers were red hot, and there was a decent amount of them as well. I know how to cook, of course. What I want to figure out is what his ingredients are and if he's done anything special. I've already seen the herbs, and the garlic, and the steak. Well, I've seen everything. I suppose I want to figure out what the herb mixture is.

I asked and got the names of several herbs I haven't heard of before. Thyme? Never heard of it. Neither have I heard of rosemary. Is he making up names or are they actually plants?

"You're not pulling my tail with the names, are you?" I asked

"They're imported, I'm sure you can grow some on this continent but it's not one that originates from here. It's not surprising you don't know of them."

Imported? How expensive are my tastes, really? How much money has this guy sunk on me in the name of kindness? "How much does a single one of these dishes cost."

"A gold coin, probably."

What? And he's willing to throw this away into my maw every morning? What? I'm a poor vagrant, not some high lady of a court. Is this man's head on right?

"You know, on second thought, can you prepare me anything else, Alfred?" I would owe this man three gold coins. Wait, if that's how much the food costs, how much would my clothes cost?

"Nonsense. Now listen, you throw a cube of the lard in and let it melt on the pan while you cut the herbs. Once everything is cut up, you throw it over the steak. It's not that complicated, this is perhaps one of the easier dishes if you don't count figuring out the correct temperature."

I whined. I should've known better. Is he going to turn me into his indentured slave once this is all over? Alfred looked over at me with a smirk on his face.

"Eithne, don't worry about the cost, just enjoy the meal. And pay attention. The lard has melted and we've already seasoned the steak. Place it on the pan and wait."

I can't not worry, but him telling me not to is a good sign, I think. But I'm still getting nervous from the thought of eating such an expensive piece of meat. A single one of those steaks cost enough to feed me for two months! For three if I was being frugal. How can Alfred be giving me this much?

He placed the piece of meat on the pan and began to prepare the vegetables. With this he didn't say anything, perhaps because he had assumed I knew how to do this as well. He gave me a look from the corner of his eye and seasoned the asparagus. I've been eating the same thing for the past three days, I'm realizing. Was he judging me on that, too? My goodness is the thought of the steak costing an entire gold coin eating at me.

I stood next to Alfred, unintentionally playing with my tail as I watched the steak cook. I'll memorize the entire layout and if I ever have to sear a piece of meat this will provide a good basis for that future action. It would have to be from an animal I had owned myself, and it'd be cheaper to raise and butcher my own animal than to just buy the meat from some other farmer. What made this dish so expensive? Was it the herbs? I bet it was the herbs. A steak like this wouldn't cost more than eight coppers, or a day's work of labor, normally.

Alfred dumped the vegetables into the pan and flipped the steak over, revealing a perfectly seared steak to my view. He hadn't mentioned the timing but I more or less got a sense of when it should or shouldn't be flipped. I waited patiently with Alfred, both of us looking at the steak as it cooked. I couldn't stop playing with my tail.

"It's done." Was it? Alfred stabbed the meat with a fork and moved it towards a plate, and then scooped up the rest of the vegetables with the same fork. "Here you go." I nodded and accepted the dish with both hands. Moving and placing it on the table, I sat politely and stared at my dish, only having a fork. I can't cut with this. But a knife appeared suddenly, Alfred's hand carrying it and placing it on the lip of the plate.

"Thank you."

"No problem. Now eat." Again I nodded, but I didn't move my

hands. Alfred didn't move away from the room; I got the intense feeling that he was watching over me, judging me for not eating yet. Or judging me for being such a glutton as to eat an entire gold coin's worth of food for three days straight. I could buy six cows with that!

"Would you prefer not to eat, Madam Eithne?" I shook my head. He moved to grab the plate and I let him. "Very well. I'll throw out the dish then, I'll be right back."

"Wait!" I brought my hands up but didn't touch Alfred or the plate. I clenched them together and placed them on the dark wooden table as politely as I could, and then rephrased my gesture. "I'll eat it. Don't throw it away."

"Don't mind. If you don't want to eat, then it can serve for food for someone else." Despite saying that Alfred let go of the plate and pushed it back into its original position, moving away from me and the table and towards the entrance door. "I'd have to figure out whether it's still snowing out before I throw it out anyway. If you've changed your mind, then eat now."

This is too much pressure. I nodded, didn't say anything, but instead picked up my knife and fork and began to cut the meat into sections. Regardless of the condition outside I'll have to eat this, so it's best to start now in case it really had stopped snowing.

The taste was still exquisite, even if I had eaten it three days in a row that doesn't stop it from tasting the way it does. I had sliced the steak into small strips and had begun to chew, watching Alfred make his way to the entrance and open the door. Light came through, but not the sight or sound of a thunderous wind. This had only meant one thing, it had stopped snowing at some point today or yesterday. I was assaulted by the conflicted sentiments of waiting and enjoying my food patiently, and engulfing it down like an uncivilized hoodlum.

I chose a mixture of both. Chose would be too strong of a word, I was forced to choose both. I had enough self control to taste and enjoy the texture of my food, but not enough self control to make myself wait too long for the opportunity of moving out. Alfred, on his part, closed the door and moved over to the

table once again. I didn't greet him, but instead focused all of my energy on chewing and tasting this entire gold coin worth of flavor.

Alfred moved the chair and sat down. He put his elbows on the table and leaned over, looking at me while doing so. I looked at him, chewing as I did so, continuing to bring food into my mouth. What did he want?

"Once you're done eating you may finally go. It's stopped snowing, and the snowstorm has let up. You may keep the dress, by the way."

I stopped eating at that moment. I continued to chew as I needed to clear out my mouth before I spoke. I'm a lady, after all. And this wasn't something I hadn't expected. I knew the day would come, and I also knew I hadn't got into a good enough favor for Alfred to try to convince me to stay without my prompting. At some point during my stay here I had made it certain that I would do everything I could to stay here, and I had silently been working arguments for why I'd be beneficial around.

But first the formalities. I gulped the steak and wiped my mouth with a finger, as there was no table cloth or a cloth but the clothes he had given me. Later I'll rip apart my dress for rags, but for now focus on making myself presentable and agreeable. I cleared my throat, and throughout Alfred had patiently waited for my words to come. He had a neutral face on, even if his posture spoke of laziness given that he was leaning on the table.

"Thank you, Alfred, for your gracious patronage. In my life I hadn't been treated as kindly as you have with anyone but my mother, and I will not soon forget the things you have gifted me and most vital, the life that you had saved. Anything but a sincere and honest thanks would be an insult worthy of the ire of the divine." I placed my hand on my heart and gave a bow, still seated. I still wanted to eat, after all.

Alfred smiled, a genuine one. "You're welcome. Now what is that you really want to say?" Wha—? How can he be so direct? That's rude! After my honest thank you you'll question my motives? This man is nothing but perceptive. And rude. And

creepy.

But not wrong. I smiled, a true one I knew it to be, "Sorry, Alfred. I won't beat around the bush, then. I'd like to stay just a bit longer if you won't mind. Now, I'm not—"

"Sure."

"Completely useless, I know how to sew and how to do house chores. I could work as your maid, and before that I'm a magician, as you know. My specialty, my talent, is enthrall...Wait what?"

"I don't mind."

"My staying?"

"Yes. As long as your tastes aren't as expensive as the food I'd fed you, I wouldn't mind. But go on about what uses you have, but know that my intentions are to have someone to tease and talk to. Primarily."

"Primarily?"

"Yes. But you first, continue." Alfred straightened out his posture and gestured his hand for me to continue. "Unless you want to eat first, of course. I'm patient."

What now? Do I take him up on his offer of letting me eat or should I speak first? It sounded like he really wouldn't mind me eating and then talking. And eating was why I was still sitting down. I nodded and wordlessly began to eat, making Alfred smile in amusement. Cold food is bad food, as I say. Continuing to chew rather than talk, eventually the food was off the plate and into my stomach. Now I should speak, again wiping another finger on my mouth. I hope my mouth isn't dirty.

Clearing my throat I once again began, "As I was saying, my natural talent is enthrallment. I'm not an expert on it, but I'm good enough at it to put me on the class of a magician. I'm not technically trained, so I'm not a magician proper. I do not have full access to the entirety of my mana. However, I can use the spells I do know to good effect already, I had enthralled a large multitude of spiders and had them produce silk for me. From there I would weave it together and sell the cloths to noble families or anyone who'd buy.

"If you'd allow me the time needed to collect and raise enough of the spiders, I could be producing as much silk as my mana could allow me, the limitation being the time needed to gather the spiders and the amount of mana needed to enthrall and maintain that enthrallment. In my village, which I had been cast out from, I could make 18 gold coins a year. It may be humble compared to the wealth you may have, but it is worthwhile to keep me I would think."

"Don't need it, and it goes against my secondary intention for having you stay."

That was both reassuring and annoying. I can't be too much of a pushover, but I need to hear what his other motivation is before I push. "What would that be?" Alfred tapped his fingers against the wood and spoke.

"I'm interested in an apprentice to pass own my craft to and to help me in my research for years, no, decades now. I have not found one, given that I barely leave my home that isn't surprising. But it wasn't a pressing concern. An opportunity came with your arrival, and I'm convinced that you are a godsend, an opportunity that I won't look over. You are a magician, even if you haven't unlocked everything yet. I may not be aligned in the same spirit as you but I know enough about those who're born in the black cloth to teach you."

I don't fully understand what he's saying here. Black cloth, aligned in the same spirit? Does he mean my dark alignment? Would make sense. I nodded, regardless of how clear his words were this was a massive opportunity on its own. I know he's a skilled craftsmen of dolls, and that would be a good skill to learn, but something also magic related? I'd regret refusing this for the rest of my life. I had begun to play with my tail below the table, I needed to calm down and that usually helps.

"And Miss Eithne, from the moment I had caught, almost on your knees in reverent, gaze straight and hands as steady as your beating heart, looking up the skirt of dear Miss Catamarán...I knew you'd be the one. You had to. We shared the same spirit."

"Wait," I tried to interject, but he continued.

"The same heart, Eithne."

"Wait, stop." Alfred had been mimicking some strange motion, lifting some strange cloth and with curious eyes looking up. This was mockery, I was nothing like he had described. So what if I wanted to look up her skirt? I wasn't deserving of this sort of humiliation!

"So I offer you my proposal. You may stay and live here, I will feed and cloth you. In exchange, you are to learn my craft, and learn my magics, and will devote your life to the aim of perfection within our crafts. The true oath won't be now, I need to get to know you more before I could truly have you commit. But ultimately you will, in some way, help in my research. Is that acceptable?"

Alfred had ignored my cries for him to stop, even ignoring when I had gotten up in anger. But, ultimately, he was right to ignore that. I needed to consider this. So I sat back down and sat in my embarrassment and anger, trying to wrack my brain for what I should answer with. There was one answer. He was offering me everything I had wanted to ask for. He was being an insolent, teenage, prick on my butt about it. And teasing was part of the exchange from what I had gathered.

What if this was all just a test to make me leave? I knew my answer already. I nodded, then I spoke. "You had played me and had me dancing on the palm of your hand, Alfred. I relent. I accept, but please do not treat me like a pervert and creep to ridicule anymore. I do not like it, release me from the torment of your mockery." A strange growl came out as I spoke the last portion. My tail was restlessly moving between my hands, and my ears I could feel were as perked up as they could be. This was anger, I knew it.

Alfred looked at me with something that screamed seriousness. "A trial of one month will be taken before a true oath said. Your aptitude and your sincerity will be tested there. Now, would you like to go outside and stretch your legs for a bit, or would you prefer to have me begin teaching immediately?"

I've gone from stressing over the price of a piece of steak, to

being offered to become an apprentice to Alfred, to being able to walk outside once again. This is too much.

A walk around the place should help me let out some stress. "I'd like to walk around if you don't mind. Are we covered in snow and can we get out?"

"Follow me, little Eithne." Why does he call me little?

I got up and followed Alfred, intentionally not paying mind to the dishes that I had not yet cleaned. I would do that later, when the opportunity arises. Alfred opened the door and waited for my arrival, which would come only seconds later. The entrance was covered by snow, but light could be seen poking out at the absolute top. A good chunk of it wasn't covered, but it would take some time to dig our way out. At least we aren't trapped in here, that would be a disaster. For me, probably not for Alfred.

"How do we get out? Do you have a shovel?"

"No. Watch as I do my magic." Alfred placed a hand on the snow, and indeed I did watch as a sudden wave of mana moved around him. Etchings of some sort of pattern moved across the face of the snow, not materially but in mana, and I watched as snow as began to rise into the air. The entrance was cleared or rather a cube of snow was cleared, and we had space to walk outside. Not much, but it was space. Alfred walked out, only wearing his tunic and trousers with no shoes, and touched another face of the newly exposed snow. The same pattern repeated, but this time a staircase was revealed.

"There, we may leave now. Will you come or do you want to put on shoes first?" Yes, I was being painfully reminded of the fact that I lacked footwear thanks to the cold. Neither did I have a cloak, except for the one that was ragged. I will negotiate with Alfred later about obtaining a new cloak. I nodded at Alfred and ran upstairs, to my room and to get socks and my leather shoes. The shoes were worn down as well but I could make do with it.

I slipped on my socks and then came the shoes, tightening the laces and then tying them into a knot. I tested how well they fit by tapping each one by the toes on the floor, and once satisfied made my ways downstairs. Alfred was no longer outside of the

entrance, although the door was still open. He might've gone up, so I followed and went up the snow steps. Each step was hardened, most likely magically, and subsequently sturdy. I don't know how long this snow will stay for but considering there's at least five feet of snow it'll be a long, long while.

The difference between the stale air of Alfred's home and the clear, crisp, if cold air of outside was enough to fill me with new found vigor. That and the sight of the snow covered landscape, a long, wide strip of snow surrounded by trees on both sides, the sun that showed itself to have only recently risen up, and the fact that I could see something other than the grey stone walls washed my mind clean of what had happened to me these past few days.

But my reverie was taken away the moment I stepped away from the stairs and into the virgin snow below. My foot sunk deep within it, reminding me that I wasn't fully clothed to be out in the snow like this. By the time I would be back indoors, if I had stayed too long out here, I would be a wet, shivering, and possibly hypothermic mess. I committed myself to removing my foot from the engulfing surface of the snow and back into the safety of the hard snow stairs. Where was Alfred in all of this? I couldn't see his footsteps.

I surveyed my surroundings, looking for Alfred anywhere around, the blinding white snow making it difficult for me to find him. I couldn't see any other trails of footsteps, nor anything that could signal the fact that a creature had walked. But, somewhere next to a tree, Alfred stood. The snow didn't break under his feet, and he was standing as if the snow was as hard as any other surface should be. How is he doing that? Is it magic? It has to be magic.

Has to be.

"How're you doing that!?" I shouted, as he was some distance away from me. I was still on the steps and he next to a tree, the home wasn't surrounded by trees as I had expected it to be. Well, I had several ideas of where this building was located and one of them was a forest, another deep inside a mountain. Looks like I

was partially right with the first.

Alfred turned to stare at me, wiping hair away from his eyes as he did so. "Doing what? Standing?" Was he playing with me again?

"Yes, standing. My foot sunk in my first step, how are you able to walk through snow without disturbing it as well?"

"Harden the ice below my feet as I walk. I'm sure you can make it over here if you can manage to find where my steps are. Do you not know how to do that?"

Definitely not. That sounds like an incredibly complicated, how am I supposed to know how to do that? Sounds almost impossible, actually. I refused to answer and instead, in a show of defiance, turned away and went inside. It's a shame that I wouldn't be able to walk around, but given that had neither the right clothes nor the right magic to do so, I'd be forced to stay in here for a while longer. Hopefully Alfred will come inside soon, the choice he had given me was either walk outside or begin training immediately. I'd prefer not to waste time.

I didn't have to wait for much time after all. Only a couple of seconds later did Alfred make it back inside, closing the door behind him and having a hand behind his head, scratching himself. He had an apologetic smile on his face, an expression I hadn't seen before.

"Sorry, Eithne, I'd forgotten what sort of abilities the common folk has. How old are you, by the way?"

"Sixteen." Although some might still consider me a child, I'm a proper, full grown lady according to the law of the bards, and through that enjoy all of the rights a full grown adult is entailed to. Or I would be if I had land. And that was a good question, how old was my soon to be teacher? "And you, Alfred?"

Alfred stopped scratching his head and froze in place. He let out a forced laugh and then answered, "Ninety-six. I didn't know I was dealing with such a young girl, excuse me." I've picked up he was an old man, but I had expected something within the range of a normal human's lifetime old and not, uh, that. As a cultivator

he was reaching middle aged, as a man he was ancient. I nodded, it wasn't completely outside of my expectations.

"Is it really alright to call you Alfred, then? I think Master or Grandpa Alfred would work better." I put my hands over my chin in thought, or trying to mimic thought. In truth I was trying to stop a smile from forming on my face. I wasn't as professional of a manipulator as I would prefer, and neither my tail nor my ears would listen to my commands most of the time. Alfred shook his head and walked over to me, then passed me. He opened the door and gestured for me to go inside first.

"Whichever amuses you, óg Eithne. If we ever go to a city together I would require you to call me Master, but otherwise you may choose yourself. Now head inside, let's begin your lessons."

"Sir Alfred it is then." I nodded with the air of a wiseman and walked into the room. I don't know where I should go from here, or why he wants me to go in first, but that doesn't matter. For now I'll listen to Alfred. I hope his first lesson won't be something boring like the history of his craft. I wasn't all that interested in dolls, and I wouldn't be interested at all about their histories. As long as I had the protection of a cultivator and learned magic, that would be fine. And he was providing to me both of those things.

I walked inside the room and once I had decided I had walked in enough, which was an arbitrary decision, I waited for Alfred to move as well. He followed me, then passed me and moved towards his chair. I followed close behind.

"For now I'll begin by explaining what it is I expect you to do." And not the history of your magical research? That's fortunate. I knew he made dolls, but I don't see where the magic is located. He did say his craft isn't lethal, so maybe it was confined in the realm of making more accurate dolls.

"But before that, some background," Why? Alfred sat on his chair and began to arrange the various tools around him. "I've invested the past twenty years into the art of creating dolls. Previously, it was statues and then painting. From the start I had wanted to create artwork that was as real and as human as the

people that surrounded me, an obsession that has been dear to my heart for as long as I could remember. I want to create living art, I want to assemble the things that the divine had created with my own hands.

“That was my original intention. It is still that same obsession. What I expect of you is to help me in a single branch of my research, purely within the magical side. If you want to learn how to create dolls yourself, then that is fine. If you want to learn how to paint, or how to sew, or how to carve statues, that is also fine. But without question I will be training you in the basics of magic, and from there I will be relying on you for enchantments. I do not expect you to innovate, you are far too young for that. You’re welcome to try, of course, as long as it doesn’t hamper any progress on specific enchantments I want done.”

I nodded. This is basic apprenticeship, doing work that the master doesn’t himself want to do. “Of course, Sir Alfred.”

“My magic isn’t simple. I have several other companions who share similar goals as I do, my art is the result of all our dedication put together. It might sound like a common apprenticeship, but know that you will be using the full extent of both your wit and your intuition in understanding my art. Anything that I deem to have the slightest defect will be made again, and again, and again, until you do it right. Perfectly. I expect no work to be said done until I had said it to be, and never expect anything that you consider lacking in anyway to be accepted by me.”

This is reasonable, and not unheard of either. Some master magicians or master cultivators won’t accept anyone with less than a hundred years of experience in an art into becoming an apprentice to them, the standards of these kinds of people aren’t the same as the common folks. I nodded once again.

“So, I will provide you with a single task. Complete one enchantment, of which the basic pattern is drawn here,” Alfred moved over a piece of wood with a simple pattern of lines and spirals near me. “On these hands.” Alfred placed a tiny pair of hands, evidently doll hands given their strangely jointed structure, and then continued, “by the end of thirty days. If you fail to

meet my standards, then you will fail. And unfortunately I will have to ask you to leave. If you succeed, then I will teach you. If you were to do it without any guidance even the most skilled and talented magician would fail, but given that as true I will provide you with a single hand that has already been enchanted with that spell.”

Alfred picked up a tiny hand and kept it on the tip of his pointer finger. He made sure I was looking, and then did something with his mana flow. He moved a bit of fire mana into the hand and I watched as it clenched and unclenched itself.

I looked at Alfred, then back at the hand. What?

“The spell isn’t for the movement of the fingers, but for the reception of a person’s mana. Is that understood?” So I wouldn’t have to enchant an item that could do that? Good. This sounds possible, and reasonable. I nodded. “Yes, Sir Alfred.”

Alfred looked at me with a raised eyebrow. He placed the hand next to the pair of unenchanted hands, and then began to pick up various tools. “Good luck. I will not help you, but you may submit your work anytime. If I think it’s inadequate, you must try again. You have one month, if you’ve failed to give me both hands with a perfect enchantment by then, then our deal is null.”

Then I have to get to work. I picked up the little hands and collected them together safely into my palm, and then gingerly picked up the wooden carving of the enchantment.

“Do we start now?” I asked. Alfred shook his head.

“You can do what you want for today, considering morning has already come. You may start now, though.” Perfect.

I made a low bow and went back to my room, through the kitchen and up the stairs. I was used to spending most of my time doing nothing but inspect enchantments, and today it wouldn’t be any different. I imagine I’d need less than ten days to get a proper enchantment on both of these hands, I can’t imagine this being all that difficult.

So I spent the rest of the day figuring out the enchantments on the enchanted little hand, focusing most of my observations

on the mana transmission enchantment.

V

The Trial

Day 4

It wasn't as complicated as I thought it would be. The enchantment was simple, as Alfred had told me, it was a five lines that emanated from the wrist to the five fingers, ending in a spiral at the fingertips. I could tell Alfred had made this enchantment since it both had the flavor of a cultivator and the familiar sensation of his mana. Although it was pretty, just like the unnaturally delicate fingers of the hands, it wasn't hard to replicate.

I had inspected the other enchantments, four of them were what I could feel. Whatever material this was made of must've been refined and processed for the express purpose of handling magic, considering how small it was and how much mana was tucked inside it must be very expensive to produce. The most complicated enchantment was most likely the one used for moving the thing, and for the sake of experimentation I had tried to move the fingers of the hand using my own mana to see if I was right. But, I couldn't do it correctly no matter how many hours I had spent trying.

But this wasn't the point of my task. Focus, I had 29 days left if this day wasn't counted. Although I fully expect myself to be able to complete the task within that time frame I shouldn't make my job more difficult than it had to be.

Day 5

I had figured out how to move the mana inside whatever material the hands were made of. It had proved to be more difficult than

I'd thought, I had enchanted things before but they were more often wood or stone rather than this clay like substance. And, neither the wood or stone responded in the way this clay had. With the wood it would take a decent amount of mana to make a proper enchantment, since it didn't stick to it well. And this worked the same for the stone. For this clay, if I used the tiniest amount more than I needed it would ruin the entire formation of the spell.

But that wasn't all. Creating straight, non-geometric lines as this enchantment required was an incredibly difficult job. With other enchantments the base spell is usually some sort of shape since that was both easier to visualize and to enforce. But with lines, for whatever reason forming it into shape required more than visualization. It was like having to draw a perfectly straight line, it wasn't feasible for those inexperienced. And I wasn't experienced, and neither did I have a straight tool to guide my mana.

I had to practice making straight lines within the little hands, each one being heavily scrutinized for their straightness. I would use the original enchantment as the model for whether or not the lines were straight. The more I practiced making the lines the more I realized how wobbly and imperfect my lines are, and how perfect the original enchantment's lines are.

Day 8

For the past three days I had been practicing my lines. I dreamt about lines, and when I awoke I immediately trained on constructing the lines. It had consumed me entirely, I've grown to both hate and love the perfect lines within the original enchantments, and absolutely loathe the ones I had made. But finally I had made precisely one line that I could call good enough. It was almost exactly as perfect as the original lines. All I had to do was replicate the same thing nine more times.

Day 9

Both hands were finished. The lines, at least. The spirals would be another problem, and it's one that I had begun to solve. The loops again aren't a straightforward geometric pattern, it was incomplete in itself and would have to be attached perfectly to the ends of the lines. I'd have to keep the curve of the line perfect, a task that I was miserable at. At first. But like with the lines, I got better with practice. I didn't give up, I kept going failure after failure.

Eventually I had figured out how to smoothly and neatly transition from the line and into the spiral. This is progress, and I would need to cherish it if I wanted to stay motivated. It's been a long six days.

Day 13

The spirals have been completed. Despite being smaller and taking up less space than the lines, they were much more difficult to complete. Figuring out the right distance and the right curve angle was excruciating, but eventually I had built up enough experience to intuitively create the designs. The hands were finished, I had enchanted them both. And it did only take me nine days to complete! That was within expectations. The enchantment wasn't a difficult one.

I got off my bed and headed downstairs into Alfred's doll making room, knocking on his door and waiting for him to open. I hadn't seen him in the last nine days, I would wake up and make breakfast, eat, and then head back into my room. On a side note, I'd not use the herbs that Alfred had offered to me. And I noticed there was other kinds of meat within the cabinets, so I used those as well. On the fifth day I found a couple of eggs, a strange sight considering it is still the middle of winter.

If I had gained any weight I hadn't noticed, and if I had lost any, which would be more likely, I hadn't noticed either. It

wouldn't surprise me to see a tummy that had gotten softer, but that wasn't the case either.

But that was a digression. Alfred had been taking his sweet time opening the door, and I almost knocked again, but right as I had begun to move my hand the door creaked and Alfred's face appeared.

"Good afternoon, Sir Alfred."

"Yes, good to see you. Come in, I expect this is about the enchantments. Just so you know, I'm not allowed to give you answers or hints." Alfred gave a friendly smile. I couldn't tell if it was genuine or not, but regardless it was a welcome sight. I'm use to not interacting with others, although I'm not used to interacting with absolutely nobody, so seeing the sight of a friendly face wasn't so bad. I nodded.

"I've completed the enchantments." I raised my hand and revealed the two tiny doll hands protected within. Alfred turned his head quizzically and picked both up off of my palm. He, without making a sound, turned around and headed deeper into the room. He kept his attention trained on the hands as he sat down. I followed him and stood next to his table, fiddling with my tail in anxious wait.

I had thought I did a good job, but now that it was being scrutinized all the possible mistakes I may have done was starting to assault my mind. I couldn't control it, and I stayed there, shifting uncomfortably in place, waiting for Alfred to give me his acceptance or rejection. After what was probably a couple of minutes Alfred extended his hand outward to me, the one he was holding the hands in. I extended my hand out and he dropped the hands on top of my own.

"Rejected."

Ah. "Why?"

He stayed silent. I could feel the familiar sensation of blood running from my limbs, the cold prickling of lightening as it ran through my spine. I held the hands close to my chest and waited for an answer. "What did I do wrong?"

"I can't answer. Try again, Eithne." I had worked on this for nine days, nine painful days. And I didn't deserve to know what I had done wrong? Pain bit at my chest, like a tiny weasel had begun to play and twist itself inside of my bosom. This wasn't anger. At least, not towards Alfred, although he did have a part to play in it. It was unfair.

I left the room and quietly closed the door behind me, and went upstairs to try again. It took me a couple of hours to undo the enchantment, but each moment wouldn't be something I'd forget.

Day 13

Most of the day was spent on lazing around. I no longer had any motivation to do anything, I didn't know where I had went wrong. And Alfred had treated me so coldly, thrown away my hard work in but a moment. I felt hurt, and betrayed, and I didn't know why I had felt all of this. I knew I had to work on the enchantments, but I couldn't do anything. Eventually the thought of doing something else came into mind. But what? I could try going outside. But I didn't want to feel the pain of snow cutting into my skin. I liked being in my room.

I liked it. Had liked it. But that was only because I had something to do, and that thing was a constant task. The numbing sensation of cold wrought skin would be nice to feel every once in a while, maybe. I'll test the snow to see if it was hard enough for me to walk on, and then I will consider my other options. I put on my shoes, and my socks, and went outside. The sun was in its infancy, the blue sky apparent and the sky without clouds. It would be a good day to walk in most cases.

But a five foot tall snow wall stood in front of me. I was only two inches taller, and I could only barely see above it if I stood on my tippy toes. The trees were pretty, their sight a welcome one considering how long I had been cooped up inside the house. I tested the old snow stairs and found them to be still hard. I

climbed them and tested the snow. It was fell a bit under my weight, but it wasn't as deep as last time.

I could walk on this. Not far, but I could. So I did.

I headed towards the plains, where there were no trees or obstacles. I wanted to see what the building I was living in looked like from afar, that would be a fun thing to do. I won't stay out here for long, the winter days are too dangerous to get lost in. And that's tripled considering the amount of snow I had to walk through. I was light, roughly a hundred pounds, so the snow didn't consume me as it would a normal grown man.

But I walked. For a while I did so, until I had reached the planes. I wasn't in the best of shape, I had been sedentary for a while, and the plains were a good distance away. By the time I was there, I was tired and in need of rest. I looked behind me and tried to find the house.

Only the trail of snow I had left behind gave me indication of where it was. A door could be seen in the far off distance, but otherwise I could've mistaken the building for a giant boulder. Technically, it was a giant boulder. How did Alfred carve a home out of that? And why? I suppose it'll last for a long, long while. And proper cultivators and magicians can live for several hundred years, right? That would make sense.

I looked around and tried to decide what else I could do. This wasn't a relaxing walk outside, this was a labor intensive tread through deep snow. My legs were cold and numb. I should go back inside instead. Yeah, that's what I'll do.

I retraced my steps back into the Alfred's home, all the while trying not to break any new snow or accidentally overstep or under step each step I took. Better to walk through trodden snow rather than carve a new path, it's easier that way. Even despite that the way back was as hard, if not harder, considering I had to walk up a hill rather than go down hill as I did last time. But I persevered, and with numb legs made it back into the house.

I went up stairs and into my room, took off my shoes and socks, and tried to think up something else to do that day. I could continue to study the hand, but I don't want to work right now. I

was wasting a day, sure, but if it meant getting back my motivation it might be worth it.

What else could I do? Figure out the light enchantment, or the fireplace enchantment? No, no more of that. That left only two other things. Eating, which I wasn't up to, and inspecting the dolls. The dolls aren't a perfect remedy for a boring day, but they're not bad. I like looking at them, although I won't say that out loud. I'm a lady, after all. No longer am I a big eared kitten.

So I spent the rest of the day observing the dolls. I felt for each one's enchantments as well just to see if they had any, all of them did. Most had enchantments similar to what Alfred had wanted me to do, and similar to what was already enchanted on the single hand. Some had more than that, but I wasn't paying much attention to any of it. I just wanted to watch, to look. The dresses were as pretty as each of the dolls' faces.

Day 14

I woke up that day with some motivation to continue. Watching the enchantment in the hand, observing how each one interacts with the other. The mana transmission enchantment daintily connected to the movement enchantment, and the entirety of it was encased within a hardening enchantment, and in the center of the entire structure laid an enchantment I couldn't figure out. Perhaps it was to soften the material? Make it more elastic? I've never seen it before, but I suddenly got the idea after enough pointless staring.

I had doing nothing but stare at the enchantment. I didn't get out of bed, instead curled myself into a little ball and sat in a corner. I didn't get up to eat breakfast, and perhaps a couple of times I had fallen into sleep while observing the enchantment. It moved sometimes, elegantly. As if it was breathing rather than in deformation. But the entire structure stayed as it did when I first saw it. It's beautiful, not as beautiful as the hand that contained it but beautiful. I wanted to mimic it.

But I had already tried, to the best of my ability. Alfred didn't think that was good enough. Many of my things aren't ever good enough, not to the villagers and rarely to mom. There's something wrong with me, I didn't have any motivation and I kept spiraling into depressive fits. But it's alright. I don't want to suffer that rejection again.

So I stayed and slept holding the little hand of the doll, and I dreamed about enchantments.

Day 15

Once again the motivation began to seep in. Not a deep one, but it grew throughout the day. I had figured out something while I had slept, I didn't need to mimic Alfred's spell to the smallest point. I wasn't a cultivator, I was a magician, even if not a proper one. My abilities differ from his, and I should make adjustments from this fact. I can make the enchantment, but it won't be a perfect copy.

It'll be my enchantment, based off of my understanding of how magic works.

I hope Alfred would accept it.

So I spent the day figuring out how to make lines once again, not trying to mimic the lines I saw on Alfred's. Not the taste, or aesthetic, but the shape must be the same. There were other things I had forgotten to check, that being the composition of the structure of the spell. What magics composed it? Water and wind, and very tiny amounts of earth. The water acted as the medium, the earth as the shell, and the wind as the access point. That was easy enough to figure out, and I imagine the exact composition would be more or less the same regardless of who makes it.

I made quicker progress on the enchantment than I did last time, but there were many quirks that I had to figure out. How do I make sure the enchantment sticks? For a light aligned cultivator, forcing it would be enough. But for me, who is aligned with

the dark, I had to make sure the mana was balanced enough with the entirety of the material or else it would be rejected. More experimentation is needed.

Day 20

I worked out all the kinks in the enchantment. The spirals were troublesome considering each growth of the enchantment within the material required me to readjust the entirety of the material's mana balance to maintain, something I had to do only twice for each of the lines. It took ours to complete each line and spiral, and subsequently took me days to complete both hands. But I had done so. But I was too scared to be rejected again.

So another day I had spent looking at the dolls. I had gotten brave enough to pick some up, and play with them, always being very gentle and careful not to break them. I've grown to be fond of some of them, and certain personalities of the dolls had started to show itself.

Day 23

Or three days spent playing with the dolls. It won't be four, I'll make certain of that. It surprised me how little time Alfred spent outside his room, the only evidence I could find whether he left his doll creation room at all was I that the dolls would return to their original positions after I had woken up each day. Alfred didn't scold me for moving them, which I was thankful for. Perhaps he didn't scold me because we didn't meet face to face anymore.

But too much time had passed. Today is the day. Rejection or acceptance. You won't be accepted as an apprentice until you give Alfred the hands that he wants. I believe in you, Eithne.

Thanks, me.

I was standing in front of the doll workshop door, breathing in and out as I scrounged up the courage to knock. I lifted up my

hand and finally did the motions, feeling the wood tap against my knuckles gently. I waited.

The door open and Alfred appeared behind it, like he always does. I was too nervous to do anything but wait for his verbal commands. My tail was wrapped up and holding my left hand, and my right was holding the little doll hands. This time I'm absolutely certain he'll accept me, the enchantment is as perfect as I could get it.

"Come in," I nodded and awkwardly made my way inside, my limbs needing to be commanded each movement, an awkward affect exuding from my walk. Alfred didn't mind, and as was traditional he had me go inside before he walked past me and into his working table. I followed close behind him, as always. Alfred sat down on his chair and gave me his hand, palm raised up. I gave him the tiny hands, and he began to inspect them.

I stood for what felt like half an hour. Member an hour, my sense of time has been screwed with ever since I've been trapped inside this house. I don't know whether I should be happy about this, the first assessment had me be rejected in less than five minutes. This had to be a good sign, there was nothing else that could explain it.

"Rejected."

"Why?"

Alfred didn't answer. Neither was I thinking. My mind was beginning to shut down and anger was starting to seep into the space my mind had left. It's one thing to be rejected while giving a good reason, and another to be rejected just because. I'm a lady, and a lady shouldn't resort to violence so quickly. Let's try reasoning.

"Tell me why." That didn't come out as polite as I wanted it to. Alfred didn't look at me, instead played with the tiny hands of the doll. He shook his head. "Is this some strange oath? A ritual? Tell me."

Alfred nodded. "That I can speak about. I'm not allowed to speak about anything related to your enchantment other than rejection or acceptance. Forgive me, Eithne."

He sounded sorry, and for some reason that was enough to quell my anger. "Give me." I extended out my hand and waited for the doll hands to return to them. I would prove Alfred wrong. There was nothing wrong with my enchantment, it should've been better than the one he himself had made. Why did he reject it? Was I missing something? Was he intentionally kicking me out? I'll pass and make him eat his words.

Alfred placed both of the hands into my palm and went back to his own work, ignoring my presence and most likely waiting for me to leave. Expecting me to leave. In silence I walked out, and I closed the door with some sound, not too much as to disturb any of his pieces but neither was it soft enough to not make a loud sound. I knew better than to anger him or to force him into disciplining me, I think this would be enough of a show of discontentment.

Just you wait, Alfred.

Day 28

I had spent the last five days figuring out what it was I was missing. I had ran through every line dozens of times, broken and recreated them until I could create it in my sleep. It still took time to create each of the lines and spirals making up the enchantment, but I didn't have to focus. Where it would normally have taken me three hours to complete a single spiral and line, it would take me one hour now. It wasn't magically possible to speed up the process, this was as much as it I could get it to with my current method.

But that meant nothing. I was able to recreate what had already been rejected. I was missing something here, if I were to accept Alfred's word in good faith. What was I doing that the original enchantment was? In my anger I had decided to recreate what had already failed, trying to wait for something to reveal itself despite me doing the same action over and over. Nothing would change, I needed a different perspective.

And the only perspective that offered itself to me belonged to the original enchantment.

So I moved on to the hand and studied it once again. I felt the enchantment, the way it forced the material to bend and shape itself to it. This was something I hadn't done. But I wasn't going to try to mimic his method again, I would never succeed. It would either succeed through using my own method, or I would fail entirely. So I'll rule out that possibility for now.

If it's not the enchantment, then what could it be? I doubt Alfred had expected me to enchant the hands with all the enchantments inside, he hadn't told me to. So I'll rule that out. Then if it's not the enchantment, and it's not the other enchantments either, than that would rule only one possibility. It was how the enchantments interacted, but given that I didn't need to enchant the doll hands with all the enchantments, it would be how that single enchantment interacts with future enchantments. Ones not yet implemented.

So how does this hand do that?

Day 31

It took me several days to figure out what the enchantments were doing to each other, and what allowed them to work together. Normally an enchantment that needed to do two things or more at once would require the combination of multiple enchantments, but the hand had four different enchantments within the same material that weren't combined into one, and somehow all of them were in sync with each other. Nothing was attached with anything else.

But the secret on how they interacted didn't lay in the enchantments themselves, it laid in how the material was prepared. Previously I had been forming the mana within the material to be balanced only with the enchantment that I had placed within it, meaning it would reject anything else or would require me to recalibrate the mana in order for it to accept and not reject

the enchantment. So all my work, and the next two days, would require me to figure out how to do this perfectly.

Day 33

It was night, I had opened the entrance door to check to see if I had passed by the due date by accident. Luckily, I hadn't. Not really. There was still a possibility of Alfred rejecting my work because I was late, but that all depended on whether or not he considered this to be the thirtieth day or the thirty-first. I knew I shouldn't have been wasting time by idling outside of the workshop, holding and rechecking the enchantment within both hands, but I couldn't help it. I was scared.

This was my last chance, if it was a chance at all. I was sitting in my usual chair, staring at both of the hands while I looked, searched, obsessed over any possible mistake I could've made. But there was none. I had spend three times as long making the lines and spirals to make sure they weren't imperfect in anyway. I had spend twice that in making sure that the material was as neutral as it could possibly be in order to allow it to accept new enchantments.

This was all I could come up with. If this was rejected, then there wasn't anything I could've done better. I may have spent more days looking at dolls than I should've, and that may lead to my downfall. If I had overlooked a single mistake here, that would be it. No more retries.

With the weight of possible failure on me, and the weight of what was worse, of possible rejection, I got up and gently picked up both hands and placed them into my palm. Neither of them were bigger than my little finger's tip, they were small and dainty things. Half of the challenge was making sure my mana was delicately controlled enough to create such elaborate patterns inside. The other half was making sure I didn't lose them by accident.

I walked over to the door and held out a fist and knocked. I waited. Alfred appeared, as he always did, behind the door. He

looked a slightly tired, a massive surprise to me considering I have never seen Alfred look anything but his in optimum state.

I gulped in empty air and prepared myself. "I've completed the enchantment, yeah. Please check it." I handed him the hands and he retrieved them from me without a word. He didn't wait for me to come in, but rather left the door open and seemingly implicitly invited me inside. "Excuse my intrusion," I whispered. I'm sure Alfred heard my tiny voice. My tail was wrapped around my left hand, a habit I've begun to pick up.

Alfred had made his way to his seat and I next to his table. We stayed in silence for what felt like hours, but what I had intuitively guessed to really have been no more than ten minutes. Alfred had an intense look on his face, the tiredness having vanished. A deadly stoicism overtook him instead, one with an energy that I could almost taste and see. More likely my nerves were playing tricks on me, I wanted to know what was in his mind and he wasn't showing anything.

Alfred placed the hands down on the table and wiped his hands clean of some ephemeral thing, his hands were already clean so I didn't know what he was doing. The man didn't look at me, instead he closed his eyes and leaned back on his chair and sighed. My heart felt as if a void had replaced its position in my chest. It hurt. "Alfred?" My voice was pathetic, even I could tell.

"Accepted."

How was one supposed to react to this? "Really? Really really? It's not overdue or anything, yeah?"

"You've said 'yeah' twice now, are you trying to pick up a new verbal tic, Eithne? Yes. you've passed."

"Thank you! Thank you thank you thank you thank you!"

I grabbed Alfred's hands, both of them, and dragged him off the chair. A task that was proving to be much more difficult than I thought, he must've been at least twice my weight and I was never one to have much muscle. But for whatever reason he obliged my pulling and got up, a confused look on his face. I hugged him as tightly as I could, I didn't know how else to express both my gratitude and my happiness if not through a hug.

"Are you alright?" Alfred asked me as I tried to glue my face on his chest. Am I? Why was I so excited? What was this feeling welling up in my chest? I hadn't felt this way for anything but for when mom would give me a gift on my birthdays. No, this was a stronger feeling, a more intense one. If it was any more intense I think I would be in pain rather than in excited euphoria!

But I had every reason to be happy, an acceptance would mean many things for me and my future. The first, I would probably become a proper magician thanks to Alfred's guidance. The second, I wouldn't die out in the woods or become some slave to some perverted noble in the near future. The third, my work had born fruit, my anxieties weren't founded in reality and I could finally be accepted by Alfred. The thought of being accepted by him give me tingles by the thought of it.

I don't think I'm thinking straight. I nodded heavily on his chest, finally answering his question.

I might've been hugging him for too long, since he grabbed my shoulders and pushed me away. He looked me over while still holding on, lifting up my chin as if he were examining me of anything odd or strange, and then let go. Clearing his throat he took on a serious attitude once again.

"Anyway, like I said, you're accepted. On the brink of time too. I'm finally allowed to speak to you about what the test was about, follow me."

Alfred moved past me and I followed him closely behind. He was taking me back to the kitchen, probably to have me sit instead of stand for what he was about to say. I couldn't stop my tail from swaying gently, and I had to grab onto it and hold it near me in order to prevent it from hitting any of the dolls. I didn't need my tail or my ears to know I was excited, as both my face and my mood was shining. I'll figure out why I'm so happy later.

I sat on the my usual chair, and Alfred's his, and waited for him to speak. The hands I had enchanted were on the table already, since he had brought it over, and he was fiddling with the hand while beginning to speak. "I had expected you to fail."

What a great start. It shocked me, but gradually letting the words settle and their meaning seep into my core, my smile grew.

“The test was to see how sincere you were about learning and becoming my apprentice. I didn’t expect you to succeed. You have, and there’s no reason why I shouldn’t accept you now. I won’t comment on the quality of the hands, I’m sure you know them as well as I do, and I have nothing to say about them. Without my guidance you’ve met my standards, I praise you for that. So let’s move on to what your apprenticeship will mean, and what your oath will be.”

Alfred began a lecture, a lecture that had lasted several hours and had managed to wear down on my mood to the point of only being mildly giddy rather than euphorically ecstatic. He told me about the history of his craft, his teacher, his friends, and where I had fit. Then he spoke about the oath and the importance of keeping them. The last bit I definitely knew, if an oath is broken the backlash will be directed at the spirit of the oathbreaker, possibly destroying him on the spot, or greatly weakening his mana output if it didn’t. It depended on the severity of the oath.

If the oath requires sacrifice then it has a strong possibility of increasing a person’s mana and strength if the oath is adhered to, therefore it’s a popular method of gaining strength through sacrificing some sort of worldly pleasure. However, the oath I was to swear to didn’t involve much sacrifice, only that I stay true to the path of my craft. There are various other oaths that have been passed down through generations, but this is the one that was essential. Alfred also suggested me two other oaths, one involving following a code of honor, and another to abide by his word when I felt it to be true.

Oaths, as it turns out, aren’t an exact craft. Magic in general wasn’t, although some magicians and cultivators have been working to resolve that issue. I swore to all three of the oaths. I trusted Alfred. I may not like him, but that didn’t lessen that trust I had in him.

If this was a mistake, I would regret it for the rest of my life. But for now, I am happy.

“In truth I had already accepted you by the first of your enchantments. I hadn’t expected you to complete something of that quality in less than thirty days. You’ve given me one by nine, and given me something that rivaled, and in some ways exceeded, my own enchantment by thirty. You’re gifted. It’s with pride that I will teach you.”

I couldn’t contain my smile anymore. I don’t know what is the best way to express my happiness, but tackling him and roughly rubbing my head against him didn’t sound like the best idea. So I shifted and moved in my seat until the excitement abated, which felt like forever. Alfred had a soft smile on his face, but nonetheless got up and suggested for me to follow him. He’ll begin my training immediately, he said.

VI

The Fruits of my Suffering

Day 34

It's not as glamorous as I thought it would be. Alfred had spent the first part of the morning, after I had woken up, clearing up space in his workshop for me. I wasn't allowed to help, something about ruining the pieces if I touched them the wrong way. Or that I could accidentally move it somewhere where it would never be found again. I learned another side of Alfred, he was slightly possessive and controlling. That wasn't bad, but I worried about our future relationship if that goes overboard.

The rest of the day was spent on teaching me the basics of magic, from the grounds up. His was peculiar, a mix of formulaic and natural magic. He was officially taught by the Connaught Holy Kingdom, when he was hired as a soldier for a 'brief twenty years,' but once he had left he had to develop his own magic. And he was never one to really understand how formulas and logic works, so he naturally moved towards more primitive forms of magic.

Although primitive natural magic isn't at all inferior to formulas in terms of potency and strength, but in terms of how well it could be taught? It was terrible at that. But that's fine, I was Alfred's one and only apprentice, personal lessons designed for me specifically would teach me well. The entire point of formulaic magics is ease of teaching and nothing else. In many ways, learning through formula is inferior to learning by trial and error. Probably.

The first thing Alfred had begun to teach me once my own little workshop was created was the difference between my style of magic and his. For cultivators their bodies naturally begin to

enchant themselves with the magic innate within them, for magicians this is an action that had to be initiated before it could begin. What this means in the real world is: if I wanted to live as long as a cultivator, I would have to artificially replicate what their bodies naturally do. Alfred wasn't willing to teach me anything else until I had developed the enchantments on my body.

I'd die too early for him otherwise, at a mere sixty to seventy. Compared to a cultivator's hundred-thirty to two hundred, it was a short amount of time.

Unfortunately Alfred didn't have the full picture of how this is done. The Connaught Holy Kingdom, or CHK, would only provide to their soldiers the basic spells needed for combat. While research and development wasn't exclusive to them, and it wasn't banned, it wasn't actively cultured. But Alfred had enough friends who were interested, and enough friends who've undergone the process, to understand the bare bone spells and enchantments needed.

So we worked together, although really it was Alfred figuring out how my internal mana worked and me trying to figure out his, until we could start to enchant my body. If it goes well, I'll gain the body of a cultivator. What that means for a magician is half the strength of a cultivator, which was still many times the strength of the common folk, with the body naturally building itself to its physical optimum.

Meaning, I won't be keeping my overly soft belly for long.

Day 96

Or very long. After a month went by the bulk of the work on trying to figure out how to enchant myself was left solely on me, and if I thought enchanting the doll hands were difficult the human body was several magnitudes more challenging. Most of the time I was glued next to Alfred, watching him paint, carve, draw, and do whatever else needed to create his dolls. I had to spend nearly

the entirety of my day in some way in contact with his skin, so that I could figure out what exactly the enchantments were.

What that translates to is sitting on his lap for the majority of the day. He got used to it within three days, I got used to it within a week. I guess it's easier to get used to someone sitting on you than it is having someone work from behind you, finding a spot that was comfortable that didn't feel, uh, lewd, was a difficult thing to do. But eventually I got used to it. Alfred would give me lessons on what it is he's doing with his dolls and how I could do it myself, and lessons on the basics of magic.

I knew much less about magic than I thought. All I know is enthrallment, and I can only enthrall creatures at the level of tiny animals as I am now. Squirrels are about my limit. It was a problem of not having enough mana, and a problem of unrefined skills. Enthrallment may come easily to me, but it doesn't mean what I do is the most efficient method of casting. With that I would require further refinement, but it would come later.

Luckily I had managed to figure out what precisely the enchantment was. It was a single one, and it wasn't any more complicated than Alfred's innate element affinity, which turns out to be wind, repeating itself across his body. I knew what mine was already, water.

It might sound like something that could be easily improved upon, but Alfred had given me a very grave warning on what kind of disaster that thinking would lead into. The basic elemental form was the simplest, and although it was simple it didn't mean it was easy to replicate. It's the result of Alfred's own mana constantly refining itself into smaller and smaller forms, going inward and then outward. The basis is the Holy Circuit, more accurately the mass of spirit that is Alfred himself.

Magicians don't have the Holy Circuit. But our spirits, which is another side of the process of creation, can work as a surrogate. For whatever reason magicians can't efficiently use mana internally, but are twice as efficient as using external forms of magic than cultivators. It's the reverse for cultivators. A strange balance is what it all leads to.

But I knew what to do and how to do it. For the final part, of enchanting my body, I would need Alfred to kick start me. He needs to enchant a tiny, tiny portion of me himself, using the basic pattern of the water elemental for convenience, and then I could build off of that until my body has replicated the same constant refinement as Alfred's does.

No longer do I have to sit on Alfred's lap. He didn't seem to mind, but I started to feel a bit forlorn over not having a heat source constantly behind me.

Day 128

Creating the enchantment wasn't as difficult as figuring out precisely how it's done. All my hard work and research had built up to these moments, when I've almost complete the internal cycling enchantment and finally was able to move on to something else. I no longer had the time to stay near Alfred, and although alone time is appreciated an entire month of doing nothing but assembling an enchantment wasn't something all that enjoyable.

Unlike replicating the mana transmission enchantment, the body enchantment was something I had already figured out. All I had to do was spend the time creating it. My mind was desperate for stimulation and the enchantment wasn't providing it to me, but today was the final day. There was only one pattern left to etch, the basic pentagram that forms the essence of my spirit. Once that is complete my body will start cycling mana around itself naturally.

Only an hour or two to go.

Only a single line was left. I had given each line several times more attention than I otherwise would, if I fail this there was a significant chance that I would have to try again, starting from the beginning and building the foundation all over again. The black line, built from my soul itself, was slowly being con-

structed. Only a couple of seconds were left. I stopped thinking, I only focused on constructing the enchantment.

And with that, it was done.

I waited for the explosion. For some sign of all my hard work being finished, anything at all. But none came. I knew what the enchantment would do, the pentagram was already starting to spin very slowly. It worked as the source of all the movement, and over time it will increase its speed, reaching its fastest point in around a month and maintaining that speed for the rest of my lifetime.

But I didn't feel anything special. I don't know if I should laugh or cry. Or better, go to Alfred and resume our lessons. Preferably without having to sit on his lap. Maybe every once in a while instead of constantly would be fine. He gets lonely without me, I think.

I pushed myself off my my bed and headed over downstairs. I've gotten very familiar with this home. It felt natural, even if I didn't understand where I was in relation to my original village. Although the snow had been thawing out I still wasn't comfortable heading outside. And since I've never got around to asking Alfred for a new cloak I've not been willing to leave, I never liked the cold. It nips at my ears and tail, making them both painfully numb even at the mildest temperatures. Mom used to call me a drama queen when I'd refuse to leave the house without my hood over my head.

I miss her.

The door to the workshop was always open, and I could walk right in if I wanted to now. Alfred had gotten used my presence enough to not mind when I enter or leave, so I no longer had to knock on the door for him to invite me in. He was where he always was, within his corner working on some doll, or a dress. Lately he had been making very articulate dolls, ones that could mimic the entirety of human movement without any trouble. But other than that, he was as he always was.

"Alfred."

"Eithne."

Alfred didn't move away from the doll he was carving, he didn't spare a glance at me. Conflicted between wanting to disrupt his work so that he could pay attention to me, and letting him be and obediently reporting to him the completion of my work, I waited for him to move so that he could decide for me. He didn't, so I was forced to make a choice. I cleared my throat, trying to grab his attention.

He looked over at me with a disinterested look and waited for me to say something, no longer moving his hand. Did he really now know what I wanted to say?

"The enchantment is complete," I placed a hand on my puffed out chest and proudly stated. I offered him a hand so that he could observe my mana himself and waited.

Alfred set down the things that he held, his hands not as dirty as they could be but still not the cleanest. He grabbed a hand and I waited for him to give a response. Knitting his eyebrows together and putting more concentration to the mana inside me, I waited even longer, the anticipation of his reaction starting to reveal itself in the soft swaying of my tail.

"I had expected you to be a better magician than I was, given that you are from the dark cloth, but I think your ability can't be entirely explained by your alignment alone. You've surprised me once again, Eithne. Congratulations, you are a true magician now. Not an official one, but one regardless." He let go of my hand and got up off his chair. I had gotten used to how Alfred would tower over me when he stood, his robust frame carrying itself with a fluidity that I could scarcely replicate even given my small size. He walked past me and beckoned me to follow.

"Let's prepare you a reward. It's customary, at least within the Connaught Holy Kingdom, for both magicians and cultivators to be gifted either a weapon, a book, or some sort of jewelry once they've completed the foundation of their work. Which would you prefer?"

"I don't think you have any of those, Alfred."

"Good observation. Now, Eithne, I'm going to do something that I hadn't done all year. We're heading to the city."

To the city? We're leaving the house? I had thought Alfred didn't want to leave, but given that he had gold to spare, and I doubt he had picked all these herbs himself, it would make sense he would occasionally leave for the city. How is this related to my gifts? "Are you going to buy me a gift there?"

Alfred turned to look at me, staring as if I was some dumb child. "That's one of the reasons, kitten. The other one would be to restock my herbs, and finally to sell my dolls. While I hate to part with them, many of them were ordered directly by the children of noblemen, and occasionally an adult as well. My research is expensive, after all."

Oh. "I wouldn't mind a cloak, that sounds like a good enough gift." Alfred kept his gaze on me. His face was as neutral as a face could be, neither judging me nor mocking me.

"How about a piece of jewelry? I'll sew you a cloak, I have the materials at hand. And boots, those I also have. Conveniently fitting your size, as well. We won't be traveling today, but rather tomorrow." Alfred began to walk up the stairs, ignoring me. I followed him without needing to be told.

"Were you planning on traveling regardless of whether I had completed the enchantments?"

"Yes, and taking you with me. The deadline for all the dolls would be coming soon and regardless of your presence I would've left this week."

"Isn't it going to take a while to prepare everything that needs to be packed?"

"No. I'll be having you do it, as I had planned regardless. I'll be preparing for you the things you'll need to travel tomorrow, in truth I've been working on them for a week now. The cloak is almost done, and the boots will soon follow."

How convenient, but suddenly traveling to a city isn't something I had planned. I'm not good around crowds, or people in general. I would honestly prefer to stay with Alfred for a bit longer, alone. But with the temptation of a new cloak and boots, I would be stupid to reject this. And possibly jewelry, as well. I

don't have much use, or training, in either reading or fighting, but there's always a benefit to looking fancy.

However, I didn't mention the silent decision on my part. Instead I followed Alfred as he opened the door and walked inside into the doll room.

"The packing isn't that hard. If you wanted, we can start traveling by the end of the day. Stay here, let me get everything you'll need." I nodded and waited, spending the sudden free time given looking at the dolls. Alfred came back almost as fast as he left, carrying with him large leather bags, small and elaborately crafted wooden chests, and many folds of what was probably linen. He handed them to me, and I took them, and walked into the room once again.

"I'll have you neatly pack a total of fifteen dolls. Place them safely inside the leather bags, that will be the entirety of your job," I nodded, although he wasn't paying attention. He picked up dolls seemingly at random, moving them next to me gently and going back and forth between picking up dolls and dropping them off. Once he was done I was greeted with the collection of several daoine ainmhithe, the singular catamarán with green eyes being among them. A single one of the strange knife eared folk were also present. Otherwise it was an assortment of colorful dolls, mostly girls but a single man in armor that looked to be made of real steel was also there.

Alfred stood next to me and took the linen from me, taking a single piece of the cloth from the bundle and giving the rest back to me. "Now watch how I pack them. Their safety is paramount, spend as much time getting the details correct as is needed."

"Yes, Alfred." I knew when it came to dolls Alfred rarely joked. I won't mess this up.

Alfred picked up a doll, one of the ainmhithe that I has inspected months ago, and took off all her clothes. He was delicate, and almost provocative, in his undressing of the doll. He picked up the now naked doll, a doll with too many features that should belong on humans and not on toys, and wrapped it gently together with many folds of linen. He folded each piece of

clothing, from the underwear to the cloak, in separate, smaller slices of linen, and then packed both the dolls and the cloth into the wooden chest. It was a slender chest, made of dark wood and held together with cast iron.

Embellishments and designs were carved into the wood. I could tell it had stylistic designs of the animal that the doll was descended from, a bunny in this case. It looks like each doll had its own custom made chest, a cute feature. He closed the box and locked it using the tiny latch on the side, and then packed it neatly into one of the leather bags.

“Understood? And leave the holy knight out for me, I’ll deal with him later. You wouldn’t understand the intricacies of his armor and how to take it off.”

“Alright, Alfred.”

Alfred nodded and waited next to the table where all the packing was being done. He didn’t leave even after I waited a couple of seconds, instead he looked at me expectantly. Did he want me to pack the dolls in front of him? Or does he want to make sure I had watched his example closely? Either way I had a job to do, so I began to pack the dolls. Starting with what was probably a design of an kingly court lady, I undressed her carefully, taking apart each clothing and making sure none wrinkled, setting them aside onto a laid linen sheet so that none of it had to touch the wooden table directly.

The procedure wasn’t the same. It wasn’t a complicated task, it was one that took a bit of time and careful attention and delicacy, a respect of the dolls themselves in order to complete. It wouldn’t take me much longer than an hour to do everything with the care each doll deserved. Once I had packed, tied, and placed each of the items in the chest, Alfred nodded and made his way out.

“I’ll be finishing everything else you’ll need to travel.” With that, Alfred closed the door behind him and left me alone with the dolls.

VII

The Cat and the White City

Day 129

It was the morning of the hundred-twenty-ninth day, how many more of these I would need to count I don't know. It's been close to five months since I had left my village, after I had been kicked out and forced to fend for myself. In all, I think I had done well. If the snowstorm hadn't happened I would've survived. But now it was nearing spring, and the snow had mostly thawed out. Today Alfred and I will be traveling. Walking. Something I hadn't done in a very long while.

All the things were packed and my new articles of clothing given. My cloak wasn't elaborate, it was a simple piece of long and richly blue wool, embellished with black geometric patterns along the edges. It was a nice piece, and the boots that matched it completed my entire outfit. The boots were brown, of course, given that they were made of leather I wouldn't expect anything else. But the long underskirt hid most of it, so the little flashes that could be seen would compliment rather than detract from my general clothing. I think.

Alfred wore yellows and reds, not matching well with the colors that I had on. He didn't seem to mind, although in the back of my mind I would worry other people might not think of us as a pair. We were. I can't have anyone mistake me for anyone but his companion. But if that time comes it'll be quickly resolved, I hope.

We were walking along a path that was well trodden, the dirt below compacted and no flora made its way over it nor did any grow on it. How often does Alfred really use this path? Or was it a common one? We hadn't passed by any villages, instead we

continued along in never ending wilderness. I hadn't walked for so long without seeing signs of a close by village before, where exactly were we?

"Alfred?"

"Yes?" Alfred didn't change his gait or posture, nor did he look at me when he responded. That was fine.

"Where exactly is your house?"

"Geographically? You should already know from which kingdom my land is home to. But geographically speaking, it's within the Greater Sunpeak mountain, within a tiny nook where the land hasn't risen too highly. Barely anyone lives around there, so I made my home there."

That would explain why we were constantly going down-hill, and the massive mountain that framed the backdrop of our home. I nodded. I should've figured that out sooner.

"And where are we heading?"

"Belcarra."

"Oooh. Some of my products wound up there, and I had a traveling merchant routinely come from Belcarra to my village to buy my silk. I've heard it has extremely high, perfectly white stone walls surrounding the town, and a sizeable lordly castle as well. The merchant would always exaggerate the beauty of the place, I swear the walls would get fifteen feet taller each retelling."

"The walls aren't much larger than forty feet tall at their peak. But yes, it is well maintained wall, but it's plastered with white rather than made up of white stone. One of my buyers is the Lord of the town, he is the buyer of the faerie."

"The Lord!? Buying your products? No wonder you're so wealthy. And a faerie? I don't remember seeing a faerie."

"Is your world as small as your chest, Eithne? You don't know what a faerie is?"

That's a new insult. "No, I don't. What does my chest have to do with any of this?"

"You remember packing that white long eared girl? That's a faerie. They're much smaller than the doll may have you think,

they're roughly the size of children. The caste you had packed is an Ard, their warriors and battle magicians."

"Are you pulling my tail? Why would a faerie look like a dainty little girl? I've always heard stories of them being nine foot tall mortal gods of life and death."

"Aye, they are of a sort. You don't have to believe me, maybe you'll be able to see it for yourself."

I dropped my questioning there and instead ruminated on the information for the rest of the day. It's a shame to know that the walls are plasters rather than being made of pure marble as the merchant had said, but there's nothing I could do about that.

Day 131

After two days of travel we caught sight of the high walls of Belcarra, a perfect and shining white that almost hide roofs and buildings of similar colors. Not all of it was a perfect white, colorful variations of reds and yellows also dominated, and occasionally a green or blue could be seen as well. But the town could be accurately described as a town carved from white. Many outskirt buildings existed alongside the walls, something that cities will naturally attract although aren't officially recognized as part of the city itself.

We were on a paved road, surrounded by work-deer and carts, men and women as well. It wasn't a dense stream but it was a constant one.

"Don't bump into anyone."

"Of course." Why would I bump into someone? The road is pretty wide and there's not a large amount of people anyway.

We walked through the road and into the beginnings of the city, the buildings out in the outskirts being the first thing we had to walk through. It wasn't bad, although some of the buildings looked like they had seen better days, but it was in all well maintained. Not as safe from raiders or from sieges but through numbers it can fend off the worse, from what I've heard the only

major problem are crimes. Murderers, thieves, gamblers, fraudsters other assortments of criminals could be found here. Although all those sorts are rare.

“Stick close to me.” I nodded, not bothering to make a comment on it. I walked a tiny bit closer to Alfred. Our destination of the city gate was roughly ten minutes away now, the traffic had gotten worse the further inside we went and I’ve been given strange looks by the locals for my ears and tails. I didn’t feel safe, and I knew Alfred would provide to me protection if anyone did anything bad.

The outskirts folk wore clothes that I might’ve expected village vagrants to wear. Subdued colors dominated, some clothes weren’t even dyed at all. The clothes looked well made enough but the amount of people without the tiniest bit of wealth on their bodies was staggering, this wasn’t a sight I was used to. Compared to them I and Alfred were beacons of color and vibrancy, something that I wouldn’t mind being without considering the circumstance. I don’t want to be robbed, but what would someone rob from me? A box? That’d be hard to do.

Luckily none such an occurrence happened while we walked towards the gate. The road had gotten more packed the closer we got to it, two lines forming once we got close enough to see both the gate and the men who were guarding it. On one line were carts, the men guarding were checking the cargo and speaking to the people who owned them, perhaps checking for any contraband or any other illegal activity. I’ve never been to a city, I’m not all that familiar with their customs or rituals.

On the other, where Alfred and I had lined up on, were people who had simple luggage like ours, no carts or luggage bearing animals were within this line. The line was noticeably faster, and outside of having to be in such close proximity to other people for long periods of time it wasn’t terrible.

“How long does it normally take you to get inside the walled city? Where are we going once we get inside anyway?”

Alfred didn’t look at me as he answered, only looking towards the city guards and keeping an eye on the carts. I don’t

know what he was looking for, or if he found it amusing and had no other motive. "From this line? Roughly twenty minutes. Maybe someone in front will start a fuss over not wanting to pay the entry fee."

"What's the fee?"

"Eight coppers per person for any who doesn't have residence or a permit."

"That's a lot to pay just for entrance into the city."

"It's common knowledge for anyone who's stayed around for long enough. It's mostly to discourage any unsavory folk from entering."

I hummed and nodded. That would make sense, I guess. But considering how many people are here you can earn a lot of money just by doing nothing, but how many within this line are without either a home inside or a permit? Before that, did we have one?

"What about us?"

"Do you mean whether we had to pay? No, we don't. Technically I'm a merchant and as a merchant I don't have to pay a fee to get in, and this is extended to up to three people. Don't worry about that, just make sure no one's touching the dolls."

I nodded. The line wasn't tightly packed and there wasn't any traffic flow within the road we were on, outside of the occasional movement of the line or the movement of the carts. I doubt anyone would be brave enough to try to steal something from us, but I kept my eye out regardless.

We passed through the gate without any hindrance, Alfred showed the guard a small golden coin and he let him through once he inspected it. I didn't ask what the coin was since I thought it was pretty obvious that it was some sort of permit. Alfred tucked that away safely back into his clothes in some unknown crevice, and we were greeted by the sight of the city. It wasn't special, the beige of the road and the large, white stone buildings while impressive didn't have anything I wasn't used to staring at already.

Carvings and etchings, occasionally faces, were carved into the stone, pillars and overhanging bridges connecting some buildings to others. But compared to what I had seen in Alfred's workshop and even on his kitchen table, these weren't anything either new or visually impressive. But still I looked, perhaps gawked considering how some of the city folk would look at me, and stuck myself closely to Alfred as he walked. Where are we going now?

"Where are we headed?"

"The castle. I'm acquainted with the Lord and it would be rude of me not to go to him directly. Especially since one of the dolls was a request by him."

"Now?" Both of us must've stunk from having to travel for so long, and I don't know the right courtesy required to speak to a Lord. Will this be alright?

"Yes, now. Are you nervous?"

"No, why would you think that?" I lied.

"Don't worry. Just be polite and don't break anything, you'll be fine as long as you do that." Alfred rubbed my head a bit and continued to walk, only staring at me for a brief moment. I nodded, fixing my hair and drawing a hoodie over it just in case. My ears were getting cold anyway.

We walked through long roads filled with people, many shops filled with odd items. Mostly businesses that dealt with weaving, sewing, or shoes, occasionally what may have been a tavern and even more occasionally blacksmiths. It was a large city, I could tell from seeing it outside of its walls. From the rumors I knew in the village, and by the merchant who would tell me tales of this place, it had twenty thousand people living inside its walls. But considering how he had lied to me about how the walls were constructed, possibly, I don't think I can take his word faithfully.

The buildings got sparser the closer we neared the castle, larger clearings that looked like miniature and contained forests were dotted next to the road occasionally. The buildings, although being fewer, were larger, and their structures both more

vivid in color and in more detailed in design. Statues were beginning to become a common sight, so were fountains and those miniature forests could be seen in front of each of the buildings.

I ignored all that, though. What grabbed my attention instead was the very large, definitely white stone castle that dominated the sky in front of me. White stone towers and walls that were higher than the walls of the city, all within the middle of a raised hill and a surrounding moat. The water within the moat moved, rapidly. A single bridge connected the castle to the rest of the city, reaching an ultimate point of a retractable bridge, guards could be seen roaming the streets in their goady bronze and steel armor.

If this wasn't the residence of the Lord then I'd hate to see what it truly looked like. What could top this sight? It wasn't the details of the walls, nor how large each individual stone was, but it was the sheer size of the entire structure that awed me. Alfred, on his part, didn't look fazed. He kept walking resolutely towards the bridge, ignoring the guards as he did so. The guards didn't ignore him, however. Although they didn't move their heads or changed their routes, I could feel their eyes trained on us the entire way.

A single guard blocked the way from the castle's entrance and the rest of the city. A simple man, not wearing anything particularly eye catching. If I didn't know better I would've suspected him to be an average guardsmen. Perhaps he was. When Alfred got close enough the guard sprang into motion, putting his left hand out but not speaking. A sword was in its sheath on his armored hip, and a polearm in the other.

"Halt, ye merchants. Ye have reason hither to wander so loosely onto mine bridge? Speak."

Alfred stopped, and I tried to hide behind him as best as I could. I didn't know how to fight and I wouldn't want to get in one, even by accident. Alfred removed the bag from his and took out a single chest, the one that had belonged to the faerie. The only reason I knew was because of the floral decorations that covered every inch of the surface of the chest, and even on the

latch.

"I am the doll maker Alfred, on request of Lord Bréanainn the Unending I am here to give to him these dolls, Sir Cathal. We've played this game before, as you know." He handed over the small chest to the guard, and the guard took it. Unlatching the chest and inspecting the things inside, we waited for his response.

"Upon my steely hands, under these stone walls, and upon mine trusted gate, I have encountered the sight of the a faerie most fair, given to me by a man who claims to be acquainted to my Lord himself. Does thou take me a for a fool, to offer to me a daughter's toy and expect entry through petty bribery? Not gold, not silver, and not by the dull shine of copper are you buying my treason, but alas I have been tempted by the pale visage of this fair maiden's sight. Ye enter, merchants, tread carefully for I do not know who would accept ye here." The guard set his polearm leaning on the stone wall and began to walk inside.

I have no clue what this guard is saying. Was he taking the doll for himself? Alfred didn't mind, instead he waited for the guard to return. He didn't move or speak until after the guard returned, empty handed and as if he hadn't just made a small speech about accepting a bribery.

"Sir Guard."

"What business thou have here?"

"I'd like to buy entry, and maybe to buy a toy for this little lass here. Do you have anything you can offer me?"

"Yea, do I have. Two coppers is mine deal, in my possession had drifted a doll made by a famous toymaker. With two coppers thou may have both entry and possession of that doll. What say thee?"

Without batting an eye Alfred took out two copper coins and handed them over to the guard, which he took and hid away into some corner of his armor. The guard went back into whatever room he had moved into and came back with the chest, handing it over to Alfred. Alfred on his part opened the chest to see if anything had been stolen, and noticing that nothing had put it back into his bag.

With no more words Alfred walks through the gate. The guard didn't stop him, but as I began to move he yelled, "Halt!"

Of course I stopped moving. Alfred stopped as well, turning around to look at me, but he didn't move to save me.

"Can thou eat raisins?" Raisins? Those dried grape things? Grapes make me vomit and so do raisins. Wine does the same for me as well, so I've never drunk or eaten any of those if I could help it. I shook my head.

"Speak!"

"N-no, Sir Guard. I can't." He laughed, then he stopped moving, keeping his armored head pointed directly in front of him and away from me. I didn't move for a while, but I got the courage to take a step forward after long awkward minutes waiting. The guard didn't speak, or move, and I walked without interruptions into the castle.

I caught up to Alfred, not a large feat considering he was standing still throughout the entire exchange. Alfred didn't speak, and neither did I, as we walked deeper into the castle. The walls were at least fifteen feet in depth, superbly and almost pointlessly thick if it wasn't for my knowledge the destructive capabilities of both magicians and cultivators. Up ahead I could see natural light from the sun shine, the perfectly white stone of the ground being surrounded by blindingly pale green grass.

Through the walls and into the courtyard, it was much larger than I had thought it would be. The massive sixty foot tall walls of the castle were intermitted by large cylindrical towers, only ten or so feet taller than the walls themselves. A central building connected itself to the walls, and slightly off center from the entire structure stood a massive tower, something I could've seen from outside. All of it was white, red and white flags could be seen as well. But all the decorations, from the statues and from those strange wolf heads, were made of the same white stone.

From the mana signature alone I could tell it was a deeply enchanted structure.

And the courtyard contrasted against the beautiful walls that constrained it. A single oak tree, old and gnarled, could be seen.

Surrounding it was the same ocean of deep green grass, no longer as pale as I thought it was when I was in the walls. My eyes must have been adjusted to the little light within the walls, now that I'm outside I could see it was as normal as any other grass I had seen. I ignored the grass and the tree for the building that stood in front of me.

Faux-Pillars made up most of the structure, windows that were closed with stone rather than with wood were opened in some areas. The indoor light source could be seen, and the ceilings and some metal and woodwork that acted as furniture were also inside.

Alfred continued to walk, ignoring my gawking. Seeing as he might've left me behind, I followed closely behind him, pulling the bag behind on my back closer to me. I didn't speak, I knew it was both out of not knowing what words to say and not knowing whether it would be punishable for me to say them.

He walked up into a large stone door, carved to look just like a normal wooden door, and knocked. It must've hurt his knuckles to have to knock on stone, but he didn't flinch. But I might be thinking his flesh to be as weak as a commoner's. He is a cultivator, and cultivators have stupidly robust bodies no matter what alignment they belong to. But those aligned with wind are known to be on the weaker side of things.

Alfred waited and I waited alongside him. I looked around the courtyard once again, but no one was around. I could see the guard still out there, not looking to have moved a single centimeter from where he had been standing before. He didn't look alive, to be honest.

The door began to open, shocking me out of my head. The inside of the castle could be seen properly now, the tiling a light yellow and the edges black. A room, a large one, could be seen, and in each side of the wall doors were placed. All of them were stone, the same white stone that the walls were made. But that was besides the main attraction. A man stood in front of us, tall and elegantly dressed in red and white, his posture straight and his gaze controlled.

“Good Sir Alfred, good to see you’ve arrived on time. Come in, the Lord is waiting for you inside.” The servant stood by the side and waited for Alfred to walk in. Alfred beckoned me inside, not saying anything in return nor introducing me to the servant. I nodded to the man regardless, but he ignored it.

Once inside Alfred stayed in the center, waiting for the servant to move and open the next door. There were three doors, perhaps he was unsure of which one would be the route towards the Lord? Or was this a strange custom? Regardless the servant opened the door to the left and we followed him inside. Hallways kept leading to doors, and doors to more hallways, until eventually we arrived at a staircase. We climbed up and reached a greater room, another hallway but this time a carpet of deep red laid on the floor.

It was tall, the hallway extended all the way towards one wall to the other. Paintings and artwork could be seen around, as well as flowers in vases and tables that support them. The floor was marbled with black, giving the entire room an air of actual nobility rather than the depressingly well made white walls that was the lower floor.

The servant moved on towards the furthest end of the hallway. I paid attention to the paintings, both portraits of people that might’ve been famous, and of battles and of duels could be seen. Some of the paintings look positively ancient, as if they had been there for hundreds of years if not longer. Others looked new in their vibrancy. Armors and clothing styles that looked to be thousands of years out of fashion could be seen on some of the statues. The entire room, more than the nobility, felt depressing in a different way from the lower floor.

“Come in,” the manservant said as he opened another stone door, pulling it open as all the doors seem to only be pullable rather than pushable. Definitely intentional.

Alfred walked into the door, one of the last doors at the end of the hallway. The room inside was similar to the hallway, save for the white marble floor and wrought iron railings on a staircase that ran alongside a wall. The top of the stairs could be seen, a

single door and a couple of smaller paintings could be seen at the top of the floor. The room was as tall as the hallway and had a single window that let in both air and light.

“He’ll be waiting for you upstairs.” Alfred nodded, one of the only signs of the servant actually being a person you can interact with, and headed up the stairs. I followed closely behind. The servant closed the door and left us alone.

The door this time was wood, a doorknob of brass was positioned and the wood a deep dark brown. I looked at Alfred to see what he would do, but he didn’t do anything as he stood in front of the door. It was only a minute later, as if timed, that he knocked on the door and waited for a response.

“You may come in, Alfred.” A man’s voice echoed out almost magically from the door. It didn’t sound like it came from inside the room, it sounded like it came directly from the door itself, something that Alfred didn’t pay any attention to as he turned the knob and opened the door. He pushed his way inside into a bedroom and I followed him closely behind.

The room was, really, a bedroom. With a bed and all. It was a large one with a bed that looked proportionally fitting for the room’s size. The ceiling was as tall as before, but this time I could see dark wood serving both as a roof and as part of the walls. I ignored my curiosity over the layout of the room in favor of the man who sat on a chair, writing something on a table. Bookshelves containing more books than I’ve seen in my life, which was admittedly very few, were next to him.

“Lord Bréanainn, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance once again. Excuse my intrusion into your room, and please excuse the presence of my apprentice as well.”

“Don’t bother with the formalities. You have the doll with you, right?” The Lord didn’t look away from his table, continuing to write instead.

“Of course, Lord. I wouldn’t have come here without it.” Alfred took out the box from his bag and walked over to the Lord, not even waiting for the request. I stood nervously, not moving

from where I was standing. Was Alfred making a mistake? He was dealing with a Lord.

The Lord didn't move as Alfred set the box next to him. Instead he placed the pen down his hands closer to Alfred, and to my relief not onto his throat but instead onto the box. He moved it closer to him and with another hand moved whatever parchment he was writing on away. I heard an unlatch and then the sound of the unrolling of linen. "Are you not going to introduce your new apprentice? I thought we were better friends than that." I swallowed and tried to make my presence much less known by curling into my self. It didn't work.

"Sorry, my Lord. Eithne, come here and introduce yourself. The Lord is a generous and polite man, there's nothing to be afraid of." I nodded and stiffly walked over to Alfred's side, holding my hands to my side as best as I could. It was only in these moments when I didn't know where best to place them, I could hold my tail but that could be seen as rude, somehow. So I waited.

"Well?" Oh shit. My introduction.

"I-I-I-I'm called Eithne, I-I come from damhán village. It's a pleasure to m-meet you, my Lord." That came out terribly. And I'm not sure I could still be said to be from that village.

"How long have you been an apprentice for?"

"Three months!" I shouted unintentionally. The shouting didn't take the Lord's attention away from the doll he was inspecting, but he did pull a drawer and took something out of it. With a closed fist he extended it to me, finally looking my way.

"Take it." I nodded and put both hands under his own hand, the moment I did so he dropped a ball on my palm. I brought it closer to my face to expect it, but it was too well wrapped and the cloth was too dense for me to see anything through it. "Open it and eat it." Again I nodded. If the Lord told me to eat something, I'll eat it. Even if it were a rock I'd eat it. Unfortunately I may have jinxed myself, as a hazy glass ball was hidden behind the cloth. I looked over at the Lord and then at Alfred, neither of them showing anything on their faces.

I placed it gently in my mouth and was rewarded not with the flavorless texture of glass, but of the sweetness of ten jars of honey condensed into a single ball. It was almost painful how sweet it was, but I let it roll in my mouth.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.” Physically and probably visually calmed down I answered. The Lord nodded, his visage returning once again towards doll and away from me.

“I assume Alfred hadn’t yet given you the gift of the first step yet?” The gift of what?

“I don’t know what you mean, Lord.”

“He did speak to you about a gift, right? He isn’t one to skimp on gifts, it’d be an unwelcome surprise if I learned he didn’t. So did he?”

“Yes. He brought me here so that we could find a gift, actually.” The Lord nodded at my words and finally sat the doll down.

“This is a very fine piece, Alfred. I truly can’t tell the difference between this doll and Anfiel. How much did I offer you for this?”

“Six gold pieces, Lord.” Alfred answered, once again being the one to speak rather than I.

“A thief I am, then. This is worth eight pieces of gold, at least, and eight pieces will be your pay.” The Lord got up off his chair after he gently placed the doll onto the linen cloth.

“Thank you, Lord.”

Without answering the Lord walked towards the bookshelves, Alfred making way for his steps, and started to move his fingers through them. He picked one out, a thick leather bound book that looked very heavy, and pulled it out of the bookshelf. Turning towards me he walked, and I stiffened my posture in response.

“You’re welcome, Alfred. Miss Eithne, do you know how to read?” No.

“No.” The Lord stopped in his tracks. With a complex expression he tapped his finger against the book, and then went back to the bookshelf and squatted down, opening a cabinet and retriev-

ing a much smaller book. He straightened himself out and came back to me.

“My gift to you, in honor of the first step into immortality. Alfred, please teach the young girl how to read.”

“Of course, Lord.”

The opening of a door could be heard. I turned to the intrusion by a guest who hadn't even bothered to knock, anxiety welling up inside me over the thought of what the Lord might do to this intruder. However, what I saw wasn't the nasty, ugly visage of an uncivilized brute, but instead the well dressed figure of a girl that mustn't have been older than twelve. Her eyes were a fierce yellow, not too dissimilar to the Lord's, and on her head ran the long hair of a redhead. Her dress, which didn't extend beyond mid shins was a deep, almost blood colored red, rimmed and trimmed with black laces and frills.

“Coinnle, what have I told you about knocking before entering when guests are around?” The Lord said.

Instead of answering the young girl walked with confidence towards us, her face neutral and her eyes on me, occasionally flickering to Alfred and the Lord. She wasn't walking towards me, but instead towards the Lord. “Forgive me, Papa, but I couldn't contain my excitement over Sir Alfred's arrival. Who might you be, catamarán?”

Papa? Is this little girl the Lord's child? I didn't know Lords could have children, I've never heard of that before. I smiled and ignored her calling me by my race rather than a slightly more polite 'you.' I made a slight courtesy, and tried to place the sweet bead of glass in my mouth somewhere where it wouldn't interfere with my speech, and said my name, “Eithne of damhán, the apprentice of Master Alfred.” I had nothing else to my name, so that was all I could offer her. She gave a slight nod and gave me her own name.

“I am Coinnle Slánaitheoir, third child of Lord Bréanainn, heir to the Citydom of Belcarra whom is vassal to the Connaught Holy Kingdom. Pleasure to meet your acquaintance, miss Eithne

of damhán.” What a long introduction. She turned to Alfred and didn’t cut words, “Do you have my doll, Sir Alfred?”

Alfred nodded his head, setting down his bag and taking out a box with an engraving of a woman’s silhouette, her dress long and dragging across the floor. “This is the one, I hope it’s too your exact specifications.”

Coinnle accepted the box and held it close to her chest. With a smile, a smile that from my core I felt had some hidden intent that I did not like, and she nodded her head, “I’m sure it has, Sir Alfred, but please, there’s no need to be so humble. Papa will handle your payment?” She looked over at her father, the Lord, and he nodded. “He will. I thank you, Sir Alfred.” She turned to face me, her fierce yellow eyes training themselves on me. “Papa, Sir Alfred, would you mind if I were to take Miss Eithne to my room?”

What, why? What’s so interesting about me? Go play with your doll with someone else, squirt.

“Ask the girl yourself, Coinnle.” Pap— I mean, the Lord answered. Alfred nodded as well, perhaps giving permission for me to go rather than in agreement to the Lord’s words. Coinnle turned her gaze back to me, as if she had planned for that response, and asked.

“Would you mind, Miss Eithne?” I could only give one answer in this situation.

“Of course not, Princess Coinnle.” I said with a smile that I hoped didn’t look forced.

With a genuine smile Coinnle began to walk once again outside and without further prompt I followed closely behind her, my newly acquired books still close to my chest. She took me out of the room, down the stairs, into the hallway and directly to the right again until we arrived at another stone door. Without much effort she pulled it open and held it open for me to enter. She didn’t close the door until after I had walked a good way inside already.

The room was a beautifully marbled white, the floor having a square red rug. A sculpture of the face of a woman was on one

corner, and a small painting of flowers could be seen on a wall next to a door. The flowers didn't look well painted, but it had its own charm to it.

Coinnle took out a black key hidden away within some fold of her clothes and unlocked the door, inviting me inside without saying a word. The door was made of the same wood as the door to the Lord's room, and within a site alien to the entire atmosphere of the castle a hallway was hidden inside. I followed Coinnle inside and she closed the door once I had stepped in.

"Welcome to my private section of the castle. To my room now, Eithne." I nodded and followed her closely. The walls were a mixture between dark wood and striped white and beige paint, the floor a red carpet. It was a hallway, to the end of there were two doors. The one on the right was further down than the one on the left, and at the end of the hallway was an open window.

VIII

Trapped by the Light of a Candle

"Welcome to my private section of the castle. To my room now, Eithne." I nodded and followed her closely. The walls were a mixture between dark wood and striped white and beige paint, the floor a red carpet. It was a hallway, to the end of there were two doors. The one on the right was further down than the one on the left, and at the end of the hallway was an open window.

Coinnle opened the door at the furthest end of the hallway and walked inside, not waiting for me to enter as she did last time. I followed her and saw the sight of what must've been a bedroom. A bed was in a corner, and a window directly to my left. A desk to my right, and tall bookshelves stood on many sides of the walls. The ceiling was high as to accommodate their massive height.

Coinnle laid the box on the desk and sat on her chair, unlatching the box and revealing the contents that laid within. "Sit on the bed, I'll get to you shortly."

"Thank you," I tried to say as politely as possible, moving over the bed that was on the opposite side of the room. I sat on it and laid my books next to myself, watching Coinnle inspect the dolls. She didn't say anything as she moved her eyes across the naked form of the doll, the linen no longer covering the thing's modesty. For a little lady she didn't look afraid to look at such a thing while someone else was around.

She began to dress the doll up in her clothes and once satisfied had her sit on her desk. There was a way to make them stand up without any assistance, but either Coinnle didn't know how to do that or she didn't want to do it right now. She turned to me and smiled, getting off her chair and walking over to the bed, almost throwing herself next to me.

"I overheard you couldn't read, Eithne."

It took me a moment to comprehend her words. That implies more than what she just said, it would mean she did indeed wait before entering the room. I nodded, ignoring that new revelation.

"Yes, it's true. Is it an odd thing for a villager like me to be illiterate?"

Coinnle shook her head, "Not at all. You were from damhán, right? The village north-east from here. That's a pretty fair distance away from this city, isn't it. I also heard you've recently taken the first step into immortality, excuse me for my overhearing."

Where was she going with this. I nodded again, and seeing that Coinnle got off the bed and grabbed onto my hand, dragging me up with her with firm strength I wouldn't expect from a young girl like her. "Then, as a gift to the apprentice of Sir Alfred, allow me to bestow you with an item. Have anything in mind?" I shook my head out of instinct. She smiled, one that was more polite than it was genuine. "Then I will pick something out for you. How does a dagger sound?"

A dagger? I wouldn't mind having another. I nodded, and she gave a genuine smile. "Wait here." She went off to her desk and opened a drawer, pulling out a dark leather sheath and walking back to me. She handed it to me and I took it with both hands, as I had done with the Lord's book. "Unsheathe it." I nodded again and unsheathed the dagger.

It was a steel blade, a small guard of silver with red gemstones embellished within. The hilt was of white wood and it had no pommel. In all, it was a dagger that I most likely wouldn't have been able to buy no matter how many gold coins I saved up in my village. I looked up at Coinnle, at her smiling face that felt as if she were hiding something. Or was it my imagination? I meekly nodded and sheathed back the knife.

"Thank you, Princess Coinnle. This is much more than I should be accepting." My voice was softer than I thought it would come out. She nodded deeply and began to speak once again.

"Anything for the apprentice of Sir Alfred. Now, I want to give you one more gift, but before that I would ask a request from you."

"Whatever you want I will give, as long as it's in my power to." I gripped the sheath to my chest.

"Take a bath with me." Huh? Was that all? Take a bath with her was the request? Of course, I nodded. This was something easy enough. She smiled happily at my approval and went off to the side of her bed. "Then let me get the towels and my clothes, we'll go to the bath soon."

Why did she want to take a bath with me? What possible reason could she have for that? I ran the possibilities in my mind. Was she scared to bathe alone? Did she prefer company? Was this to get closer to me, if not any of those?

Or did I just stink? Oh Divine. That must be it. Suddenly stricken with a bout of nervousness, I waited for Coinnle to gather everything she needed from whatever cabinet she was looking from, which didn't take very long. A pile of clothes laid on her hands, and two towels in the other. For a supposed princess she didn't have many servants to help her. Rather, she had none.

"Come with me, Eithne." I nodded and followed behind her, trying to discretely smell myself while she was turned away. I couldn't smell anything particularly offensive, although as I had said before I did smell a bit. Perhaps she wasn't used to that kind of stench? Whatever it is, I wanted it gone.

Coinnle opened the door to her room and went across the hall towards the other door. She opened it and I followed her inside, into a room that was more fitting for the general design of the castle. White stone walls and a white stone basin with a small portion of the room devoted to empty space was all that there was to this room. A couple of hangers stood on a side of the wall, which Coinnle promptly began to put to use when she started to undress herself.

Not wanting her to do so alone I also took off my clothes, leaving us both naked. She went over to the basin and turned a knob,

and with the turn a sudden spring of water started to pour out of a wolf's head. She walked away from the basin and into a small box, opening it up and taking out several sponges and a bar of soap. "Get in the bathtub."

Is the bathtub the basin? I nodded and walked over to the basin, watching as the water poured into the empty space. Light steam was rising from the water, so it must've been hot, and hopefully it wasn't simmering hot. I placed a hand to touch the slowly rising water and felt it wasn't too hot. It was hot, yes, but not enough to boil me. Probably.

"Is it too hot for your tastes?" I shook my head.

"No, I'm just slightly nervous. I've never been in a bathtub before." I said, the Princess responding with a laugh. I heard her footsteps come over to my side and I glanced at her.

"You'll only take a dip in here. Get yourself wet and I'll have you washed and clean, afterwards we may enjoy the bath to our leisure."

Ah. I nodded and moved my feet into the bath, sitting inside and watching as the water slowly raised. I began to scoop up water with my hands and rub it into my skin, trying my best to get myself in a better state to clean myself in. But, that didn't seem all that necessary, as the weight of hot water splashed over my head and covered my body in a layer of water, doing most of the work for me.

Coinnle was standing outside with a bucket in hand. I moved the hair out of my eyes and nodded, "Thanks."

"You're most welcome, Eithne." Coinnle scooped up another bucketful of water out of the basin and poured it over her own head, with a strength that I again wouldn't have expected from someone of her size. How old is she anyway?

"Princess? May I ask a question?"

"Anytime."

"How old is your highness?"

Coinnle moved hair out of her own eyes and looked at me before answering. "Ten." Ah. She's younger than she looked, surprisingly. She had developed very well for a ten year considering

her height, and her frame had more muscle than a child should have. She was a very beautiful child, something I could admit to even as a woman. I got up and left the basin, standing next to the Princess and waiting for further commands. She knew what her position was in this relationship and began to move before things got too awkward.

Taking a white bar of soap she moved over to me and stood right in front of me, and without saying a word began to rub me with it. Oh my. "P-Princess?"

"Yes?"

"I can wash myself, you know. And it isn't proper for someone like you to wash such a lowly lady like me." Coinnle ignored my words and continued to rub the soap across my skin, moving my arm when necessary. She left only the most delicate parts alone, to my gratitude, but was more thorough than I would've wanted her to be. She had me crouch down when certain places on my body were too high for her to reach.

I waited patiently for everything to be done with. Eventually, while my eyes were closed and I focused just on my breathing, I felt the now familiar sensation of water being thrown on me. It wasn't over my head like last time, she probably couldn't reach the height for that. I rubbed my eyes and opened them, but instead of the cleaning being done with I was being rubbed with a sponge.

All the soap was rubbed off my body, and the sponge dirtier than my shame would want it to be. Coinnle didn't look bothered by having to directly touch the dirty sponge, or to be the one to clean me. I waited for everything to be over, and thankfully it was after another bucket of water was thrown at my body.

"There. Now it's my turn." A smile was formed on the Princess' face, and I meekly nodded. I grabbed the soap from the box and stood in front of the girl, unsure of what to do first. She wasn't wet enough, I think, so instead I grabbed the bucket and poured it over her head gently, she made sure her hair didn't block her eyes. Her pale skin slightly reddened from the heat of the water, but I ignored all that and as delicately as I could I be-

gan to rub soap over the Coinnle as she had done for me.

I had to look over her body carefully, or maybe that was an excuse just to get a good look at her. She both looked and felt muscular, not to the point of losing femininity or childishness but she certainly had more definition than I did. I could swear I could see some of the individual strands of her muscles through the skin...but I'm not sure if the shoulder has circular striations. No, this is wrong. These aren't muscles, this is something else.

I traced my finger along the marks on her skin, almost forgetting for a moment that I had a job to do. Cleaning the girl. But Coinnle didn't fail to notice my excessive touching.

"Those are enchantments. You may inspect them if you want, they run all over my body save for most of my face." Enchantments?

"What for?" I blurted out the question, looking at the girl straight in the eyes by accident. She smiled slightly.

"Various things. Mostly to do with my future cultivation, if you want a detailed explanation about it then I'll speak about it while in the bath."

I nodded. Not wanting to pry any further when she had already told me when I should speak about it, I rubbed soap around her body in silence. I did as she did to me, pouring water over her I began to rub her clean with a sponge this time. The sponge didn't get dirty, I don't think this was even doing anything, but I did my job as well as I could. Then I poured water over her once again, and I no longer had anything to do.

Coinnle didn't say anything as she walked into the bathtub, already full and the wolf's head no longer vomiting out water. I followed closely behind her and we both sank into our own side of the tub. I didn't know what to say, or what I should talk about, so I rested on the only thing we had already begun to talk about.

"So, about the enchantments." Coinnle hummed in response to that, her eyes closed and most likely enjoying the bath more than she was caring about my presence. She nodded and opened her fierce eyes, pointing them to me and scooting her body over to me. I had no way to escape her here, so I did nothing and let

her get closer than I was comfortable letting her. She grabbed my hands and placed herself into a hug within them, wresting her back on me while she did so.

Alright. This isn't so bad I guess. "Feel my mana." Okay.

The moment I began to sense her internal structure, a massive wave of heat rushed through my entire body. It wasn't painful, no, it felt as if a wave of mana had rushed itself over me. Within a moment I felt the fires of hell, and in the next I was looking at the internal structure of the little girl in front of me. Her structure was obviously that of a cultivator, one that was more intricate, more detailed, more ancient than even Alfred.

"I'm a cultivator. I've been a cultivated since the moment I was born, as Papa tells me. I was born to complicated circumstances, but all you have to know is that my enchantments help in my future cultivation into Lordship. If you want, you can spend bath time exploring my mana."

Wow. I don't know what any of that meant, but I nodded regardless. "Why are you telling me this, Princess?"

She looked up at me, her eyes as painfully intense as always. "You are Alfred's apprentice, yes? And I already knew from seeing you that you were a magician. You are capable of magic greater than Alfred ever would in his lifetime, so I wish to support him indirectly through supporting you. Do you know what Alfred's goals are?"

I nodded. He wanted to create lifelike dolls, and he's doing that pretty well. "Creating lifelike art, right?"

Coinnle nodded. "But there's more to it than that. He wants to create life with his art, moving and changing. He's surely shown you dolls that he could move through his enchantments, yea?"

Now that she mentions it, there are several dolls that he's enchanted with the ability of movement. I nodded.

"His goal is to create a doll that is alive. The enchantments on my skin will help with that goal, and I can't go and show him my body like I could with you. So excuse my over familiarity, what's some skinship between girls?"

"You're awfully close. It's almost like we're mother and child rather than acquaintance and acquaintance."

"Don't mind."

Hm. Whatever works. I hugged her a bit closer and let me mind wander to her mana structure. The most obvious thing was the fire alignment she held, and that she was a light cultivator similar to Alfred. Other than the deep intricacy of her internal enchantments, there was nothing to watch. Coinnle seemed to pick up on something and answered a question I hadn't asked.

"The enchantments on my skin won't show internally. They're more like spells. You do know why some enchantments are on the surface rather than done internally, right?"

"No, I've never heard why. Why?"

"It's easier to create intricate spells by drawing them, and it costs less mana to maintain. It costs nothing, actually, so it could be turned off and not have it expend any mana. My enchantments are too complicated for me to internalize, and it's easier to carve it into my skin."

That sounds incredibly painful. "Isn't that painful?"

"Yea. It's very painful. The worst pain of my life, and from what I've heard of others who've gotten skin enchantments, the worst pain anyone could feel."

Wait. "Were you forced into this?" It'd be bad if she were. Putting a ten year old child into such a position isn't what could be called moral.

"Yea. I didn't choose to be born a Princess to a Lord, but it's my lot in life. Despite having siblings we are separated by hundreds of years of time. In the eldest, more than a thousand. But my two older brothers never reached the Lordship stage of cultivation, so I'm alone."

"That sounds like a very complicated family situation, Princess. I'm sorry to hear this."

"Don't let it bother you, like I don't let it bother me."

We spent a long time sitting in the position she placed herself in, I asking her questions related to her enchantment and how it relates to Alfred's research, and her answering as best as

she could. It was Coinnle rather than I who decided that we've spent enough time both talking about her enchantments and in the bath, so we got out, dried ourselves in the towel, clothed ourselves and headed back to her room.

"Onto the gift I wanted to give to you. Get your the small book and bring it to the table, Eithne." I nodded and did as she said, not being able to do anything. It wasn't like I liked being ordered around, but when you're dealing with both a cultivator and the daughter of a Lord, you have very little choice but to obey.

I grabbed the book and brought it over to the table, setting it down and looking at Coinnle for further instruction. She pat the seat of her chair as if inviting me to sit. I nodded and she in turn sat on my lap. "Alright. Let's begin your reading lessons."

"How is this going to work out?"

"I'll explain to you each word and their letters and how to read them, and you'll try your best to follow along." Sounds simple enough. I brought the chair closer to the table and we began to read.

Several hours passed by as Coinnle taught me how to read. I couldn't understand what the letters were trying to convey, although the book we were using for practice had lots of nice looking pictures, the words were too small for me to really read them. They were very large, if I were to go by Coinnle, but they looked like random scratches to me. It wasn't until several hours, near the end of our reading, that I began to pick up on the meaning of the letters. But it was all too fuzzy and my head was starting to hurt.

The story was also too simple for my taste. Is this a children's book? Maybe it is.

And what about dinner and the like? It's getting close to when dinner would be served in my village, was it different in the castle. I looked down at Coinnle, who was still on my lap, and asked. "Will there be dinner served?"

She nodded. "It's about that time."

She scooped her butt off me and I was allowed to get up off the chair, she left the room and I followed her to another room

within the hallway. Opening a door into a large dining room. Food had already been served and both the Lord, Alfred, some court lady and several other men and women were sitting on the table as well. Looks like people were waiting for us.

A seat was left empty for me next to Alfred, so I sat next to him and we ate.

After the dinner was finished Coinnle starting asking me and Alfred questions.

"Is Sir Alfred and Miss Eithne going to sleep here tonight? Or do you two have separate plans."

"Arrangements have already been made for the both of them to sleep here, Coinnle." The Lord responded in Alfred's place. He nodded, and I nodded as well. I didn't know that, though. With a smile Coinnle said something I hadn't expected her to say at all.

"Then, can Miss Eithne sleep with me tonight?"

"Huh?" I blurted that out, impolitely considering the stares I received in response. The Lord ignored my outburst and answered his daughter's question for me.

"If she allows it you may sleep together."

Why is Coinnle so interested in me? This goes slightly beyond wanting kinship, sleeping in the same room as a Princess isn't a comfortable position to be in. When was the last time I had slept with someone else anyway? The only other one, ever, has been mom. Coinnle looked at me expectantly, and given the mood and air of the room I had to answer in the affirmative. I nodded, "It would be my honor, Princess Coinnle."

"Let us leave together now." I nodded and politely left the dining table and headed back towards Coinnle's room, following the girl closely behind. I looked and saw Alfred speaking once again to the Lord, ignoring my departure. That pricked my heart a tiny bit for some reason. Did he not mind that some girl was hogging all my attention to herself?

Regardless, today has been a long day. And I'm not sure for how much longer I can keep my attention towards the Princess going, once we had arrived back in the strange hallway and in her room I had decided to politely ask if I could be allowed to

sleep immediately. I wanted to sleep anyway, by myself in some isolated room like I've gotten used to, and it didn't matter to me much if I had to sleep with her next to me.

"Are you tired?" I nodded, not responding. Was that too rude for her? I don't know, I'll have to figure that out some other time. Coinnle put a finger to her chin and began to think. "Very well. Let me get you a servant's night clothes, if you don't mind." I nodded, not really paying attention. "Wait here, then."

Coinnle left and I was made to be alone in her room. Not knowing what else to do I took off my cloak and set it on the chair, as there was no other place to put it. I sat on the bed and waited for her arrival. It didn't take long, no longer than five minutes, and when she did so she held a long and white one piece dress in her arms, a calm smile on her lips as she opened the door.

"Here you are. Change and make yourself comfortable in the bed, I'll join you soon." I nodded, absentmindedly taking off my clothes and setting them on the chair as well. I threw the dress over myself once unclothed and I noticed that it had no holes for my tail, something that wasn't too much of a problem but was noticeable in that there was now a constant furry thing tickling my legs.

Yawning I trodded over to the bed and laid down, moving myself away from the edge of the bed so that I occupied a side that was directly facing a wall. There was an ultra fine blanket laid on that I didn't know how to retrieve, so I waited for Coinnle to arrive to bed as well. She wore clothes that matched mine save for a red ribbon on her collar, and she pulled the blanket away from the bed and tucked herself in.

I see. I moved myself off of the blanket and got myself under it as well, laying on the massive pillow that Coinnle had on her bed. The lights were on, but it would take very little magic to turn it off. "May I turn off the lights?"

"No."

"Eh? Why not?"

"Because we're going to continue practicing our reading, this time while in bed."

“Princess, my mind is already attempting to leave my body for the lands on yonder. And this bed isn’t helping that.” Ah. I didn’t mean to say this out loud. I could see Coinnle pouting from the corner of my eye, her dangerous looking yellow eyes trained on me. Now that I look at it, it was only the vividness that makes them so fierce. Otherwise she had the delicate eyes of a young little girl rather than of a wolf.

An attention that I should’ve noticed earlier. “May I turn off the lights and sleep, Princess?” Coinnle didn’t respond for a couple of seconds, but she gave me permission and I turned off the lights with a switch of my mana. The moment I stopped giving attention to my surroundings was also the moment that I felt out of conscious.

IX

Love of Passion

Day 130

The devastatingly comfy confines of the bed and blanket was what I awoke to the next morning. No Princess in sight, just me and me alone in a bed that was too big not to invoke loneliness for all who sleep alone on it. I could feel the traces of warmth of some body that wasn't mine, but it was quickly leaving and I could tell from the marrow of my bones that I had slept enough. It was time to start a new day in this odd castle.

Crawling my way out of the bed I took off my nightdress and put back on my clothes. They were exactly where I had left them, but I had a new problem. I had no clue where to put the nightdress. Carrying it around would be unsightly, so I placed where my old clothes were and headed out of the room and into the hallway once again. I only knew of one place where I could more or less walk in without looking too odd, and that was the dining room.

I pulled open the door of the dining room, a task that wasn't simple considering its massive weight, and quickly walked inside before the door could crush me. There was some amount of activity within the dining room, servants walking from one door and out the other, others carrying trays filled with dishes and others picking up what was on the table. Alfred was there, and more importantly, Coinnle was there as well. But what struck me wasn't their presence.

Coinnle was sitting on the lap of Alfred. And for some strange reason, that sent a suffocating wave of dread rolling through me. What was Alfred doing letting another girl on his lap? Why was Coinnle so quickly betraying me after spending

so much time together with me?

Why did I feel any of this to be betrayal? I moved towards my ears and felt for their position. I knew where they were already, but I wanted another confirmation. Yes, they were perked. And my tail was slightly puffed up. I was angry. And I had no clue how to express it, or why I was feeling it.

I walked over to Alfred and the little nymph and, trying to control my voice, spoke. "What are you two doing?" Well, I chose the words right. But the anger had seeped itself deeply into the words, and that can't be easily hidden. Both of them already knew I was behind them, but when Alfred heard my voice he turned to face me quickly with an eyebrow lifted. Coinnle reacted more slowly to my question.

"Is something wrong?" Alfred asked.

"Nothing's wrong." I replied. The question sent another shiver of anger through my spine. What do you mean is something wrong? Can you not notice the girl sitting on your lap, you bastard?

Coinnle was far more perceptive to my mood. She got off of Alfred and dusted herself off, looking at me quizzically. Perhaps she didn't fully understand. "Have we done something to anger you, Eithne? Are you angry over being left alone in the bed?" I looked at her. She wasn't one I wanted to anger, second worst to the Lord in terms of how bad a fuckup that would be. But I couldn't control myself.

"What are you doing sitting on Alfred's lap, nymph?" Fuck. I didn't mean to say the last part. Coinnle raised her eyebrow at that, at first a surprise, then anger, and then genuine worry.

"Excuse me? Please watch your words carefully, Eithne. I may have treated you kindly but I won't tolerate such blatant disrespect. What have I done wrong here?"

"Y-you..." I bit my lip, hard enough to draw blood. Not a difficult feat considering how sharp my canines were, but I've always had very fine control over how much pressure I could place on my lips. Right now, I didn't have that. Coinnle's face turned from worry into basic frustration, but it was Alfred's turn to speak.

"Eithne. Do we need to speak somewhere more private?" His words were a threat, but instead of cowering I felt my anger harden from the callousness of his voice. He was complicit with the action, he let her sit on his lap. She wasn't supposed to go there. I need to resolve this, immediately. Now.

Both of them stared at me as I tightly grasped onto my dress. The blood from my lips formed a single drop which fell onto the floor, the obvious pattern of blood splatter forming on the surface. It was Coinnle instead of Alfred who first acted, looking fed up over my angsty actions. She grabbed my hands and forcibly moved me out of the room, I doing nothing to stop her pulling. I was a strange mixture of feeling jealousy, hatred, betrayal, shame, and sadness mixed into one vaguely feline form. I let her pull me away, licking the wound that was upon my lip clean of the blood.

Once I had been taken out of the room by Coinnle she turned to face me. "What's wrong?"

I didn't answer.

"I said, what's wrong?"

"Don't get so close to Alfred." It took everything in me not to insult her again.

"Why? What's the matter with you? Whenever Alfred comes by every year I like to hear his theories while sitting on his lap. I've sat on your lap as well, both in the bath and on my chair. What's wrong with that?"

I didn't answer. Coinnle didn't ask for an answer, but she didn't continue to speak. Her fiercely yellow eyes boring holes into my skull, forcing me to relent and release some of the tension building up from within my bosom.

"I don't like it. It hurts me. Please stop doing it."

Coinnle's face softened at the sound of my voice, it was much more pathetic than I had thought it could be. I didn't like it, I didn't feel like I had control over my own voice. But all I could do was beg for her to stop, I didn't want her to do something like that to my Alfred.

“What’s wrong, Eithne?” Her voice was childish in its innocence, and genuine in its care. Perhaps I was crying, something that wouldn’t surprise me considering the haziness the world started to develop and the hotness that began to develop in my cheeks. Coinnle stood on her tippy toes and first touched my lip with her finger, the part with the bite wound on it, and then wiped away both my tears. “You have to speak to me, I’ve sworn an oath to help those who are in pain, as long as it doesn’t contradict any other verse of my oath. So speak. I’ll hear it out.”

I nodded. I felt absolutely pathetic. I no longer felt any pain on my lip, touching it with my finger I couldn’t feel a wound either. Had she healed it?

“It hurts me to see you sitting on the lap of Alfred, Coinnle.”

“Does it? Why?” Coinnle asked a simple question, one I couldn’t answer.

“I don’t know.”

She hummed at my response. Then her face started to take a thinking expression, her pointer finger on her lip and her thumb on her chin. I stood there, waiting for her to respond. Something clicked in her mind as she suddenly turned to me with a slight smile. She nodded. “Understood, Miss Eithne. And it’s Princess Coinnle, remember my title. A maiden’s heart is a fickle thing, I will forgive you of your brash impoliteness.”

“What do you understand?” Coinnle smiled again, a smile that spoke of someone who knew more about something that was important that I did not.

“You’re jealous.” My tail puffed up at her words and I couldn’t control myself enough to not open my mouth, but I closed it before I could say anything. I knew she was right, I had admitted it. But jealous of what?

“Of what?”

“Of me taking the lap of your crush. I understand, Miss Eithne. I won’t do such a thing again, you have my word.”

“A crush? On who? Alfred?” I asked and Coinnle nodded in affirmation. Her words didn’t process in my mind for several

seconds. Me? Having a crush? On a boy? No, on a ninety four year old man? What is this girl talking about?

But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense in its own twisted way. Why else was I so overprotective of him? Why else did I feel so betrayed over someone else sitting on his lap? Why did I want others to think of us as a couple? Everything was already there. Divine, I do have a crush on him, don't I. For some reason, that made my cry even more. Coinnle gave a smug smile at my crying face, something that didn't upset me as much as vex me.

Despite my revelation I couldn't help but deny it. "You're wrong, it's not like that." Coinnle nodded wisely.

"You'll be happy to know I won't steal him from you. By the divine, how possessive can you be to become jealous of someone my age? I may understand feelings of love from books, but I've not met a man who sends me to angers such as yours."

"For a child you sure are articulate."

"Enchantments and bloodlines, Miss Eithne. Those will take you a long, long way, as Papa says. I know more than my age should allow." Without saying anything, and seeing that my tears no longer streamed down my face, Coinnle moved back into the dining room and kept the heavy stone door open for me to pass through, if I wanted. She didn't have to wait long for me to come with her.

I spent most of the day along with her and Alfred, up until Alfred had to leave in order to make the deliveries of his orders. He didn't take me with him since he thought I could better spend my time getting better acquainted with the Princess, which I don't think he was all that wrong about. I wanted to accompany him but despite Coinnle's supposed maturity she still clung close to me for whatever reason.

Still, the feeling of powerlessness as I interacted with both Alfred and Coinnle this morning embed itself deep into my chest. It wasn't enough that Coinnle had given me her word, although I definitely did trust it considering it came from a cultivator. I wanted Alfred to not be under such conditions again with any

other women. I needed to find a way to get him to comply. And, for once in my life, I was reminded that I had a natural born talent.

Enthrallment.

X

Last Ditch Effort

Day 131

It was stupid. I knew it. But I couldn't get it out of my mind, plans of how to get Alfred to not notice my attempt at enthralling him into my control kept running through my mind. No matter what I did, whether it was bathing, reading, or meditating, it stuck within me. I don't want to relive that level of shame that I had felt yesterday. Regardless of whether my crush was transient, I needed the assurance of that it will never happen again.

It was night time, I was sitting next to Coinnle with the children's book on the desk. She no longer sat on my lap as she had done on the first day, instead having a servant bring me my own chair so that we could both sit comfortably. A certain level of distance was developed between the two of us, but it wasn't something I minded. On the contrary, not having her constantly clinging on me was a relief.

But it was time to spring my plan. I needed to go to Alfred, to find him before he slept. I already knew where his room was located, I had asked Coinnle and she had shown me where the guest rooms normally are. But my best bet for catching Alfred in ambush was when he was asleep, and I didn't want to risk waking him up by opening the door to his room. I had already come up with an excuse for why I wouldn't be sleeping with Coinnle today, I wanted my own room since I didn't feel comfortable constantly taking advantage of her kindness. She accepted it, although she looked sad.

It was about time. I could feel it. I yawned, a real yawn, and stretched my limbs and spine while still sitting on the chair. Coinnle looked at me weirdly and said the words I had wanted

her to say myself, "You look tired. Wanna head to bed?"

I nodded, perhaps with a bit too much enthusiasm. I could see something behind her gaze, suspicion. It had been there all day, but she never mentioned it. It must've been my imagination instead, I don't think she caught on to what I was planning. She didn't know the entirety of my abilities to begin with, she doesn't know.

"If anything bad happens come straight to my room, okay?"

I nodded, not thinking too deeply about her comment. "I'll be heading off, then. Thank you for your company and tutelage, Princess Coinnle. And good night."

"Night." She gave with a small and sad smile.

I closed the door as I left, entering into the hallway and into the last two doors of the hallway. To the left was the Lord's room, to the right the guest rooms. I opened the door inside and casually made my way towards Alfred's room. I knew the exact one, and I knew the exact layout as well. I would hide within a closet, and from there I would use one of the oldest tricks I knew. Concealment, without it I would've died within the first couple of days in the wilderness.

I sneaked my way into Alfred's room and hid myself in the closet that I knew to be there. I doubted he would open it, considering it was empty of anything and that anything that he would want could be more easily stored somewhere else.

Now was a waiting game. I caught my breathing and slowed it down to as low a pace as I could get it. I mentally commanded my muscles to relax, for my mana to blend in with the surroundings. I couldn't see anything, but I could hear when steps are made and when Alfred would be back. Alone in the closet all I had for company was my thoughts, but all they gave was worries over possible failures. What if he opened the closet door? Then I'd come up with an excuse. Worrying now would provide me no benefit.

After what felt like hours, to moments, to minutes, to whatever arbitrary amount of time I had heard the sound of the door opening, and of it closing. And then the sound of walking, of clothes being removed and laid down. But nothing that came

closer to the closet. I kept my calm and focused my attention away from Alfred for a few minutes, I needed to regain my composure. Calm down, my heart, it'll be fine.

Now is the real waiting game. I had to wait until he slept. I would stand here for hours if needed, and I had counted the seconds to be absolutely sure. One hour, two hours, three. When it neared four I began to open the closet door, slowly, carefully. With delicate and light feet I moved out of the closet, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness of the room.

A body was in the bed, laying sideways and away from me. This is perfect. I waited for a couple more minutes after I left the closet, just to be absolutely certain he hadn't woken up. Then I moved. Each step was planned. The floor was wooden, and to make sure my feet didn't stick to it when I walked I wore socks. There were no creaks, something I had to thank my very light weight for.

Fifteen minutes passed as I walked towards Alfred. I was next to him now. All I needed to do was to touch his skin, not too gently as to be agitating, but not too firm as to wake him up. Slowly I moved my hand towards his exposed neck, the blond hair of his head being apparent in the darkness of the room, and the pale flesh of his skin being all the more so.

I touched him. He didn't move. Perfect.

I felt for the mana within him, finding his spirit and carefully, very carefully, watching the movement of his entire structure. The breathing of his lungs as they fuel the fire of his body, how the fire interacts with the entirety of his being and how the earth within him constructs his bones. I knew what I had to do now. I gathered up as much mana as I could on my fingertip, condensing it when none more could fit. Even when I was at the limit of how much I could control in a single point I kept piling it up, until it nearly overflowed and exploded out of my hand.

The amount of mana needed to enthrall a simple insect wasn't great, but the amount of mana to enthrall a rodent was. I've never managed to enthrall anything bigger than a dog, and the only reason I could cast the spell on the dog was purely be-

cause of how loyal they are already. For a man I can't imagine how much mana it would require to successfully cast the spell, but I was desperate. I needed this to work.

With unhindered and devoted care I formed the spell within my finger and sent it slowly into Alfred. The point is to cover his spirit within a thin layer of my own mana, and then from there influence it into whatever actions I want him to commit, or not to in this case. Interact with no woman affectionately, no one but me would be his desire. I needed him to abide by this, and I am willing to sacrifice my life in trying to achieve this.

Was I being sane? No. I knew it. But never again do I want to feel what I had felt yesterday.

The moment I had gotten the spell into Alfred was the moment that I was dragged into bed, the arm that was touching Alfred's neck grabbed and almost torn off by the force of whatever had grabbed and pulled me. It hurt. The entire right side of my body felt like it had been bashed by sticks. I couldn't breathe, and the only thing I was able to do was look at the ceiling in terror. Was I caught? What happened? I'm scared.

A hand touched my face and a weight settled on my stomach. It was heavy, and the hand strong, whoever had grabbed me turned my face and made me make eye contact. In the dark I could tell it was Alfred, his face calm and his eyes straight. Any feelings of confusion or anger died within me, replaced with stomach knotting and heart stopping horror. It wasn't the pain of his hands against my cheeks, his squeezing that felt like my jaw would break. Nor was it the still aching throbs that emanated from my side. It was that calm look, as if it this was nothing to him.

"I had thought you better than this. That was an enthrallment spell, what made you think this would work?"

He didn't let loose his hands, I couldn't speak because of the pressure. This had to be intentional on his part, so I stood silent and waited for him to continue. I didn't try to shake his hands off, or shake or nod my head in fear of him mistaking my movement for resistance.

"Do you know what the penalties are for attempted enslavement of man is? Do you?" His eyebrows knitted themselves slightly, a barely perceptible change that one might've overlooked. If that one wasn't me, that is. I again waited for him to continue, his pause adding dreadful tension to my heart.

"It's a death penalty."

Fuck. Am I going to die today? Was I really going to die because of this? I might've missed mom, but I don't want to visit her in the afterlife so soon, and she wouldn't be happy to know the reason for my death.

"You had been acting strange since yesterday. Your insult against the Princess was unforgivable, but still she forgave you. She had treated you with nothing but kindness, and you had insulted her virtue. And you come in here today, sneaking into my room, attempting to enthrall me?" Alfred squeezed his hand on my jaw a little tighter, and now I could feel tears start to form in my eyes both from the pain of his squeezing and the fear of his judgement of me.

I had expected him to break my jaw, to crush it between his fingers as if was a rotten stick. But he let go, the intense pressure suddenly being lifted sending new, agonizing shocks of pain throughout my body. I had forgotten to breath and his release had reminded me of it.

"Why? What did I do wrong? Had I done you evil? I've treated you with kindness, and my teasing isn't enough cause to justify this. Tell me."

I tried to catch my breathing, to try to form words, but I couldn't form anything in my mind. I was trapped by the idea of being killed by Alfred, and the sudden realizations of the evil I had tried to do on him. What was I doing? Why did I think this would work? Am I retarded?

"Sorry," was all I could say. I repeated it too many times to count, through sobbing and slurred words I tried to make amends. "Forgive me, please, Alfred, please."

A slap deafened my ears and sent my neck painfully to the side. I couldn't move my hands to touch my face, the entirety of

it having become numb, and the taste of iron starting to well up within my mouth.

"Is that all? No justification? No reasons? Just sorry?" I didn't speak, both out of being unable to and out of fear of getting hit again. I tried to move my neck but the muscles spasmed instead, was it broken? At least I could feel everything from below my neck, although it was only pain. Alfred grabbed my cheeks, gently this time, and moved it back into position and kept his hand there.

"I-I-I," don't say sorry, "I don't want, don't, don't leave me alone, I don't want you to leave me alone." I started to sob again. Some part of me felt my conduct to be absolutely pathetic, and that same part tried to reign in my spasming emotions. "I didn't want you to leave me, don't hurt me anymore, please, Alfred."

Alfred kept his stare on me. For what felt like hours but was probably minutes, he watched my still crying face with an intense focus on his face. Then he moved his hand to my neck and the pain I had felt from there vanished, although everything else still hurt. He got off me and got off the bed as well, he started to put on clothes while I still laid there, unwilling to move but keeping all my attention on Alfred's form. What was he doing?

"Get up." I nodded and tried to use my right arm, but it wouldn't move. So I shifted myself to my left and crawled off the bed, placing careful feet on the ground and standing up. I think my arm was broken, or dislocated, or something. How did I even get into that position? Alfred had finished dressing at that point. "Follow me." I nodded.

We left his room and began to walk towards the direction of the main hallway. "Does anyone else know you were going to do this?"

I don't know. Coinnle might've been suspicious of me but I don't—

"Speak everything, don't hide anything." I nodded and quickly started to speak my thoughts.

"I don't know, Coinnle looked a bit suspicious, but—"

"Did you tell her?"

“N-no.”

“Let me be clear. There’s a high chance you’ll be executed tonight, a very high chance it would be within the next hour. Answer with me only the honest truth, understand?”

“Yes, Alfred.”

“Don’t speak my name.”

I wanted to die, and it looks like I’ll be getting that soon anyway. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please forgive me, I won’t do it again, I promise on my life. But I couldn’t speak anymore, my throat was too dry and my mouth wouldn’t move even if I wanted it to.

We’ve arrived at the main hallway and went towards the room of Coinnle instead of the Lord’s, or anyone else’s. We were standing in front of the door to her strange hallway, within the white room that served as a junction between the hallway and her personal rooms. Alfred knocked on the deep brown door and waited for her response, and I next to him with my head cast down.

Footsteps could be heard, followed by the unlocking of a door and then the turning of the knob. Coinnle’s smiling face was revealed, a face that looked as if she was ready to console a friend who had just done something stupid.

“Alfred! Nice to see you. Had Eithne done something stupid? Crawl into your bed? Try to—” she looked over to me, at the face that I could feel to have already become swollen and bruised, and her smile vanished and her expression turned to confusion, anger, and then fear. “What did she do?”

“Attempt to enthrall me.” Alfred’s words were simple but it cut me deeper than any other words had done before. I hung my face down and tried to cover my injuries and shame, but I could still feel Coinnle’s gaze turn to me. What do I do? What did I do? Why was I so stupid?

I heard a sigh come from Coinnle. “What are you planning to do to her by bringing her here?”

“I want you to help me convince the Lord to not have her be executed for her crimes.”

“I see. Do you know why she attempted the enthrallment?”

"No, she hasn't said a specific reason. And I think she's too unstable to articulate her thoughts. May we come inside?"

I heard footsteps, and then felt a hand grab my own. I was dragged inside into Coinnle's room, the grip on my wrist not strong but still firm, and positioned next to the bed. Alfred placed a hand on my shoulder and put pressure on me, as if trying to make me sit. He could've tossed my on the bed like a sack of rotting meat if he wanted, but he chose this. Even after I had tried to enthrall him he still cared enough not to hurt me and even to try to convince Coinnle to help me not get executed.

But why can't you just not tell the Lord? I had enough bravery, or the stupidity, to speak without being asked.

"If you don't want me executed you could not turn me in?"

Alfred turned to me, his face neutral. Coinnle was sitting on her chair and Alfred standing next to the bed frame. He nodded. "I'm sworn to speak about any crimes I've witnessed. I do not have to act against them, but I am forced to tell any local authority about them and everything I know about the circumstance."

Oaths are precious, I know that. I wonder what oaths Alfred had sworn and what were the details, but that doesn't matter right now. I nodded. Tears began to work their way into my eyes again and I tried to clear them away, but it was a losing battle.

"So what do you want me to say? There's very little I could do or say that would win Papa's favor, and it's not like we can look this over, either. Murder and enthrallment are sued against by the state regardless of the victim or whether the victims want a trial. The only thing you have is that it was a failed attempt, but you're a cultivator. And I know you've sworn an oath to speak the truth when asked to, so you can't lie."

Alfred didn't answer for a while, instead looking off at the wall in thought. Was this truly an inescapable situation for me? Crying won't fix it.

"Eithne told me you were suspicious of her. What do you know about her possible motives?"

Coinnle nodded, glancing at me and then looking off into space while answering. "I thought she had a crush on you. Now

I realize a crush is a terrible understatement, an obsession or extreme possessiveness would be more accurate. She did it out of love rather than malicious intent, right, Eithne?"

I nodded. I didn't want to hurt him, I didn't want him to hurt me either. Was it love? I don't know, but I needed him to only look at me. Coinnle continued to speak her thoughts, "Then we can work with that. This isn't the first case of a lover, or two mutual lovers, enchanting each other with a slave spell. Especially when it's mutual is the death penalty not given, and instead the two let to their own business. But this wasn't mutual."

"I want to convince the Lord into giving her a fine rather than the penalty. I think there's enough justification to allow that lenience."

"It's a minimum of five hundred gold, you know. That's a lifetime of debt, and then some, for most."

"We'll work it out."

"She was better off trying to rape you." Coinnle looked at me for that one. "Although that's at an extreme end. I had expected her to try to crawl into your bed or give you a kiss goodnight. You disappoint me, Eithne. Be thankful for Alfred's forgiveness."

I nodded.

"Are you going to keep her this injured? Her arm looks broken, and she might be missing a tooth or three." Coinnle asked, and Alfred shook her head.

"Even without the death penalty she must learn to never do that again. What she got off with was lenient."

I stood silent throughout the entirety of their exchange. I stayed in bed, feeling every awkward moment of silence as neither of them spoke. Alfred let out a sigh, and Coinnle closed her eyes. "Let's go, then." Coinnle spoke, getting off her chair. Alfred silently nodded and I got up as well.

We walked in silence towards the Lord's room. Was he asleep? Do Lords sleep? There's barely any reliable information about their capabilities. And now that I think about it, don't cultivators barely need any sleep? I had stayed by Alfred waiting for the opportunity to catch him while he was asleep, but had he

been setting me up the entire time? How did he know I would try to do something to him tonight?

In front of the Lord's door we waited, Alfred taking up the initiative and knocking. Just like last time, we waited for a while before a voice as if coming from the door itself told us to come in. Alfred turned the knob and we all walked in one by one, I coming after Alfred and Coinnle after me.

The Lord was at his desk, as he was last time, but this time he had his face turned to us. Could his chair rotate in place? It looks like it.

"I've heard from the guards. Tell me what happened, Alfred." There are guards around? Where? And when did they see us? How much do they know?

"My Apprentice Eithne tried to enslave me, my Lord."

"And why is she still alive? You have the ability to enact justice against her for her crimes as a veteran soldier of our city."

"I wanted to hold her trial, for a chance of a more forgiving punishment."

The Lord put his hand on his chin and rested his elbow against his armchair. "Tell me everything, then. One by one. Alfred."

"Yes, Lord, thank you for your graciousness. May I start by what happened this afternoon?" The Lord nodded. "Very well. Coinnle had told me she had showed Eithne where my room was located earlier today, and my suspicion for what she might've been planning had started then. I didn't know what she would do, whether it would be innocent or more mischievous, but regardless I would go to my bedroom and pretend to sleep for her sake.

"Tonight, I had walked into my room as planned, feeling the presence of Eithne within the closet. I ignored it and went to bed, pretending to sleep for five hours. She had spent the entire time within that closet, save for a single hour when she had slowly moved closer beside me. I had only begun to move when I noticed a spell being inserted into me, and I immediately recognized it for its similarity to the forbidden enslavement spell. She

hadn't learned it from anyone, by her words, as it was a natural instinctive spell

"I grabbed her arm and threw her onto the bed, breaking it in the process. Words were exchanged, but those words I think would be better said by her. After considering her possible motives I had decided she was being dumb rather than malicious, and had decided to speak to your daughter for help. We are here now after all this."

"Very well. Coinnle."

"Yes, papa. Alfred's words are true, of course. Eithne had asked me if I knew where Alfred's room was, and I had brought her there, and while on a walk outside I had spotted Alfred and made to greet him. I told him of that fact. Besides this, I had my own suspicion of what Eithne was doing, but I didn't know what. Later today, after Eithne had asked to go to bed and after a few hours of studying, I had been asked by Alfred, Eithne in tow, for help. I too believe her motives to be foolish. She is a love-struck and impulsive girl, papa, but she is not malicious. Her actions are unforgivable, but Alfred had forgiven them regardless. Please, as a personal request I will ask you to consider giving her a fine and any other punishment other than death."

"Considered. Eithne."

What do I say? Why hadn't they mentioned what I had said and done to Coinnle either? When I called her a nymph? Were they under no obligation to speak that, since I hadn't done a crime? No, stay on topic. "Uh, um...Lord—"

"Is she sound of mind?" The Lord cut me off, looking at Alfred instead of me. Alfred nodded in affirmation.

"She's in considerable pain but otherwise, if she knew better, she had enough time to consider her words."

"Continue, then. Swear an oath you will speak the truth."

"I swear by my life and my soul that I will speak only the truth on this matter, Lord." The Lord nodded. It was a grave commitment to swear this oath, considering the consequence of losing a part of my soul if I had lied even accidentally. "I believe both Si—, er, Master Alfred's and Princess Coinnle's words to be accurate."

I, I, I'm an idiot, out of impulse I had tried to enslave Alfred, I didn't mean to hurt him. I didn't think it would go like this. I had seen how Alfred interacted with Coinnle, and I grew bitter and resentful over her taking his attention away.

"Please, I'll never do it again. I swear on it, I will never try to enslave another person again. I am sorry, so very sorry."

"Did she speak these words to you when you had caught her, Alfred?"

"No. She had said sorry and forgive me, but it was mostly incoherent whispers and ramblings."

"Thank you for leaving it out then. Very well. Radanta, get me a whip." Who? Everyone stayed in silence for a while, waiting for something or someone going by the name Radanta. And a whip? Was I going to get whipped?

The door opened and a blond haired woman walked into the room, carrying in her hand a brown, long whip. She wore not the clothes of a lady but the clothes of a man, except both her trousers and her tunic hugged her closer than most clothes do. "My Lord, the whip." She said after she walked past us and near him, kneeling down and presenting the whip to him as if in prayer.

"I do not need it. Eithne, take two steps forward and take off your dress and kneel." Oh. I nodded and attempted to take off my dress, the long sleeves of my clothes sending convulsions of pain against me every time my right arm was tugged by it. No one helped as I did my best to take it all off, and I eventually succeeded after painful long minutes. With the dress off, and my breasts plain to see, I covered them with the only arm that was usable and knelt.

"Radanta, whip her. Don't kill her, treat her as a commoner."

"Understood, my Lord. How many times?" Radanta stood by my side and unfurled the whip. It wasn't long, but it was long enough to hurt even without much effort on her part. And I'm absolutely sure she's a cultivator, she could kill me with that whip if she wanted to.

"An hundred." That's a big number. "If she lets a sound out of her mouth, kill her on the spot."

Oh. I looked at the Lord, but he didn't pay attention to me. Pleading wouldn't work, and I was too afraid to speak anyway. Looks like this will be hell. But Alfred spoke up in my stead, Coinnle looking at me with worry in her eyes.

"My Lord, forgive my imprudence, but a hundred lashes, without any healing, would kill her."

"If she dies then she dies. My verdict is this: If she can survive she may live, and be made to pay the fine. If she were to utter a sound, she will die. If she dies while being whipped, then that's it. I will throw her in the dungeons for three days and two nights, if she survives without treatment then she will be free to go, although the fine must be paid."

"Lord, let me take the lashes in her place."

"Denied. Radanta, strike her back evenly. Begin."

"Yes, my Lord."

Radanta raised her whip, the sight of her only barely within the corner of my eye, and almost casually sent it down onto my back. The next moment, all I could feel was white hot pain shooting across my back, feeling as if a fire had taken hold of me. It took everything I had not to yell, or scream, or plead. Then another whip came in quick succession. And then another, and another, each one burning within me greater and greater depths of pain, until my mind no longer worked, and only on bare instinct did I keep my mouth closed and my tongue held.

It felt like an eternity. My sense of time had lost meaning, my entire world compressing itself into the whip, my shame, and my foolishness.

"Eighty more."

By the divine please have mercy on me. Should I speak? I can't bear the pain, I couldn't feel my back or my limbs, all I could feel was a nauseating, world defying agony that didn't abate. The wooden flooring was all I could see now, and I cursed myself for having kept my consciousness for so long. But then, even my thoughts no longer came, and the only one that had stayed was

to not move, to not speak, not make a sound. Stay still. Do not move.

And after what felt like years of pain, I felt a hand touch my left, dragging my vision away from the floor and towards the room in general. But I could no longer focus my sight, and everything felt wobbly and distorted. Where was I? What had happened?

“Mom? Alfred?” I heard words, and they sounded like my own. Haggard, distant, and quiet, but my own. Oh. I had spoken. I didn’t mean to.

“N-no, I didn’t mean to speak, I’m sorry, Alfred, Alfred,” I tried to move but whatever held a grip on me was too tight. I moved my neck, the only thing that seemed to work, and in a blur I had spotted the grim face of Coinnle and the bored face of the Lord. Radanta was still there, curling her bloody whip. But I couldn’t find Alfred. I looked at the hand that was holding me, my feet still too wobbly to support myself, and traced it to wherever the person who was holding me was.

Alfred was there, his eyes sad and his lips thinned. Was he the one who would kill me? “Alfred, please, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I won’t do it again. Please forgive me.” I tried to hold on to him, to get closer to him in a hug, but the way he held me was too awkward. He was behind me, and I had to look up in order to look at his face. So I pressed my body against him so as to imitate a hug, a show of affection. I ignored the mind numbing pain that once again emanated from my back as I pressed it against him, trying to snuggle against him with my head.

“Eithne, calm down. It’s alright, I forgive you. It’s fine.” Alfred whispered, cupping his hand under my chin and stroking it. I never felt such relief in my life over anything, the sensation of being forgiven running through me like a tsunami of bliss. I would’ve fell down on the floor in relaxation if it weren’t for Alfred still holding me up.

He turned to the Lord and began to speak. “One hundred lashes, a five hundred gold fine. She will die you threw her in the dungeon, my Lord. Please, reconsider.”

“Rejected.”

“Papa, as a favor I would ask that you’d not throw her into the dungeon.”

Everyone’s eyes, even Radanta’s, moved towards Coinnle as she walked forward and closer to her father. She didn’t move far, just a couple of steps.

“That’s a bribery, I have sworn not to let personal matters get in the way of my legal judgements.”

“It’s a request, and a show of my sincerity. Look at the girl, papa, she’s a miserable wreck. She may have done something unforgivable, but to indirectly kill her through torture and solitude rather than through cutting off her head is an immoral act. It’s not fair, if you had wanted her to have a chance to live then the whip was enough of a show. To put her through another trial is a terrible show of cruelty.”

The Lord didn’t answer immediately, instead looking at Coinnle as he began to think. He looked to have made a decision, and I guess it would decide my life or death.

“You’re right. Alfred, heal the girl of the wounds you had inflicted on her, but leave the lashes on her. Coinnle, since you have been the one to make the suggestion, you’re in charge of taking care of the girl. And, I’ll remember the favor you promised.”

Coinnle nodded, a bit of a shake appearing in her hands. Or was there? Honestly, I was barely paying attention now. The pain on my hands began to rapidly disappear, and my face started to not feel so swollen. Then my world became dark.

XI

Have I finally reached heaven?

Day 134

The sensation of something cold and blissful ran through my back. The feeling of gently warm air, and the of a slightly stiff neck. My head was on something soft and delicate, and my body on something that I had laid on before. I opened my eyes slowly, groggily, and saw the sight of a red dress with black laces. A sheet was under me, it a pure white, and a pillow was on my head. Was I awake? Was I alive? I already knew the afterlife was probably very white.

Or, rather, the fake one.

“Good morning, Eithne. Good to say you awake.” A girly voice was the first that I heard speak. Ah. The owner of the dress was Coinnle. I was alive. And with that knowledge came the memories of the previous day.

I exploded out of bed, or tried to, but another explosion of pain erupted from my back and I Was forced to stay still, breathing heavily. Tears were beginning to form around my eyes, and terror wrapped its ugly claws around my throat. I whimpered, both from the pain and from the memories. Alfred? Where’s Alfred?

“Eithne.” A soft hand touched my cheek, and Coinnle’s face came into view. Her eyes, which reminded me too much of her father’s, almost broke me. But I knew it was not the Lord, but the little girl who had treated me too kindly. A strange feeling of both comfort and fear washed over me, but after Coinnle continued to stare, stroking my hair now, shushing me quietly I began to calm down. “It’s alright now. You’re fine, everything is over, Eithne.”

I held on to her hand as I let he stroke my hair. Eventually

she gave me another hand and moved to lay in the bed with me, seeing as I refused to let her go. She continued to stroke my hair while I held her hand. I don't know how long this lasted, but eventually she stopped stroking and I let her get back up and off the bed.

"Where's Alfred?" I asked.

"He's somewhere. He's almost done delivering his dolls to his clients, he should arrive by the afternoon."

"How long was I out for?"

"A day. It's morning now, so all of yesterday."

That wasn't as long as I thought it was. I nodded and tried to move my neck so that it wasn't in such a cramping spot.

"How bad is it?"

"How bad is what? The lash marks? Those will heal in a month, tops. Once your body has fully adjusted to the first immortal step it'll be healed in a couple of days. The mental wounds? Those aren't going anywhere for a couple of years, to decades."

"The wounds, but thank you for the other part."

Coinnle smiled and got another dab of a white substance on her finger and started to spread it on my back. Ah. This was that blissful sensation I was feeling when waking up.

"What, what is that?"

"A lotion to help stop infections." That would make sense. Not why it was so soothing, but why she was applying it.

The following days were spent recuperating from my wounds, being taught how to read and subsequently write once I gotten good enough at the reading part, in my language. I stayed for a month as Coinnle predicted, and departed sadly from Coinnle's company on the thirtieth day, Alfred accompanying me back to our home. He didn't mention the incident throughout the entire time.

Day 164

The trip back home was much less tiring than the trip before. Two things aided this development, the first was the lack of having to carry massive backpacks on my back. The second was the fact that the enchantment within my body has taken fully effect, and with its boost in both strength in vitality I was back in shape from the injuries I had sustained within days. There was still scarring, but even that would start to disappear in a couple more days.

Right now we were about halfway there, going much faster than we had last time. We were running, and I was trying to test out just how fast I could run without getting tired. I could sprint full tilt for a couple of minutes, perhaps much longer if I really wanted myself to, but I would get tired just as any normal person would. Alfred, on the other hand, never looked tired no matter how fast nor how long I went for.

He was still much stronger than I was, and his element was wind. He was made to be fast, made to outlast me, made to be more nimble as well. If I were cultivator myself the only thing I'd had over him would be my strength and healing ability, both things much more useful in combat than what he offered. But I wasn't a cultivator, and was half as strong as what my element might've allowed for.

But I got tired of running, and I really wanted to spend some time talking to Alfred. It has been a month since we've been alone, Coinnle had always been with me whenever I left the room to meet Alfred. Perhaps she didn't trust me. That was fair, even if the lack of trust hurt.

"Sorry that we had to spend an entire month in the city, Alfred. I know I'm repeating myself, but truly I am. I won't make the same mistake again."

Alfred didn't turn to me as I spoke. He had grown slightly more colder to my presence, the worst part of the experience so far. But he would still talk, and still tease me, so it was fine for the most part. Alfred shook his head. "I had more opportunities to

meet with new customers, and it was an excuse to have me outside of my own house for a bit longer. You're fine."

I didn't respond to that. But I did want to continue speaking, so I wracked my brain for a different conversation topic. Coinnle had looked visibly shaken up at one point, wanting to stick closer to a maid that she was particularly fond of. She'd spend the final half of my stay sleeping with her rather than me, a very sudden change from her usual affectionate and gentle demeanor. I tried to comfort her, but nothing I said could get through. She'd give me lessons still, but would spend most of her time with the maid.

I'm pretty sure the maid was a *búraló*, a wolf girl, as well. What was their story?

"Do you have any idea why Coinnle started to grow distant with me during the third or so week, Alfred?"

He looked at me this time, an expression too complicated for me to understand. He breathed out a long breath through his nose. "Remember that favor she had promised to the Lord? Explicitly it might look like it didn't mean much. But implicitly, it meant she was willing to undergo more bodily enchantments. Those are excruciating, I had some done on myself while I was in the military. It's mandatory, but I only needed two. She has much more than two, and she will get much throughout her life. By giving her father a favor, she was saying she was willing to go through that torture in exchange for your life."

Oh.

"And the Lord had made well on that favor, and she had ten more enchantments done on her. For ten days she was made to go through it, each morning one carved into her skin. You noticed her absence in the dining room, that was the precise reason. As was usual, she would recluse herself with her favorite maid, Seirbhí, until she could get herself mentally stable once again."

Oh.

"I can promise you she had suffered hundreds times worse than what you went through with the whips. She had saved your life."

I wanted to back and thank her, to grovel on the ground and kiss her feet.

“Why?” The only question that made sense, why would Coinnle go out of her way to suffer through that for my sake?

“You’re an ainmhithe, just like Seirbhí. She might’ve done the same for anyone else, but especially because of your racial traits she helped you. She finds your kind fascinating.”

Eh? Just because of that she’d suffer through enchantments? That sort of messes with these feelings of gratitude welling up in my chest. Regardless of her motivations, suffering through an agony that Alfred has described for my sake is worthy of my reverence. I nodded, not knowing what else to say. How about the final thing on my mind?

“What about the fine? How will I be able to pay that back?”

“I already paid it off.”

“Huh?” Every other word Alfred is telling me is making me more and more confused. I had tried to enslave him, albeit I never meant to harm him, and he was willing to pay the fine for it himself? “Why would you do that?”

“It was either that or have you become an indentured slave.”

“Wait, if enslaving someone is worthy of the death sentence, why would indentured slavery be alright?” This entire scenario is starting to make less and less sense as conversation continues.

“The difference between an enslavement spell and voluntarily making yourself into one, without a spell being cast, is massive enough to warrant them two different concept entirely. If one truly didn’t want to be a slave, either because the burden was too much or because it was involuntary, then he could kill himself. It’s within his right to.”

“What’s so different about driving someone to suicide through slavery and enslaving him through a spell?” Anger started to well up in my chest. This doesn’t make sense.

“The spell removes free will, he is no longer in control over even himself. A slave made through natural means has free will, and death is only the removal of this physical form. He will reincarnate again.”

“That’s flimsy reasoning and you know it.”

“Voluntary slavery is another way of paying off debts, is the final say of the matter. Involuntary slavery is still up for ethical consideration, but for now it isn’t illegal. To return to the original topic, I have paid off your debts in your place. I fully expect you to pay me back not through monetary means, but in your continued service. Having a magician with greater innate talent than I in enchantments is priceless, five hundred gold is nothing for me.”

“But it would’ve been free if not for what I did. This amount of forgiveness only makes me feel worse.”

Alfred didn’t answer that, instead continuing to walk. This time I truly did run out of things to say, so the entire trip back home remained silent save for when something important came up, like needing to rest or having to do other natural business. Both coming only from me, unfortunately. Alfred was beginning to feel more like a machine than a human, something that could outlast and out power me without missing a step. How can a man be so unnaturally dedicated?

I kept my distance from Alfred both of respect and fear. Whether I had truly loved Alfred I couldn’t discern anymore, my feelings of wanting to have him are still there. But is that love? I had not given up on making him mine, although I had given up on forcing it through such forceful means. Was there something wrong with me?

Day 165

We had arrived back home, the familiar feeling and smells coming back to me in these moments. It had been just as we had left it, nothing had moved and nothing looked to have been stolen. I was back home, or the closest thing I could call home, but the feeling of not knowing what to do now was starting to take over me. Previously I would be taught some magic and literature by Coinnle, but now that there no longer was a schedule to follow, I had nothing to do.

Alfred, on the other hand, looked like he knew precisely what to do. He placed everything we had bought in the city, mostly foodstuffs and some amount of materials that Alfred couldn't source locally, where they should've been, and went straight to his workshop to begin doll making once again. Not knowing what to do, I followed him throughout. He didn't mind, and I'm not sure he noticed.

Once he had seated himself inside his workshop, and I on my own side of the workshop, I saw him begin to prepare another doll.

"What am I going to do?"

Alfred, for once, noticed my presence with a glance. He nodded. "Draw, paint, try your own hand at making dolls. If you need advice then ask, I don't mind teaching you anything. You are an apprentice of a doll maker, it would be unsightly for you to be without any education in art. At night I will be teaching you the basics of my magic, now that you've completed the first step I'm obligated to."

Then I'll have a lot of free time from now on, it sounds like. "What do you suggest I practice first? Art wise."

"Good question. Drawing with charcoal. Wait a moment, I'll get all the supplies. You'll be surprised by the amount of supplies I have for these things. I'll also teach you the basics of how to draw."

Nice. I could have the attention of Alfred for a couple more hours, it sounds like.

Day 175

Ten days had passed since we've both gotten home, my days have been spent being taught by Alfred both in the craft of art and in the craft of magic. I had aptitude for magic and I soaked up information like a sponge there, but for art it was a much more difficult beast. I didn't have the dexterity or the sense of how to draw anything, and all my sketches looked wonky and dispro-

portionate. Alfred never seemed to care about how bad it really was, but he would always tell me when I got better at something, and would scold me when I keep repeating the same mistake.

The days went on, and I still sucked at drawing. But when it came to enchantments I was on pace to becoming useful to Alfred within a year, maybe less. I'm starting to realize that I'm both a massive time investment for Alfred and a massive money sink as well, although I'd stopped eating the steak months back I still remember how much he had spent just to feed me a single meal. Now my diet consists of mostly vegetables, since I no longer had as much a need to eat as before. This internal body enchantment is awfully convenient.

Another benefit of the enchantment was that my body was no longer as flabby. It wasn't that I was fat, on the contrary, but I never looked all that impressive. I still don't, but at least now muscle was apparent on my frame. My strength was also increased to ridiculous levels, but Alfred could still murder me without much effort. I had tried to wrestle him in a sparring match once, but he had both experience, strength, and muscle mass on me. Being reminded of how much power this man has wells up a different sort of feeling in me, a mixture of envy and that possessiveness. I don't know what to make of it, but I don't dislike it.

I wasn't optimized for fighting physically, anyway. I'm not a cultivator, I'm a magician, although I don't know any battle spells.

When Alfred wasn't helping me he was preparing a single doll for an experiment of his. He had gained both enough knowledge, knowledge given to him by the very faerie that he had made a doll of, and the ability through the form of my presence. According to the faerie he couldn't do what he wanted to and had to rely on a magician, and a magician I was. I'm certain that had influenced his decision on whether or not to pay for my fine himself. But why me? He could've gotten any magician, any apprentice, as easily as he could walk through villages and ask who would want to work for him.

It's not worthwhile to wonder these thoughts. Alfred had saved me and I happened to be a magician that he could teach, that was enough for me.

XII

Hard earned Life?

Day 184

I wanted to create something for Coinnle in gratitude of what she had done for me. Out of everyone I could say she was the one that I had to go out of my way to pay respects to, as working and learning was enough to satisfy Alfred's wants, and I owed no one else but Alfred and Coinnle. But I'm not a skilled craftsman, and a mere month wouldn't be enough to create a gift good enough for what she deserved. This is going to take years, I could feel.

Day 207

My life has thoroughly entered into the routines of learning magic, drawing, and enchanting the occasional thing that Alfred wanted me to enchant. He had completed everything he could complete on the doll and he needed me to become good enough of an enchanter to do the work that he couldn't. So he had started to devote the entirety of his time in teaching me, and I to learning and practicing with him.

We would go on walks everyday, since the weather had allowed it. It was reaching the tail end of summer and it was getting close to time to prepare for winter, with all the things that entails. Well, for us, it's getting enough food to survive and that's about it. And that wasn't a difficult task since Alfred rarely ate and I only needed vegetables and the occasional slice of meat to live. Things weren't all that difficult.

But I had other things on my mind as well. My relationship with Alfred hadn't moved at all, although he had grown to be as

warm with me as he had been originally, I was still just an apprentice to him. He never made advancements, never hinted at there ever going to be anything between us. Did he have no interest in women? I might be young, or laughably young if I were to compare myself to his age, but that doesn't mean I wasn't eye catching. At least I thought I was good looking.

I'll add in a little more skinship and see how things develop. I have very little ideas of what else to do here. He had no bed for me to sneak into, he never slept as far as I could see. He told me he took a single nap every night, but I never caught him doing it. My own sleeping time had decreased into a laughably small amount of time, so it's likely he needed to sleep less than even I.

He'd push my lips away whenever I tried to give him a kiss on the cheek as well. He knows that I have something that could be called a crush, after all. He'd splash me with slushy ice water that he conjured up whenever I tried to expose my naked body to him, so he's definitely caught on to my advances.

My experience with Coinnle told me I couldn't let Alfred be taken by anyone else. He had to be mine. If I had to jump start the romance myself then I will.

Day 256

My attempts have escalated. Not in severity but in their frequency, it's become a game of how much I could do without getting scolded. So far, hugging Alfred was about the greatest level of intimacy I could achieve without him complaining about my over affection. I could kiss him on the cheek when something good happened, like I managed to complete an enchantment he had wanted to be complete successfully. He wouldn't complain much when I did that then.

But this is slow. I don't know how fast relationships should develop, but it felt as if everyday I couldn't get him to accept my love was a day closer to losing him forever. A part of me understood that this was irrational, he had stayed with me even after

I had tried to enslave him, and perhaps for most that would be enough of a sign that he wouldn't leave. But I needed it to be more, I don't simply want his presence. I wanted his assurance that he would look only at me when he thinks of love, and think only of me when he thinks of beauty.

He can have his dolls, I don't mind if he likes to create them. But when it comes to real relationships, he mustn't betray or hurt me. But I am stumped on else I can show my affection, he doesn't allow anything physical. So my only option left is through verbal communication. I have to think about the right words, then.

Today we were out on our walk, the summer sun reigning in terror over the world in its terrible heat, if not for the canopy of leaves that were raised over our heads we wouldn't have been willing to leave the house. Still, it was hot, and Alfred had explained to me that the sole purpose of the detachable skirt was so I could shorten it in these hotter months. I didn't know that, and had instead thought they were part of the set, non-negotiable. Stupid me.

Alfred was teaching me basic natural magic, something that didn't require nature to learn. It's called natural because it was one of the first magics to be developed, and thus was deemed a natural form of magic. But for now I would like to ignore all that. I was sitting on a tree trunk within a meadow next to Alfred, who was showing me the basic mana forms that most spells rely on. It was a nice view, and was the best thing to a romantic setting that I could call for. The grass was green and vibrant, the sun sky not entirely without clouds but I prefer that way. The flowers weren't blooming, but there were some weeds that gave some color, as long as you didn't mind the fact that they were weeds it worked fine.

"Alfred," I interrupted him while he was in the middle of his speech. He turned to me, probably expecting a question. But when he saw my face, he made a face that felt as if he already knew what I was going to talk about.

"Yes, Eithne?"

"What do you think about me?"

Alfred sighed and stopped projecting the mana form, turning to me and sitting on the same log I was sitting on. He looked at me, a tired look, all his enthusiasm suddenly leaving him the moment I asked the question.

"You're a smart, although incredibly impulsive, girl whom I am the master of."

"Is that all?" I scooted over a slight bit to get closer to Alfred, but he moved back in response.

"Way too possessive, and dangerously aggressive for any proper lady to be."

I knitted my eyebrows at that. What's wrong with being a bit possessive? And what's about being upfront about my affection? I admit that what I had tried to do with Alfred was wrong, but this time if he does what I want it'll be out of his own free will, although I'll also admit I had tempted him to do it. It's not manipulation beyond showing him that I'm willing to offer myself.

I breathed in to get my calm back, I'm not going to let wayward emotions get the better of me. "Well, Alfred, I personally think you're a handsome, intelligent, experienced, and kind man. I wouldn't mind living the rest of my life with you, at all. I want to become someone special to you."

"You're barely seventeen years old, Eithne. Give it a couple years more thought. And, you are special to me. I did think the divine had guided me to you, in order to save you and bring you back to good health. And you've proven yourself more than an asset for my studies."

"I've barely done anything. And I want to be more than just some girl you've found in the middle of a snowstorm who happens to have a talent in magic. Alfred, I've known you for eight and a half months now, I don't think this is me being a young and inexperienced dumb girl. Please take my advances seriously." I moved closer to Alfred rapidly, and this time he didn't move back. I was sitting right next to him, our thighs touching at this point.

"You're too young."

"It doesn't have to be physical."

“Eithne, I don’t dislike you. You may got on my nerves, but I sometimes get your nerves too, although I haven’t been getting much opportunities to do that with you. You may feel like you love me, but trust me, all I care about are my dolls. There’s nothing else in this world that matters to me. Find someone else, you won—”

Without thinking I kissed him mid speech, a tiny peck on his lips. It felt exhilarating, taking him by surprise and finally being able to touch his lips with mine. I tried to do it again, but Alfred grabbed my shoulder, so I moved and got up in order to bring more strength to my advancements, but Alfred pushed me away, hard and painfully. Not hard enough to send me flying, but enough to get me to land on my back.

Alfred had gotten red in the face, wiping his lips with his forearm and clenching his other fist tightly against his trousers. He took his hand off his mouth and stared at me, his eyes knitted together, his face still red. I wasn’t sure if it was from anger or from embarrassment, but I don’t think faces can get that red through either.

Landing on my back wasn’t at all painful, and although I truly instead landed on my butt that wasn’t in pain either. But I had gotten back into my senses, comprehending what I had just done. I had already done it, I had to continue on. Double down on my stupidity. “You’ve made me happy already, Alfred. I know what I’m getting myself into. Please, reconsider.”

Alfred looked at him for solid seconds. He got up and started to walk away, into the forest rather than the direction of the house. I didn’t want him to leave, he couldn’t, he needed to answer me. I got up and began to sprint, barely a second lasting before I impacted him and drove both of us into the ground with a tackle, doing something I couldn’t do while wrestling Alfred. I drove him into the ground, and he managed to roll onto his back, me staying on top.

Our faces were close, my breathing had grown heavier. His body had felt like a stone, it must’ve hurt me much more than it hurt him. He didn’t look pleased, but he didn’t move. My hands

were on his chest, and my face above his, although a fair distance away. I waited for my breathing to slow before I spoke, the only words I could speak at this point. What could make Alfred be convinced that my love, I'll admit it could be called love, wasn't just a passing fancy?

"Don't say anything you'll grow to regret." Alfred spoke from under me, looking deep into my eyes while I laid on top of him. I didn't respond, I kept my eyes on him and said nothing. My breathing wouldn't abate, and my cheeks felt as if on fire.

"I love you. Please consider me as a potential partner, for life."

"Get off."

"Alfred!"

"Let me consider your words. Get off." A flutter developed from my chest, and I nodded, moving off of Alfred. If he really wanted me to get off he could've stood up, disregarding my pathetic weight. Alfred wiped his clothes off of dirt and continued into the forest. I didn't ask him where he was going, I held complete trust in his word of considering my words. He'll come back. I know it.

And he did, after a couple of minutes, a thin stick in hand. I was confused what he was going to do with it, but I didn't question it either. I got up and went towards him as well, he didn't seem to mind that either. We stood in front of each other, looking into each other's eyes. My tail was pointing straight up, and my ears were perked up. I knew there was a smile on my face. But not for long.

In something faster than a flash, a moment where there was once the calm face of Alfred, the next I felt searing pain painted across my left arm. I flinched and looked at what had happened, my sleeves were broken and blood had started to soak the deep black cloth into a red color, the blood glistening under the gaze of the sun. Another strip of brain screeching pain, this time on my right arm. I tried to look at that as well, but before I could an impact hit my right cheek and I was forced to look at the face of Alfred, the stick he held in his hand and pressured on my face.

What? Why? Terror grasped at my throat and took my knees, I tried to step away from the whip that was in hand. He let me take a step, but then he hit me across the stomach, tearing another patch of cloth and sending me to the ground on my knees. Not again. I don't want to feel the whips again.

"Please," was all I could say before Alfred hit me on my back, the feeling was worse than what I had been forced to deal with in the castle. Radanta must've been holding back, because the amount of pain each strike of his stick provided was much worse than what Radanta had given me. I cowered, unwilling and incapable of moving against Alfred. I wanted him to stop, please.

"Alfred, stop."

"I have." And so he had. He hadn't struck me again, but my shivering and panic didn't leave me. I looked up at Alfred in a slow turning of my head, too afraid of moving fast enough to be considered a threat.

"What did I do?"

"I'll give you two options. Withstand my blows, and you may stay here, with me. You're afraid of the whips, right? I may be forgiving, but even I have my limits. I will make what you had felt by that woman seem like a pleasant memory, if you choose to stay by my side. The second option is to move into the city and only contact me when I need you to enchant something for me. There will be no further relationship than that. You will live longer than I, so eventually I will stop visiting you. Assume that I had died of old age.

"What do you choose?"

The answer is obvious. "Stay."

"Very well."

And thus the strikes continued. I stayed, I didn't move from the spot, and I waited for Alfred to stop. The pain was bearable in comparison to the thought of having to leave Alfred. Why was I so obsessed over this? The thought did reach my mind, but I ignored it. I was too far into this to give up now, and Alfred was kind enough of a man to not beat me beyond normal reason.

But he didn't stop. And it no longer became normal, once I felt the pain of a bone being broken, then in the next moment a kick to my stomach. I almost lost conscious at that point. I had been sent flying across the ground at this point, rolling and trying to stop myself from continuing so. Each roll moved my broken bone, my arm, in slightly more distorted and excruciating ways. I didn't stop because of my effort, however, I stopped because I hit my back against the tree.

I'm lucky I'm enchanted, that would've broken my spine. Alfred was on the other side of the meadow, walking towards me. Instincts tried to take over, but I didn't let it have any power over me, I needed to stay still. This was a test. So I waited, casting what little healing magic I knew on myself. I could do nothing but accelerate healing, but I don't know if Alfred will really kill me. Being slightly deformed for a short while is preferable to that.

As long as I could stay with Alfred.

Alfred was in front of me once again, his gaze uncaring. Trained, uncaring in a way that felt he had trained to stop caring. I could feel it, this wasn't a natural psychopathy. I've faulted those before. Perhaps he could still see the conviction in my eyes, so he stomped on my hand. That must've broken a few bones, but I couldn't tell.

He squatted down, his foot still on my hand, and took out his knife. He placed the edge on my thumb and made a swift cut, putting enough force into the cut to cut off my thumb with it. This time, I yelled, a pathetic one that I knew to be less from the pain and more from the surprise of the action. I can't live without my thumb!

"Wait, stop! No!"

"You want to leave?" Alfred asked, his voice a monotone. He positioned his knife over the pointer finger and cut, disregarding my plea.

"No!" He cut off another finger. He did this with each one, then stabbed my palm and pushed the knife deep into the earth, trapping my hand on the spot. Alfred grabbed my other arm, and

I resisted to the best of my ability. The position was awkward, and he was much stronger than me already, so it only took a single hard tug from Alfred to rip the hand forward and flat into the earth again.

"Understood. Let's continue then." What was he going to do? He grabbed my hand, his own dwarfing my own, and squeezed. The bones in my hand began to grind against each other, and a pain I didn't know was possible to feel was felt. I couldn't lose consciousness, but I could scream. So I did, Alfred continuing to squeeze and grind against my hand until there was nothing left to grind but a pulped mess of a hand.

He let go, but by that point I couldn't respond anymore, the yelling continued, but not because of the pain. What was I going to do without either of my hands being functional? I was useless. What was Alfred thinking? I can't be any use to him like this!

"Why are you crying?" Alfred asked, removing the knife from my hand and out of the dirt. Neither of these things were injuries that I could heal. I tried to catch my voice, and to stop the crying, but I couldn't do either of those. Alfred waited. And eventually I could speak.

"I-I'm useless. I can't do anything without my hands. I can't be of use to you anymore, Alfred!"

Alfred nodded. "Very well. Let's continue."

Alfred dragged me on to my feet, dropping me on my ass on to the ground. I didn't try to crawl away, but I did curl up into a ball immediately, hugging my hands as best as I could. I healed them to stop the bleeding, but I couldn't do anything beyond that. Why did I love Alfred? Why was I still thinking about this bastard in a positive light? What was wrong with me? Why am I doing this? I don't think he was going to kill me if I simply said no more, I'll leave. The Lord could do something about my hands, maybe. They can do anything, can't they?

Alfred grabbed my hair and positioned the knife around it. He cut off every section, possibly giving me a horrible hair cut in the process. That didn't matter, hair can regrow back. Then he grabbed my ears, and cut it off. I screamed, although the pain

wasn't as bad as the grinding of my hand, it was an intensely sensitive body part. He did this with my other ear, and then threw both of them on to the dirt in front of me.

I couldn't hear my yells anymore, not properly. Only a dull, distant sound. I knew it was coming from me, it sounded familiar, but beyond that it felt as if the world had become dull. Alfred grabbed the back of my head and forced my face into the dirt, grabbing my tale and cutting it off as well. That one didn't hurt as much, and the thought of losing more limbs was starting to become familiar. I still cried, that was unavoidable.

He threw the tail in front of my face once again, and picked me up by my hair to sit me on the dirt. I stayed, too afraid to do anything that upset him. I clutched the top of my head with the only hand that didn't send shivers of revolting pain every time it touched anything, my right, fingerless hand.

"The next thing I will do will hurt more than what you've experienced so far. Do you give up?"

Despite every instinct telling me to run away, to accept that I didn't want to experience anymore pain, I stayed still. Alfred was the man who had treated me with the most kindness besides my own mother. I had good memories with him. Things could still be fine, things can still work out. He wouldn't do this if he didn't have a way to fix me, right? "A-A-A-Alf-Alfred," I could barely speak.

"Yes?"

"I love you, please, please, please, please stop."

"Open your mouth."

I turned my eyes up to Alfred, but apparently I was being too slow. Alfred grabbed my jaw and forced it open, applying the pressure he had done the night he had caught me before. "Try to bite me and I'll break your jaw." He reached into my mouth and pulled out a tooth. I screamed. "Keep your screaming to a minimum. I'd prefer if I didn't have to cut off your tongue." I stopped screaming.

I did, however, let out a grunt for each tooth he broke. It was a different feeling, I'm certain he broke my jaw several times al-

ready. Each pull felt similar to the last, but each broken tooth left a different injury than before, providing a different flavor of dread to each pull. He kept going, until each tooth was removed, but that was alright. Teeth were something that could grow back, I knew the spell for it already.

My mind was more durable than I thought. I could still think even now. I still didn't want to leave Alfred, it was as if the thought was as deep of a fundamental truth as things falling down, or the fact that reality exists. I couldn't forget it, never. I couldn't live without Alfred's presence. I wouldn't want to live without him, I didn't have any choice but to go through this torture.

One part of my mind felt that, at least. The others wanted me to die. I ignored those. The only one I couldn't ignore was how much I despised Alfred, how much I wanted to see him suffer, to break his bones and rip out his eyes. I tried to keep those thoughts as away as possible, no matter how justified they were.

"I guess it wasn't as painful as I thought it would be." Alfred said, his eyes empty. How would he know? "Oh well." He squeezed and my jaw popped, and then, and only then, did I scream.

"Leave."

I shook my head, fiercely, placing my hands on my jaw as best as I could to keep it closed. It was hanging loosely, and I had to make sure it didn't wobble too much. Alfred nodded, and grabbed my right leg. He placed a foot on my knee and pushed down, leveraging it towards the wrong direction. My screams no longer sounded like screams, instead like gurgles as blood had started to well up in my throat. Then he did something I hadn't expected, he grabbed my shin and to pound it with his own knee.

Each strike felt as my bone would break, but it didn't. Eventually, however, it did, and with a pop my shins were turned into a corner. He moved the broken shin around, as if trying to break it further, and then began to cut off my flesh. He took the broken segment of leg, now amputated, and dropped it like garbage onto the floor. He looked at me, and asked one final time.

“Leave, or die.”

I shook my head. He had swore he wouldn't kill me or leave me to die without good reason, the various qualifications for what was good reasons a long list. I had done none of those things. He wouldn't kill me.

The next moment was black.

XIII

Finding Peace

Day 278

I awoke to the sight of a ceiling. It was familiar, but not too familiar. I was covered lightly by a blanket, within a white one, surrounded by brown wooden walls, within a room with a desk, a chair, and red carpet. This was Coinnle's room.

I couldn't forget what had happened the moment before. I shot up and felt for my wounds, but there were none. Wait, how could I feel my wounds? With what? I lifted my hands out of the blanket and was greeted with a fully functioning pair of perfect hands. I reached inside my mouth and felt for teeth, those were there. I went up to my ears and felt for them as well, and they were there. I checked my tail, they were there. I checked my right foot, and my entire leg was as it has always been.

Was it all a dream? It had to be. Why else would I be perfectly fine? It was a very bad one, a very long one, but it was ultimately just a dream. It's the day after I've been whipped, right? But why was my back healed then?

I don't want to think. No more thinking. Let's get some rest, I'd like to sleep for a bit. Or maybe not sleep, just rest. I hope I can see Alfred soon. Where's Coinnle? I like her, I hope she's not far.

A soft humming was heard, a voice that sounded feminine yet familiar. Not old, but definitely not a little girl, the voice sounded as if it was coming from next to me. It clicked in my mind, a sudden flash of realization, I was humming without realizing it. It was a low hum, more of a continued whimper, but I couldn't stop it. And the whimper turned into crying, and then into sobbing, and it was all I could do to not scream my lungs out.

What was happening? I'm scared. I don't want to experience this anymore, it was just a dream yet why am I so frightened? I can't stop shaking.

The door slammed open, and that shook me deeper than this newfound panic had. I cowered under my arms, holding my ears close to myself so that no more of that noise could reach. I could feel my sobbing, but otherwise there was nothing else. But then a hand touched me, and I tried I crawled away from it as fast as I could, into the corner of the bed, which was one of the corners in the room.

I looked at who had assaulted me. Coinnle stood there, her face etched in deep worry. "C-Coinnle?" Coinnle nodded, gently getting on top of the bed and crawling towards me. I cowered, but I had no where else to run, and then I began to whimper again. But Coinnle kept coming, until she was close enough to touch me. But she didn't, instead letting me whimper by myself, until I could finally find enough control over myself to stop it.

And even then, she stayed there, not moving. She wasn't looking at me, but instead to the wall beside me. It was like she was trying to get a scared animal to accept her presence, and I guess that was what I am. Neither of us moved, I keeping as close an eye on her as I could, and her staring at the wall rather than me. She gave a glance towards me and I jumped, but she kept the gaze for a moment longer, testing for further reactions, probably. I gave none, instead nervously gulping empty air at her continued looking.

Coinnle slowly started to extend her hand towards me, my gaze removing itself from her eyes and turning to her hand instead. As always, it was a dainty thing, something that I shouldn't be afraid of. And yet I cowered slightly, a movement that I couldn't fully control. A dread that I shouldn't have been feeling. I stayed as still as I possibly could get, watching as the hand slowly moved towards me, until it finally touched the white dress I was wearing, and then touched me.

I yelped. Why did I yelp? Was I in pain? Was she hurting me?

What was she doing? No, none of these things make sense. Her touch was soft, and once she had touched me she kept her hand firmly in place. I was shivering, but she waited for everything to level out in me once again. Once my breathing had slowed to a better pace, and my shivering not so debilitating, she started to scooch over to me, and this time I didn't do anything in response.

"You alright?" Coinnle asked, removing the hand from my arm and placing it on her lap. She positioned herself so that her back could lay on the headboard of the bed. I was directly on the wall itself, although my thighs were touching the headboard. We were very close to each other at this point.

I nodded, then I tried to speak, but I quickly close my mouth when I noticed something strange, I didn't want to speak. I wanted to be quiet, to not make my presence too noticeable. It didn't make much sense, Coinnle had already found and caught me. But my instincts sometimes don't make sense.

"That's good. You've been asleep for twenty two days, or rather been off and on conscious for a while. Since I didn't know when you'd wake up I've lent you my bed, waking up to a familiar sight rather than a foreign one would be better, I thought. You remember me, right?"

I nodded, this time forcing myself to speak. "Y-yeah. Princess."

She gave a smile and nodded. "I want to let you know that you're fine now, understand? No one will hurt you."

I nodded. She lessened her smile and adopted a sympathetic look, hugging her knees and placing her hands on top of them. "Would you like to be pet?"

No, not really. I mean, I wouldn't mind it right now, but it wasn't a need that I wanted fulfilled. But Coinnle didn't wait for an answer as she brought her hand up to my head and placed it there, and began to rub my head gently. I didn't feel much of a reaction, at first. But the rubbing turned to a slight playing with my ears, and then to longer rubs, and at that point I couldn't deny that it was starting to make me feel better.

She took her hand away and looked at me again. "Well?"

“Please continue.”

“I’d like a better position, then. My arm won’t get tired, since I’m me and all, but it’d be easier if your head was in a better position. Come, lay back down in bed.”

Coinnle scooted over and pat the bed next to her, on the pillow specifically. I scooted over back to my original position and laid down in the bed, feeling that it was safer to move around now that Coinnle was here. She had been here from the beginning, what was I on about? I don’t know. But I trust her. She moved down into the same pillow and turned to her side, her face facing me. She took the blanket and threw it over the both of us.

“Get on your side as well, facing me.” I turned my head towards her, trying to figure out what she was thinking. She waited patiently for me to follow her orders. I nodded and lifted myself and jostled into the correct position. We were now facing each other, a position I wasn’t all that familiar being with. I normally slept on my back, so this is making the entire thing odd.

Coinnle moved a bit closer and placed her hands behind my head, then placed some pressure down on it. “Move down a bit.” Alright. I moved down a bit, and now my eyes were facing where he neck was. Then she started to pet me.

I never felt more safe in someone’s arms than I had within the minutes that followed. I had closed my eyes, and focused entirely on the sensation of her fingers running through my hair, touching the back of my ears and very occasionally rubbing what little fur extended beyond my ears. A deep rumble started to emanate from my chest, a sound that I had never made before. But that too felt right, so I didn’t pay it any attention.

I must’ve fell asleep from Coinnle’s affection, since I was awoken by her slight jostling. I didn’t want to wake up. Why did the petting stop? Where did the time pass?

“Eithne, wake up. I need to do other things, unfortunately. Wake up, Eithne.”

“I’m up, I’m awake,” I mumbled, pushing myself to my side and lifting my back off of the bed.

“Good. Do you want to follow me around for a bit? Stretching the limbs after being so long immobile wouldn’t hurt.”

I nodded, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes the entire time. She made her way out of bed and I soon followed, feeling the oddly warm touch of the wooden floor beneath me. We headed out the door and walked through the hallway, into the main hallway I had previously grown used to seeing before. Coinnle moved towards a door, one that I hadn’t been in before, and opened it, leaving the door open for me to pass through.

We continued along a new hallway, one with doors on both sides and a T section at the end. There was a long white rug on the floor, a straight line through the entirety of the hallway, and occasionally both paintings and vases were placed throughout the distance. Coinnle took me to the first door and let me inside.

What I saw within was sort of a jump between the plain, almost painfully perfect decorations of the hallway, inside there was another rug of red and white. Red as a base, yellow working as an embroidery. There were books, seats, a desk, and what looked to be some sort of bed. But it wasn’t one, it was shaped like a bench but it had cushions on it. I moved towards that and tried to test it out, to see what its business was.

“I’ll be back. Wait here for a bit.”

I nodded, taking a seat on the odd bench. It didn’t take Coinnle more than a minute to arrive back, she taking a seat right next to me.

“I don’t want you to freak out over who’s going to come here next, alright? If you feel scared, then say so. Grab my hand, please.”

Coinnle extended her hand and I tentatively gave it, she dropped her hand between us and I took in her words. Who’s going to come next? Alfred?

Alfred?

I tensed at the name. Terror started to drown out all other thoughts. I would have to meet him again. I needed to him again. The conflict between wanting to never see his face again and absolutely needing to see it as well warred inside me, until I heard

the sound of metal clacking, and then the door moving in the corner of my eyes. In long, extraordinarily long, moments, I watched as the door moved open.

A maid had opened the door. And behind her, a man. Tall, blond, fiery eyed, a chin that held no beard and a head that had hair that was too long. The nose that was tall and slightly thin, and the long face that made up his entire frame. This was a face I knew, a face that had been etched into my heart. I squeezed Coinnle's hand and placed my feet on top of the bench, moving closer to the end of it.

Alfred walked into the room, and then the maid closed the door and left.

He picked a chair and brought it over, placing it on the rug, near but not in front of the bench. I watched his every movement as carefully as I could. Sitting down and looking over at me squarely, Alfred began to speak. "How much do you remember?"

I didn't respond.

"Rest assured I had made certain that your resolve to stay with me wouldn't be without fruit. Do you still wish to? Stay, I mean."

I nodded, besides myself. He let out a sigh that was longer than a man should've been able to sigh, running his hand through his hair and closing his eyes. He nodded. "Mind explaining to her your motivations, Alfred?"

Alfred nodded. "You're a magician now, one that had taken her first step in the path of immortality. People change when this happens, things that were passing interests before would become world defining obsessions afterwards. For me, I had always been interested in art. When I had managed to reach into the state of a cultivator that interest turned into a passion, and from a passion into an obsession. For you, yours seems to have been to stay with me. Or perhaps it's some other motive that you've not yet figured out.

"Whatever the reason, from experience I knew that drastic measures had to be taken in order to stop this obsession from taking root too deeply. It can't be fully removed, but people can

be dissuaded, perhaps turning the obsession away from something truly dangerous. He might've given up on me if I treated you with nothing but cruelty. I was mistaken, and for that I am sorry. But I'm not sorry for having done it."

"Why did you not want her to be around you enough to do that?" Coinnle spoke the words that had echoed within my mind, saying in place of I that had refused to speak to him. Alfred nodded, almost as if he had rehearsed this very conversation.

"I didn't know what her obsession was, and we both know how deep it runs. She had been too aggressive in her advancements on me, and I took that as a bad sign for what was to come. Most importantly, I think I'll hurt her in ways worse than I have already in the future. I'm not an affectionate man. The only thing I've cared about for the last seventy years was my work, my art. Women haven't interested me, and neither have the company of men. I wouldn't be a good companion for her, and the trauma I had inflicted wouldn't truly trouble her for more than a decade. She's a strong girl. And, the most important part, I will day before her. I didn't know how she would handle it."

"And yet you don't regret committing it?" Coinnle continued her questioning, and I nodded in order to show my agreement to her words.

"No. Right now I'm hoping that she'll learn that I am dangerous, and that my words should be listened to. I hope she's learned that."

Coinnle looked at me, this time expecting me to answer. She squeezed my hand, somehow having enough strength to squeeze despite my grip probably being enough to break most people's bones. I nodded, the only response I wanted to give. Or, the only one I could. Alfred scratched his head and continued to stare at me.

"What's going through your head, Eithne?" He asked me. What was going through my head? Fear. I wanted to escape, now. I wanted Coinnle to make Alfred go away. I wanted to forget everything, perhaps live in this mansion with Coinnle, forever. She was nice. I liked her, and despite being only ten she

held enough wisdom to bring even elders to shame. And, she was kind. I could repeat that five more times and it still wouldn't do her justice.

But I also wanted to stay with him. I wanted to make things right again. I wanted to learn from him, to make things for him, to be fed by him and feed him as well, I wanted to hold him tightly and he me tightly. What more was there? I had an interest in his body, yes, but it was secondary to everything else. Probably even tertiary. Not a high want on my list.

I didn't answer. And seeing that I refused to answer, Alfred moved on. Looks like he wasn't going to force me to speak.

"I need you regardless of anything else. You're healthy, and I've brought everything I need you to complete for me here. If you wish to stay here—"

"No!" I shouted before I could stop myself from moving, and as if I was frightened by my own voice I hid deeper into myself. An impossible task, but one I was committed on achieving.

"No? Very well. Then, when you're ready to leave, and once again be alone with me, then we'll depart. I'm sorry for what had happened, Eithne. Abide by my words and I promise I will not do what I had done again."

I didn't answer, too afraid to. Not of Alfred, but of the shout I had just yelled, that had freaked me out more than it should've. Coinnle squeezed my hand, and I glanced at her. Her eyes were closed, and her face pointed slightly down. She opened them and glanced at me and kept her gaze.

I nodded. I would prefer to be next to her for a little while longer. I don't want to be with Alfred, alone, right now. I'd like to see him, but I'd not be able to control myself if I was trapped in a room with him. I don't want to imagine it, either. Is this what trauma feels like? I hate it.

"Let's have her stay for one or two more days. Truthfully and honestly I'd prefer to have her stay here and you elsewhere, I don't think your actions were justifiable in any way. But you weren't outside of your rights, so I can't punish you. But neither

can I force Eithne to stay here with me, such is my predicament. Promise to me you won't hurt her like this again."

Alfred nodded. "I promise on my spirit that I won't, I do not think my actions were all that justifiable either. But they were necessary, regardless of the outcome. Boundaries had to be laid, and even after getting whipped by Radanta she decided to try to test me. Drastic measures were necessary."

Coinnle made a humph, then looked my way. "Do you want to follow me to the room you'll be staying at, or do you want to do something else? Do the tasks he had provided you, maybe?"

I nodded, and Coinnle made a slight smile. "Good answer, I guess. Come." Coinnle got up, her hand hold still kept, and dragged me away from the bench and out the room. I don't know what she had decided was my answer, I had only given her a nod, but whatever it was I trusted her enough to not take me anywhere I wouldn't like.

But my trust had already been shown to be a bad metric. It wasn't a certainty. I needed to make certain that I could trust her not to hurt me, so I asked her. "Coinnle?"

"Yes?"

"Will you hurt me?"

"Not in a way that I think is malicious, Eithne. I promise you that."

Good enough for me. I nodded and kept my hand held to hers.

XIV

Returning Home

Day 280

I had gained enough confidence that leaving the castle and heading back to Alfred's home, alone with each other, wasn't a nerve destroying, timeline collapsing, cyclopean mental collapse of a task, although it was nerve wracking. I had walked a good thirty feet behind Alfred, constantly I holding the spells Coinnle had thought would be useful to learn as an assurance for my own safety. These were battle spells, things that would suit be better given my affinities.

I didn't know if Alfred would do what he did again, but I'd work to make sure he wouldn't have a reason to do so. No more suggestions, no more advancements, and no more asking for intimacy. I'll devote myself to the craft he wanted me to perfect myself in, there's nothing else that he would accept from me.

Alfred didn't attack me, and neither did he speak to me throughout the entire journey back. Both from fear and having nothing to talk about, neither did I try to engage with conversation with him. He had already promised that he won't attack me, but my feelings on the matter aren't rational enough to accept his words, regardless of how dangerous breaking vows would be for him. I wonder why this feeling of terror doesn't override my feelings of wanting to stay with him?

The gentle hills, and the massive Sunpeak mountain that serves as the backdrop for Alfred's home was in sight now. It had been getting colder, autumn has been setting in full affect, and already the trees are beginning to change their colors. Within these rolling hills and by the side of the mountain the rest of my life will be here, I hope. Preferably after Alfred has prepared new

rooms for me, as having a single bucket, a bar of soap, and a towel to wipe myself in wasn't a comfortable way of cleaning myself.

Day 387

Nearly five months have passed since the incident. I've gotten substantially better at enchantments, and I've finally begun to understand what Alfred had been working on, and what he wanted me to do, after this entire time. I knew he could make dolls that could move if you inserted mana in the correct way, but what I didn't know was that there were various other enchantments that make these dolls more than things that children could idly play with.

Some of the enchantments he wanted me to do involved sharing senses with the doll. Normally dolls have no senses, they can't think nor do they have souls, but through specific enchantments you can simulate the feeling of touch and to a lesser extent sight through the body and eyes of the doll. Each doll, in order to enchant them fully, requires months of work on just the enchantments alone, so for Alfred having someone else do the work while he spent his time either experimenting or creating new dolls was a massive time saver.

But still, the dolls had no souls. And that was the issue he had. How do you create an artificial soul? What is necessary to? And what even is the soul?

The time I spent enchanting had taken up most of my days. But everyday I was given two hours for myself, not including the time needed to sleep, and despite that I wouldn't spend it doing anything entirely unrelated to Alfred's goals. I had been theorizing that it might be possible to transfer the souls of an already living being into the body of one of the dolls, and for that I was perfecting and making more optimized my enthrallment spell. Not so I could use it against people, of course. But in order to get a better understanding of what a soul is, since the spell manipulates, or more accurately conditions it, almost directly.

I would find spiders out in the wild and bring them over to my room. I'd keep them inside glass containers bought from my yearly allowance, something I had to talk to Alfred about a few months back. We rarely talk anymore, so I remember that conversation vividly. Not that it lasted for more than five exchanges, though.

Year 2, Day 22

Alfred had been making steady progress thanks to my presence. Everyday I would work in his workshop, and everyday I would see a smile on his face while he worked. He had managed create an enchantment complex enough fully simulate what a human could feel with his sense in a doll. This was a goal that he had wanted to complete for decades, and it was only through my help and through the sharing of my insights related to how souls function that brought him to that enchantment.

Seeing him smile and be so full of joy over such a thing lit up my heart, it almost made me forget the dread I felt while being near him. Even after much more than a year I hadn't forgotten what he had done, and I doubt I ever will, but thankfully through whatever magical and incurable obsession I had over him I didn't leave his side regardless. Perhaps the divine had guided us together, my talent and his dedication are a good combination.

All that he had left to do was create an enchantment that could adequately stimulate a person's sight. For hearing he had already done that decades ago, it was something that didn't require much in order to simulate. In fact, the enchantment he had made for it could be made to be nearly hundreds of times more effective than an actual human's ears. Better than my own ears by a long shot.

Year 3, Day 10

Alfred wasn't the only one who's developed a groundbreaking magic, I've finally managed to do something I had been working on all year. The creation of an artificial soul might've not been necessary, and Alfred had never wanted to create a soul if he didn't have to. So, the logic went, if I could transfer the mind of a living being, such as an insect, to the dolls, then it could move independently and by itself and thus be a step closer to a lifelike construction. And for once, after hundreds of corpses of various insects, I had managed to transfer one of them inside of the doll.

Excitement bubbled up as I saw the doll do...absolutely nothing. I had expected that. The fact that the soul didn't immediately extinguish upon leaving the body was an improvement, but it didn't mean I had fully replicated how a spirit functions within the human body itself. Looks like different enchantments would be needed for that, and I had only a rough idea of what those enchantments would be.

The doll was one that Alfred had lent to me when I asked for one I could tinker with by myself. It was an old one, according to Alfred roughly as old as I was, but it had advanced enough magic to do everything I needed it to. From moving to any other senses it needed, it had it all. If only the soul of the insect could interact with the enchantment inside.

The insect itself was a cricket I had found while walking outside. It wasn't anything special originally, but now that it was inside the doll it would be a very, very special cricket. I picked up the doll and headed downstairs into Alfred's workshop, anticipation threatening to boil over and leave me a giggling mess. But I was a proper lady now, at nineteen I should be expected to control my emotions well enough to hide that.

I opened the door to Alfred's workshop, since knocking was an inconvenience for both of us Alfred had given me permission long ago to leave and enter as I please. He was in his chair, as he always was, carving something into a piece of wood. I walked quietly to his side, holding the doll close to my chest. Alfred

glanced at me.

“What is it? You look like you’re going to explode. Did something good happen?”

I nodded fervently, placing the doll on his table. He grabbed it and started to inspect it, and it only took a couple of moments for his eyes to widen, and then for his face to become serious. It wasn’t anger, but a furrowing of the eyebrows indicating concentration, so I held no reason to fear the change in expression.

“Interesting. I’ve been wondering why you had been dumping insect corpses outside for a while now, looks like I’ve found my answer. While this is interesting it won’t be useful for my research directly. However, that doesn’t mean it isn’t indirectly. I have a request, complete an enchantment that could allow this soul to interact with the rest of the doll’s enchantments, and provide to me what you’ve come up with afterwords.”

“Why won’t it be useful, Alfred?” I had hoped he would be as ecstatic as I was. What a pity.

Alfred started to pet the doll’s hair, turning his eye to me and then his face. “The intelligence innate within an insect’s soul won’t satisfy my needs, and I’ve already been making steady progress on my artificial spirit.” Alfred stopped stroking the doll’s head and furrowed his brows once again. “Well, artificial spirit might be the wrong name. It’s a living spirit, and I’ve been replicating what a certain faerie had taught me about her own kind’s construction and how they reproduce. Since it’s a method that was asexual, and since the method did eventually produce a spirit that was as real as a human’s, it would be accurate to say I’m making a new soul.”

Making a soul? Alfred is not the divine, how can he do that? “How are you able to do that? And what faerie are you talking about?”

Alfred picked up the large wooden board he had been working on and handed it to me. It was roughly the size of my chest, and a perfect square that had a large swathe of it etched with odd flowing patterns. Some parts had perfect ninety degree angles, forming a zigzagging line that imitated a circle, in all I couldn’t

understand it without having to sit down and study it in detail. "What's this?"

"The soul I'm designing."

"You're designing it? How do you know this is going to work?"

"I don't, but hopefully with some experimentation I'll manage to create something that works well enough. If it works, then in the meantime I would hope you'd be able to create that spell I had asked of you. If you can dedicate some time for me later to tell me how you've managed to transfer the soul, then I'll also ask that you do that. Please continue whatever it is you're doing here."

I nodded. Alfred didn't answer my question about the faerie, but honestly that wasn't the strangest thing he'd said here. "Can you teach me about soul construction? Maybe we can artificially bolster the intelligence of the insect, can't we? Starting from a base rather than from scratch would work." Alfred nodded, taking back the wooden board from me and beginning to once again work on its construction.

"We'll exchange ideas later tonight. Thank you for the doll, and hurry in figuring out what I asked, I'm not sure what sort of effects complete sensory deprivation would have on an insect."

Shit, he's right. I picked up the doll and headed back into my room, immediately trying to work out a solution for the problem given. All the while, ideas of how I could go about enhancing this little guy's soul abounded within me.

Year 5, Day 36

The doll had finally moved. It wasn't much, and figuring out how the hell crickets operate was a hassle that took an entire year to figure out. Inadvertently I had become a bit of an expert on the thought process and mana signatures of crickets in general. They don't operate like furry animals do, each of their legs have a tiny section of their souls entirely dedicated to its operation

and movement. Mapping that to the doll required me to reconfigure and tweak the enchantments of all the spells within the doll's body. It took months, but luckily only four complete re-enchantments were necessary to have the doll move around.

She moved her head side to side, and her fingers in a frankly creepy manner. The legs would move, and the creature would open its mouth occasionally. All in all, a resounding success. But practically speaking the thing was completely useless. I'll let it do its thing for a while, perhaps being stuck in a doll for so long without any sensory information had truly messed with it. But from what I know about crickets, it'd never be all that intelligent anyway.

I could wipe the soul away, leaving it back to whatever nature does with it. Perhaps I should figure that out later, but for now I have a working doll. I picked her up and headed again towards Alfred's workshop. Lately I've been spending more time locked away in my room that I had with him, not a surprise considering all the tools and equipment I needed to complete my tasks were inside my own room and not in his.

Walking next to Alfred, who had his head in his hands, I placed the doll next to him and waited. He didn't respond.

"Alfred? You asleep?"

"No, but I am frustrated." Alfred lifts his head off his hands, his eyes tired and his face more weary than I'm used to seeing him with, and makes eye contact with the doll. The doll on her part, opens and closes her mouth and continues to twitch in a way that made me want to squash it.

He immediately went and grabbed the thing, lifting it and examining everything about it, a smile starting to show on his face.. "It works? You've completed the enchantment? By the divine you've remapped all the enchantments!" I smiled brightly at that. Well, hopefully brightly.

"Yes, the enchantments were half of the problem. They worked with human, or human like in my case, sensory information rather than the cricket's method of obtaining information.

The enchantment for the soul-to-enchantment interaction was comparatively easier.”

“Have you managed to transfer the souls of any other insects into the dolls? This one doesn’t look to be learning or doing anything.”

“No, I haven’t. And you’re right, it has no method of processing what should and shouldn’t be desired, and outside of bodily needs I doubt an insect knows what to do. It’s not a very intelligent being at a baseline. But, I have ideas. And all of them would be wasted on this thing, so I’d like more enchantable dolls if you’d allow it, Master Alfred.”

Alfred nodded, touching and moving the doll to try to earn a reaction out of it. I knew it could feel, I was certain of that, but no matter how he moved or twisted it the doll wouldn’t react. “Yes...may I have this thing? And can you discuss with me further plans for your research? What ideas exactly do you have for improving this thing?”

“Yes to both. Can you lend me some dolls or not?”

Alfred placed the creepy doll back on his desk and got up, walking over to a collection of unpainted dolls. He picked several up and gathered them up in his arms, none of them were bigger than six inches. In fact, most of them looked to be precisely six inches. “Of course, if you’re having success in your research then it’d be petty of me not to help. Paint these dolls yourself, dress them up if you’d like. There’s nothing wrong with them, I made them for the precise purpose of accepting an artificial spirit in the future.”

I gathered them up in my own hands, Alfred giving each of them one by one to me, and I asked an innocent question. “What’s wrong with your project?”

Alfred paused for the slightest moment, before handing me the final doll. He gave me five in total, a fair amount that I could do plenty with. “Creating the spirit has been taking more energy than I thought it would’ve. Or, more mana. I’ve been spending most of my days creating it, and it’s been taking nearly all of my mana. If I look tired to you, then that’s precisely the reason. It’s

very exhausting. Don't mind me, but know I'll be like this for a couple of years, most likely a decade."

"How much mana does it take?"

"As much as I could give it. Since the most I can give is roughly a hundred and fifty units a day, that's the amount I give."

"Do you need help? I could offer you some of my own mana, if you wish, Alfred."

"No, I've tried using other sources of mana but the only one that works is my own. Thank you for the offer, Eithne. Continue torturing the insects for me, please."

"Insects can't feel pain, it's not torture. And alright." With a humph I started to go back to my room, almost forgetting to mention an important fact. "And the doll has to be recharged of mana every couple of hours. Perhaps it's been to wipe the soul out, I'll leave that to you to decide."

I waited for his response, as I didn't want to be rude. He looked at me and then nodded, and then I closed the door. Proper manners and boundaries have to be closely maintained, after all.

XV

Experimentation

Year 9, Day 102

As it turns out, insects are pretty dumb. I've tried spiders, beetles, a single mantis I happened upon, flies, and eventually relented to something that made a bit more retrospective sense. Social insects actually show rudimentary capability of learning, in this case a bee that I had decided to catch while walking in the meadows. At least, social insects, if this bee is anything to go by, are much more intelligent than any other insect I've managed to transfer a soul into a doll.

Almost immediately the bee had managed to figure out that crawling was a behavior that could make it move around. It had tried to stay in place for a long while, jittering its body around, perhaps trying to fly. But after minutes of attempts, it relented and began to try to figure out something else that make it move. So it began to crawl, and it has been doing nothing but that for the past couple of hours.

It would react to my presence. At first it would crawl away, and then it would touch me with its face and its arms. But other than that, it did nothing. A great resounding success for a baseline insect I could use for further research, the amount of learning this thing exhibits is beyond what I've been use to all these years.

I've split my attention to two main projects. The first was attempting to create a spirit interface that could mimic learning ability and intelligence, something that almost felt impossible for the first year of study. I've made working prototypes already, although all of them take up too much space and aren't all that beneficial. But progress is progress. The second project is the

one I was seeing right in front of me. This one was a major success.

The problem with creating an artificial intelligence is two main things, it's not figuring out what intelligence is precisely. The soul, in its mysteries, isn't something I'm trying to figure out. The problem is finding the particular method of learning innate within the structure of an insect and expanding it until it could think closer like a person, and the other was investing the time and energy into feeding the growth of the soul. And just like how Alfred had reached a massive bottleneck in his research, of which he is ever slowly progressing through, I had my own.

But the real issue was that I couldn't artificially support the growth of a soul. So I had to create an entirely separate, new soul for the purpose I wanted, and the easiest and most cost efficient method of doing so was directly enchant the physical material of the doll, by etching within it external enchantments. But that cost too much energy, and it'd make a bee that was still pretty dumb into a bee that was slightly less pretty dumb, at the cost of increased mana usage by twofold.

Whatever. For now I'll try to objectively figure out how to measure the things intelligence, and for that I might have to do some reading. Someone, somewhere, must've wondered these same thoughts as mine. Tomorrow I'll go on a premature trip to the city and consult with Coinnle. She's taken a keen interest on my research and would surely help me.

Year 13

"What's she doing?"

"Drawing. It's something she saw me doing and decided to join in on. She does that for most of the day, otherwise she'll be cleaning things up for me. She's not very good at either, as you can see."

Ainnir, the little bee that I had transferred the soul of, was using both of her hands to scribble on a pieces of paper. I'm not

sure she knew what she was doing, and outside of drawing lines and the occasional hexagon, she drew nothing but scribbles. I knew she had some sort of aesthetic sense, she'd interact with me when I tried to draw with her on the same paper. If I drew a lot of hexagons, she would help and draw some more with me. It was very cute.

I was with Coinnle, in a library with her, and was in the middle of discussing with her my research and the progress I've made throughout the years. The concept of trying to understand intelligence and how it relates to the soul had been successful, to an extent. There was a lot of information about the daily behavior, mana structure, and physical structure of animals throughout the library, and there was various cultivators and magicians who've spent many decades trying to figure out and answer personal questions that they had related to how life functions.

But on the topic of how intelligence works, how to measure it, and methods of measurement? Surprisingly few. It did exist, but it wasn't enough for my work. But it served as a good baseline.

Right now, what I know for certain, is that Ainnir is pretty smart in comparison to insects and many larger animals. But compared to humans? She was incredibly dumb, barely being able to think beyond the level of a one year old. And the amount of mana required to sustain her level of intelligence was stupidly high, over twice the amount of mana the average human outputs is needed to sustain her throughout the day, all in order to hold less intellect than even a one year old. It was clear that as things are now my research on raising the intellect of bees would be a work that would require decades of research and development to see any real fruit of.

"Hmmm." Coinnle hummed and grabbed the paper that Ainnir was sitting on and gently dragged it over to her. Ainnir was used to this action before and had learned it wasn't a threat, so she stopped drawing so that the charcoal she was holding wouldn't destroy her hard earned art, and waited until Coinnle stopped moving the paper. Once she did, she began to draw again. Coinnle picked up another piece of charcoal and started

to draw figures on the paper as well.

Ainnir noticed this immediately and looked at Coinnle directly in the face. It was one thing I was surprised at, she knew how to distinguish between the various faces of different people, and knew who owned the hands of whoever was doing something. Another thing she had, over the years, learned how to do was walk. So she got up and walked over to where Coinnle was drawing, and then sat back down and watched what she was doing. Coinnle wasn't drawing anything impressive, flowers that looked like they would decorate a page was what she drew. But Ainnir kept looking, something she was good at.

"What're you trying to do?" I asked.

"Dunno, just playing with her. Does she know her own name?"

"Yeah. Although she'll stop responding to you if you say it too much. She knows some other things like paper, pencil, and clean. But otherwise she doesn't understand any language."

"That's pretty impressive for a bee."

I nodded, continuing to read my book "On the Attainment of Lordship and Other Immortal Steps." Coinnle had suggested it to me, a book written by her father roughly a year back. There was some information related to the topic of increasing soul density, or increasing general mass, and how the soul relates to bodily functions and general sensory and mental improvements. The only parts of the book that made sense was chapter 14: The development of souls, and chapter 17: The modules of the soul, and only because I had focused much of my research on the topic.

If we could take both the chapters as a good reference point for the ability of Lord Bréanainn then he is without doubt a genius. Every sentence of his feels like I'm learning something new, and every paragraph felt as if he was answering questions that had plagued me for more than a decade in less than seconds. The density of the information and the amount of information he could share was mind bogglingly great. However, through reading it I can only affirm the idea that trying to attain what I

wanted out of Ainnir was an incredibly difficult, but not impossible, task.

I can say for certain that Alfred would die before he could see the completion of his lifelong passion if he were to go through my method. Perhaps even I wouldn't be able to see a fully adequate conclusion to my own research, but I could certainly get close.

Coinnle and I were within the castle library, a privilege normally afforded to the court researches and the close kin and family of the Lord. I had gone here for the yearly discussion on my research and development with Coinnle, who'd asked me to explain to her my every step and thought process. She would occasionally offer to me an insight of her own, or make a certain enchantment more efficient overall, but the most important contribution she provided to me were basic ideas of what could, or couldn't, work. I valued her for that, and our relationship had revolved around this for a while now.

I had lost interest in most things that weren't related to research, Alfred, or Coinnle. And Alfred rarely left his room nowadays, his mood growing sourer by the day. Nothing I did cheered him up, and he'd never tell me what the problem was either, and he didn't tell anyone else. I worried for him. I held Coinnle close to my heart, so I didn't mind interacting with her for days when I could've been spending those developing some other enchantments. I had a lot of those, and Ainnir requires a massive amount of work in making her more efficient.

Year 15

Alfred had been stuck inside his room for a month now. Literally he hasn't left it, and as a cultivator he could do that without having to do anything else. This was odd, usually he'd at least go outside for a walk, or to eat with me occasionally, or check up on what I was doing and collecting. But now, all he did was rest his head on the table and do nothing. He'd breath, and and blink, and would answer me if I ask anything. But he didn't have any

motivation do anything else.

I didn't know what was the problem, he'd say he's fine when I asked, and wouldn't offer me anything else if I continued to prod. Today, I was sitting in the desk that had many years ago been mine, and still is. It tore me up inside to see him like this, so without energy. But superficial encouragement won't work on Alfred, I needed to find a way to solve whatever problem he was facing. And to do that, I needed information.

"Alfred? Do you need anything from me?"

Alfred didn't respond.

"If there's anything I could do you need only ask. I'll be here for you, rely on me."

Alfred didn't respond.

"How is the development of the soul going?"

A loud bang shook me from my sympathy, fear of Alfred's anger welling up in my bosom and forcing a yelp out of me. Alfred straightened himself out of his chair and looked my way, his face showing a complex set of both despair and anger. Why did he bang the table? He knows I can't handle when he makes loud noises or moves too fast. He continued to stare, within the next moment the anger faded and he slumped into his chair.

"Terrible. I've failed, and all my progress had been taken from me within an instant. This isn't the first time I've failed, but I've never experienced a blow back of a literal decade's worth of time. I've spent too much mana on it for everything to be lost in a blink of an eye. I'm sorry for scaring you, Eithne."

"I-It's alright. Mind sharing what happened?" I grabbed my tail and began to play with it. I thought this was a habit I had broken years ago, but apparently not.

"I failed to transfer the soul from my body, as you know the new soul is placed near my own, and to the doll. Within an instant it was lost to the aether, and I will never see it again. I had thought that since you were so easily capable of doing it, then I would be even without practice. I was dumb, stupid, a moron. I'm not sure I should even bother to try again, I don't want to go through another decade of doing absolutely nothing but work on

something so fallible. Let me wallow in my despair for a bit, Eithne. I'll go back to what I usually do."

"You're giving up?"

"That's a strong word, but I think so, yes. The progress you've been making with Ainnir makes me green with envy, so I'd like to help you with her, if I could. Perhaps our positions could change, I your assistant and you the master?" Alfred chuckled slightly, his eyes looking down and staring at his hands. He shook his head and closed his eyes.

"I don't think you'll live long enough to see any true fruits of my research, Alfred. I've not done much more than transfer a bee's soul into a puppet, and I've barely helped her in her complete mental inability." I ignored his joke. Even if I had more skill in one area than him it didn't mean I had surpassed him in every way, I was still a child compared to him. Even when I'm nearing thirty.

Alfred opened his eyes in surprise and turned to me. "Why not?" His voice echoed some sort of desperation, something I don't think I would've picked up on if it weren't for my familiarity over this man. "How can you be sure of that?"

"I've been at this for a decade already, and from the progress I've made so far, which is barely anything, it's going to take a long while for anything humanlike to be born."

A sudden idea struck me with the force of a hammer to my skull. Born? How are children's souls made anyway? It takes a mother only nine months to develop a child within her, why did it take Alfred ten years to create his own? No, he only created half of one, I know that for sure. He wanted to test out his theories first, and then commit himself to the actual crafting of a complete soul. No, still. Why are humans and other animals so developed?

"Unexpected discoveries could short—"

"Let's make a soul." I cut off Alfred unintentionally, having gone too deep into thinking for me to notice that Alfred hadn't stopped speaking. Alfred furrowed his brows slightly at my comment, irritation seeping through his face.

"I already said I'll stop that line of research."

"No, I mean, let's make one the natural one. Let's make a baby, Alfred."

I've never experienced a more pregnant awkwardness in my life. Alfred had first shown a surprised expression, then anger, then confusion, then realization, and finally arriving at unfiltered horror. I couldn't imagine what he was feeling, but I could feel what I was. A fire I hadn't felt in years had been rekindled, a tiny spark that I had tried my best to snuff out. Whether this was romantic love, I didn't know. I just knew that I wanted to help Alfred get better, to cheer him up some how. And this was a good way, I think.

I also knew it was a morally questionable proposal.

"Eithne, do you understand what you're suggesting here?"

"Yes. I think."

"We're talking about a child. Ignoring the fact that you'd suggested me to impregnate you, what sort of mockery of life are you trying to play here?"

"What's so different about this than me committing mass murder against insects? Other than the loss of a catamarán, or human, life, that is."

"That's precisely the issue, no, it's worse. You could be subjecting our child to unimaginable torture. What if something goes wrong? No, I don't think you've thought this through enough. Did you think it up just now?"

"I may have. I think it's a good idea, if you want a human like intelligence, then have an actual human's soul be used for that intelligence. What's the problem with my idea?" Of course, I knew the problems. I'd be subjecting a child to potential danger, and removing any possibility of normalcy the child could've attained. And if it goes wrong, then a stillborn, or an abortion. But this was the best bet for Alfred to see what he had wanted for so long for.

"Everything. Eithne, this is the most disturbing thing you've told me so far."

"Alfred, I don't think you've got much choice here. You can take the moral high ground if you want, but none of what I've been doing could be called truly acceptable, playing with the souls of any creature is an act that is nearly inexcusable. And yet you've been trying to make one yourself, and you've been funding my progress. We don't have to immediately jump towards you plowing me and me transferring the soul towards a doll, I wouldn't want that. We've still got plenty of years together, let's figure this out together."

"Eithne..." I know Alfred shared, to a large extent, a common mindset as I do. He knew the merits of what I had just suggested, and even I couldn't fully believe the words I had just spouted. This was the best chance for Alfred, and the best chance for this entire project, one we could both see the conclusion of.

"We'll need to test this out with other less human animals first. Then we can work our way up to our child. Any other objections you may could still perfectly be applied to what you've already attempted to do, and so far I could safely say that my method would be surer to work. How about it?"

"I have major reservations about this. The first, and foremost, would be the fact that I would have to, uh, impregnate you. The others you've already outlined." Alfred looked away from my gaze, a blush forming on his face. This is the first time I've seen him do that in fifteen years of knowing him. But still, he had a point in his worry. The entire thing required me to have sex with Alfred, something I didn't mind doing.

From a purely rational perspective, the suggestion I gave made enough sense to try it out, if you were a bit mentally unhinged like I was, and Alfred tried to pretend not to be. From an emotional perspective, this is the stupidest idea I've thought up yet. But, it's also the only way I could convince Alfred to have a child with me. Due to this fact, I'd prefer if Alfred agreed.

"Let's consider this for a little while longer. For now, please cheer up. You've not gone on a walk in a month, probably longer. It's good to take some fresh air every once in a while, you know."

Alfred intentionally coughed and made a slight nod. This is

good progress already.

XVI

This will end well?

Year 17

After two years of thinking, and two years of experimentation of mammal pregnancies and reproductive experimentation, Alfred had finally been convinced enough to give me a direct answer to whether or not he'd be the father of our child. Of course, he answered yes. Who wouldn't want to have me? Where else can you find a woman so ready to gamble the loss of her child in order to bring potential happiness to the man she loved?

I've had a lot of thinking, and I've realized I'm not a flawless being after all. I'd never admit it, though. If this goes through I'd have to deal with an entirely unique life form, and the potential backlash from Coinnle, and maybe the rest of society. Coinnle was understanding, she'll be the one who most understand why I had done these things.

Right now, I was sitting next to Alfred, trying to figure out what exactly is the best method of, you know, doing the deed. We were both clothed and as it turns out, almost shockingly, Alfred hadn't known a woman through his century of life. Too obsessed with art, he said. What's the appeal of women, he said. They're gross and too needy, he said. Perhaps the last one was true to an extent, women can be needy. Like me.

I've seen other animals do the deeds, considering it's part of my research. From beetles, to wasps, to birds, and to other living animals, I've got a pretty good idea of what's the rough idea of sex is supposed to be like. Sort of short, a bit awkward, and embarrassing to look at. And since I couldn't rely on Alfred to lead the way, it's going to be have to be a cooperative dance. The obvious of taking off our clothes went without saying.

And of course, we hadn't done that.

"Maybe we should bathe ourselves first. I might stink." I said, trying to break these strange tension filling the air. Ainnir was still in the room, she had grown some amount of dependence with me and didn't like when I wasn't around, so if we did she would also have to come. And I very much so doubt she'd care about us mating. She had been drawing pictures of flowers, something she had very quickly learned and, to a very limited extent, taught by Coinnle about. Even now, with Alfred in the room, she continued her diligent work.

"I've smelled you worse than you are now." Alfred, forever the most charming man, rudely added.

"So I do stink?"

"No, you don't. You're fine."

"And what about you? You don't think you stink?"

"My body odor has never been something most complain about, so I assume not. But if you'd prefer, then let's wash ourselves."

I shuffled my butt in place. We were both sitting on my bed, lightly touching our hands together to show some sign of intimacy. In truth, touching Alfred sort of scared me. I had been very clear that he's not to move too fast, since I had a very real trauma over his actions. He understood entirely and would rarely move in a way that I found too frightening to handle.

But didn't want to shower. I wanted him to hold me and embrace me, now. "Nah. Let's get our clothes off to start with."

"Good idea."

But neither of us got up. I glanced at Alfred, his face entirely neutral, and then made to get up myself. He soon followed. "You can be more proactive, ya know."

"Don't wanna scare you, ya know."

Fair point. "Just be slow and it'll be fine. I don't want you to be a puppet who does everything I say exclusively. I want to be with you because you want to be with me."

Alfred didn't respond to my poor logic but instead devoted himself to unclothing himself. He was slow, although not excru-

ciatingly so, and eventually he had gotten himself naked. He had much fewer clothes than I did so it wasn't much of a surprise. I was in bloomers while he was without anything. I ignored his body up until I had taken my bloomers off, revealing my womanhood to the wolf beside me. And also the bee beside me, who had decided now would be the good time to stare.

I tried to shoo her away but she didn't respond. Idiot. She had her own room that I had designated as her own, so I picked up her and brought her inside. It was big enough to allow for a parchment of paper to also fit, so she'd rarely complain or make a fuss about it. I left her in there and went back to Alfred. He was standing in place, arms to his side, watching me as I moved the little bee-in-a-doll into her home. Now, standing in front of each other, we could reassess the correct method of engagement.

I looked into his eyes, the chin and cheeks that he managed to always be nearly completely bare of any hair, the eyes that seemed aligned perfectly for the sole purpose of showing the depth of his thoughts. The nose that spoke of nobility, and the lips that were on the side of thinness. In all, I have no clue what I'm doing.

His body was as I've seen it before, it wasn't like I had spent all these fifteen years unaware of how muscular he was. The only new piece of information was the tiny golden bush he kept hidden beneath his clothes, and the penis and testicles he had also hidden away. I've seen these features before, but never up close. On drawings I definitely have. But in the flesh and so close? No. Some level of curiosity existed in me, though.

I looked back up at Alfred and saw that he had an amused confusion on his face. He shook his head slightly when I made eye contact with him again, and he slowly moved his right hand towards my shoulder. He placed it there and then moved down, almost beckoning me to move up with him. I had to get on my tippy-toes, and our lips touched gently. I didn't feel much of anything. I've read one romance book back in Coinnle's library, and the author described the first kiss as an electric shock that ran from his lips to the tips of his toes, but I felt none of that.

Felt like I was touching lips with Alfred, nothing more. The look on Alfred's eyes told me he had felt the same. I don't know whether that was his first kiss or not, maybe I should ask?

"Was that your first?"

"No, I've had women steal kisses from me before. You've done it before, haven't you?"

"I don't think that one counted. I also stole it from you. This is the first real-real kiss, and I have to say, it's underwhelming."

Alfred smiled and pat my head. "Never understood it myself, either. Do you prefer head pats or kisses?"

"Head pats." Alfred continued to stroke my hair, I no longer having any clue on what to do. "What now?"

"Do things have to progress so quickly? If I have to do this I'd prefer it not to be an emotionless exchange of fluids, it'd be a bad memory that way."

I nodded, and closed my eyes, letting Alfred draw me closer to himself. I didn't mind the physical contact with him, as long as it was intimate and not threatening. Right now, it just felt like he was hugging me and petting me. Both things I generally liked. The only difference was the body that I was pressed against, the hardness of his muscles and of the bones that hid behind his flesh were things I could feel. It was a sensation that wasn't awful, but it provoked in me curiosity.

How strong is Alfred really? How dense are his bones, how do his muscles connect together, what sort of magic does he use to not have to eat at all? Why was his skin so perfectly smooth and spotless, and so pale, all without showing any sign of this man being alive like a mortal was? I suppose my body had transitioned to something strikingly similar to his. The same shade of paleness, the same color of blush, there were other differences like how our muscle belly lengths but those were minor.

Even our nipples shared a similar color.

I wonder how this sex thing will go if all I can think about isn't the dick pressing against my lower stomach, but instead the physiological makeup of the man I was going to carry the baby of. I started to run my hands through his body, to feel for the

first time in my life feel how Alfred was shaped in a way that he allowed. Yes, he was hard, and I could feel his breathing. He was warm, something that had begun to soothe me as he continued his petting of my head.

But eventually both of us were exploring the other's bodies. I moved and checked everything, from his face to how his legs were constructed, even tentatively exploring what his penis felt like. It was still flaccid, a strange feeling of both disappointment and anger over the fact he didn't find my body arousing welled up, but I ignored the feelings. It felt like a squishy, soft piece of skin enveloping something slighter harder. And the balls below it were heavy and, well, it's a sac with balls in it. What am I supposed to expect?

How do men get themselves off? Stroking it, right? So I tried doing that as well. Alfred didn't stop me, and eventually something began to happen. The flesh began to engorge from my stroking, not something I wasn't entirely unfamiliar seeing in other animals. But to see it done because of my own efforts was an entirely different experience. I stared at the thing, unsure of what to do with it.

"We should be preparing you rather than me, Eithne. Is your curiosity satisfied?"

I looked up at Alfred, his hand on my shoulder, and nodded. He moved me over to the bed and had me lay down, then moved over to my side and placed a single handle on my inner thigh. That sent a wave of pleasure across from me, the simple touch of his hands against me shocking me in a way the touching of lips hadn't.

"Be careful, alright?" I pleaded, unsure of what I should do with my hands. Should I lay them to my side or clutch them to my chest, or should I try to pleasure Alfred as well? Opting for holding my tail and placing and biting the side of one of my fingers with the other, I waited and let Alfred do whatever he wanted to do. He moved both his hands and opened up my thighs slightly, and then moved closed to my side, right next to me to be exact. His face, almost neutral save for the slightly worried look he had

in his eyes, was close to mine.

He kissed my forehead, a feeling that felt much better than the kiss he placed on my lips, and moved his left hand to my pubic hair. I suppose you have to start somewhere, right? He felt at it, perhaps curiosity of his own was revealing itself, and then finally moved to the my lower lips, gently feeling it with a single finger. This is actually pretty scary, once again I didn't know where to move my hands. I'll keep the hand on my tail, but the one being bitten is feeling awkward. I moved it towards Alfred, trying to grab him in some way, but that was proving awkward.

"Can we change position?" I asked, this is feeling incredibly awkward and fear is starting to bite at my heart.

"Sure." Alfred scooped up my body from the bed, moved towards the wall and leaned his back on it. An incredible display of athleticism considering he held me in his arms and had to use his legs to move over to the wall, but he finally let me down on his lap, his cock against my own back, and asked, "This alright?"

I nodded, and moved my left hand towards his left, grabbing it and keeping it held. Alfred placed his chin on my neck and began to feel me out once again, this time a bit more forward than aggressive than before. He felt for my entrance, and once he had found it he began to trace soft circles around it. I had to admit, I was wet already, so I wasn't entirely sure what Alfred wanted to do with me. But he continued, moving away from the entrance and instead focusing on my clit. Did he really not know a woman before? He already knows where the rough place of everything was.

Maybe he just knows female anatomy too well.

Once he had, perhaps waiting for a sign, thought I was aroused enough, he began to try to insert a single finger inside. I've never put anything bigger than my own finger inside, and compared to what my tiny hands could offer his was much, much bigger. Now I'm starting to understand why Alfred wanted to 'prepare' me first, the finger he was slowly inserting already felt like he was stretching me out, almost to the point of being painful. I did my best to relax, and only occasionally squirmed

from his touch.

I looked over to where Ainnir's home was and made sure she wasn't looking, or had left it. She didn't. That's good. So I moved my head so I could rub cheeks with Alfred, instincts controlling me rather than anything rational. He continued to slowly fill me with a single finger, up until even I could feel that he no longer had any finger to continue with. Now it felt sort of painful, but I could manage through it.

He began the slow movement of fingering, playing with my button as he etched me closer towards release, I watched his hand as he continued his assault, my hand squeezing his other hand tightly and my tail twitching again him, until my body tensed and I clenched my teeth and body waiting for the rolls of tension to stop its mind numbing hold over my muscles.

Alfred stopped moving then, instead squeezing his hand gently back against my own powerful squeeze, until everything was released and I could once again breath like I would normally. By panting was rough, and my gaze was hazy for a slight moment, but I recovered in short order.

"You alright?"

I nodded, rubbing my cheeks lazily on Alfred's own cheeks. Alfred let go of my hand, of which I regretfully parted, and moved me off of his lap and onto the bed once again. My back was laying on the blankets, and Alfred had begun to move closer to me, grabbing both of my legs and positioning them so that he could bring his torso closer to my hips. I was lithe enough to have my legs be stretched around, if he wanted. I was a catamarán, and just like our animal counterparts we were more supple than the average human.

But he didn't have me do any strange acrobatics, instead I moved my legs so that I could hug him with them, and we were both locked close to each other, hips touching, Alfred over me and I staring up at him.

"This is probably going to hurt. You ready?"

"I'd prefer to be hugging you rather than laying down like a sad sack of meat."

He made an 'oh,' sound and we both moved to get into a different position. Once again I was sitting in his lap, my legs hugging around him, and our faces near. I hugged him closer to me and rested my chin on his shoulder, and waited for whatever he was going to do.

"Help me here, Eithne."

"With what?"

Alfred grabbed my butt and lifted me off his lap slightly, and I realized he had his two hands occupied with my rear, so maybe he wanted help getting his dick in the right position? I nodded and departed myself from his shoulder, moving a hand down and grabbing his dick. The position was awkward, but as he lowered my body onto his angry member, my entrance met with his tip. He paused, and I let go, looking into his eyes as he began to sink deeper into me.

Now this was painful. I could feel my hymen begin to tear, and staring at Alfred as he did so was beginning to make me more scared than reassured, so I went back to his shoulder and hugged him instead.

"Does it hurt?"

I nodded, not answering verbally.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Please, just insert it as deep as it can go. Be gentle."

Alfred nodded back and continued to drop me on to him at a slow and manageable pace. I kept my breathing in check, tried not to squeeze him too tightly nor did I try to move in a way that's too sudden, and eventually his member was as deep as our flesh could allow it to be, our hips meeting together. Neither of us moved, Alfred was controlling his own breathing as I myself had been. Not knowing what else to do, I waited for him to make the next move. Or was he waiting for me?

That was a good thing considering the entirely alien sensation of having someone hilt inside me, and the pain that came from it. Alfred, after five or so minutes had passed and I had gotten enough of a familiarity with the presence, began to move.

Or rather, he picked me up slowly and began to move me up and down as if I was a toy.

The entire concept of arousal over having someone you love make love to you, while pleasant as a thought, didn't feel so pleasant in actuality. It mostly just hurt, and the feeling good part was washed out from the noise of the pain of my first time. For how long he'll last within me, I don't know. But maybe if he endured long enough the pain would lessen enough for me to reach orgasm.

I squeezed his cock as best I could, trying to have Alfred release his seed sooner rather than later. Alfred in turn picked up on the fact that I was now consciously participating rather than being a limp, hugging doll and began to move at a very slightly faster rate. His own breathing was now more controlled, was he getting tired from literally moving me up and down? I doubt it. Wouldn't it be more logical to have us grind against each other rather than have him move me up and down like this?

No, but it's starting to feel somewhat nice, even if I'm trying to force the entire situation to end. But Alfred, despite my best efforts, still isn't releasing his semen. Am I doing something wrong? I'm barely doing anything, so I doubt that.

"Does it feel good?" I asked, my voice sounding more sweet than I knew I was capable of speaking.

"It's sort of painful, feels like you're trying to squeeze me dry. But yes, it feels good."

Looks like my intent had been transferred well enough. Hugging Alfred closer, something that was beginning to become impossible, I squeezed as best as I could, trying to massage Alfred's cock into releasing itself. But minutes passed, and panting from both of us began to fill in for the sound of squelching, and Alfred still hadn't released. Despite the pain having been real and present, it had truly begun to be replaced with pleasure.

"Go a bit faster," I asked, kissing and sucking on Alfred's neck. Pure instinct was starting to take over, forcing me to do things I wouldn't rationally consider doing any other time. I tried my best to make my own motions now instead of letting Alfred use

me like a meat puppet, and from the occasional twitch I could feel from inside I knew it had some effect.

Alfred obliged, moving me at a pace that almost renew the pain. But it was almost too much, and I couldn't do anything but let out small yelps when he went too deep, too fast, or the occasional soft moan that I couldn't stop from escaping my lips. I felt the tension of nearing release build up from within me, my muscles tensing and my body preparing itself for the eventual explosion I was storing up from within my heart.

Alfred must've lost the concept of my possible pain, as he moved me faster and faster, pumping his dick painfully into me. Pain mixed with the feeling of pleasure, and pure instinct took over as I bit Alfred dip into his shoulder with my canines, stopping any more moans from escaping my lips. The flesh beneath surprisingly gave to the sharpness of my teeth, and finally I heard Alfred make a grunt both from pain and from finally reaching his own climax.

With a final slap of flesh against flesh he dropped me onto his hips, I feeling the violent spasms of his penis inside me, and felt the sperm he had refused to give me for too long release itself inside. My mind went blank as my own orgasm threatened to break me, my jaws clenched itself tighter around Alfred's shoulder, the taste of iron filling my mouth as I did so, and my scream being muffled into the wound I was inflicting on him.

When the twitching subsided, the worse of Alfred's cock inside me abating much faster than my own, I mindlessly took in the afterglow of the entire session. Without meaning to I licked the bite, my teeth still stuck within. When I noticed that I had bitten his flesh, fear struck me like a hammer, my heart skipped a beat and I quickly removed my teeth from Alfred. I moved myself away from the hug I had on him and looked into his eyes, his fiery gaze looked almost exhausted.

"Oh divine! Alfred, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

Alfred squeezed me back, his hands released from under my butt, and held me there. "It's alright. It'll heal, don't forget that I'm a cultivator. Healing is our specialty."

"No, I'm sorry, I didn't—" Alfred placed a hand on the base of my tail and began to rub it. I yelped from the sudden scream of pleasure from his rubbing, pushing myself off of him once again. Alfred laughed, making sure his dick didn't leave the confines of my box, and stopped rubbing. I stared at him, anger replacing my fear, and pouted, waiting for Alfred's laugh to stop. I tried to get off of him, which he allowed, and I attended to the soreness of my crotch by myself.

"Jerk." Was all I said, carefully feeling the still sensitive lower lips. I looked at my fingers and noticed that yes, blood was there. And on Alfred's own member, which was no longer erect, streak of red could be seen on it. "The blankets are dirty and I feel gross, can we bathe now?"

Alfred, still giggling as if he had done the funniest thing in the world, nodded, and made to get off the bed. I moved to follow his example, but noticed that my legs weren't responding well to my commands. Oh. I was in a dilemma, then. While Alfred had gotten up, stretching his limbs and picking up both of our clothes, I waited for the best moment to tell Alfred of my problem. Perhaps anytime would work.

"Alfred?"

Alfred looked at me quizzically, "Yes?"

"Help me get up."

"What's wrong?"

Some anger shot up within me. "I need help getting up, don't ask why." He nodded and offered me a hand, which I took and used my upperbody muscles to drag myself off of the bed. My feet touched the ground and luckily I could move them, although they were incredibly wobbly and unstable. My hold on Alfred was the only thing preventing me from just falling down on my ass, I could feel.

How was Ainnir doing through all this? I looked over to her and saw that she was peeking out through the door of her little home. Her black eyes and blond hair, the color scheme of a honey bee, staring at both of us. How long has she been watching for? Doesn't matter. If we're going to bathe then she'll have

to come with. So I moved over to grab her, my legs slowly but surely beginning to gain back their strengths, and gave out my hand to her. She knew what it meant, so she crawled on top of it and I brought her close to my bare chest, returning to Alfred and grabbing him by the shoulder for support.

XVII

The Rebellious Doll

Year 18

“I no get.”

“What do you not get?”

“Why Ainnir not get.”

“Because she’s not a human like you are, Áthas. Her soul is that of a bee, so she can’t understand things as well as you can.”

“But I not fleshy like mom, but Ainnir like me.”

Áthas, the name of our child, was sitting next to me within our room. Her long black hair and fiery eyes, both artificial as she was a doll, and the mask like face she held was pondering the reasons behind Ainnir’s disability. I’ve explained to her several times already the known reasons why, and why I couldn’t help her or why no one but herself could help her, but the explanation never stuck.

Áthas’ level of development had long ago, from the moment of her soul being transferred to that of a doll, surpassed that than any eight month old should be capable of. Alfred and I had already noticed that the soul, as one of the major components of intelligence, was the same both within development as a fetus as it was in a full grown adult’s. From that we thought, “wouldn’t she be as intelligent as a full grown adult then?” The answer turned out to be yes.

The exact mechanisms behind why babies aren’t capable of understanding or producing speech was a mystery to us, we’ve hypothesized that their undeveloped bodies limited the natural intelligence innate within the soul, and since Áthas hadn’t been limited by such a body she could show the full extent of her intellect from day one. What sort of negative side effects this may

have neither of us knew, but this entire thing was an ongoing project that we must learn about if we are to continue forward in our research.

I shook my head and Áthas' simple logic, "She may look superficially similar but your soul is like I and dad's, not like Ain-nir's. If you had magic sight you would understand."

"Why I no have that?"

"We haven't figured out the correct enchantment for it, sadly."

Áthas tapped her pen on the table, a habit she has developed for whenever she's angry or frustrated. There were too many things we didn't know about humans and souls, millennia of research still hasn't figured out even the most basic of questions about what life is, how it developed, and why. For now, we have within our household perhaps the greatest breakthrough in magic since the development of magic itself, and with her I'm sure more questions that I could fathom would be answered.

Hopefully on how her soul was generated, since as far as I knew she simply appeared in my belly rather than something assembled by some unknown method within me.

She turned to me, her face still and emotionless as she couldn't move or bend it in anyway, and began to speak through the enchantments etched into her lips. "When will you? Mom speaks too much nonsense, I can't see so why teach?"

"One day you will be able to see, and when that day comes I would like for you to be prepared. You'll live a very long life, Áthas. Frustration over incomprehension is understandable, but you must learn to deal with it at one point. For now, let's get back to learning about the generation and permutation of elements as actions, okay?"

"Too many big words!" Áthas threw the pen on the table and folded her arms together, looking away from me and slumping into her chair. She might have the intelligence level of an adult, but that doesn't mean she was as mature as one. We had already spent a lot of time playing outside, but I guess she's not yet prepared for the amount of information that Alfred and I want to

teach her. Perhaps one day we should leave her with Coinnle, she might find a way to make the lesson more enjoyable.

For now, we'll have to deal with this questionably immoral but love-able creation and try to teach her the best we can.