

The Alchemist of La Luchena

by /a/non

I

Tireless Research

Lifting her slender, gloved hand, Sena knocks on the door; once, twice, three times.

“Master Enklistar,” she calls out in a monotone, “may I come in?”

While waiting for his answer, Sena idly runs her fingers through her long black hair. As any good maid would, she wears a plain black dress with a white apron and matching headgear. The hem of her dress goes all the way down to her ankles—she knows that some masters prefer skimpier clothes but, for better or worse, hers has little interest in that.

Enklistar is a man of the mind—an alchemist—and spends most of his time glued to books, scrolls, and diagrams. As such, he has almost no time or disposition to do things like cleaning and cooking, which he fully delegates to her.

Sena knows that many of her maid colleagues would be delighted to be in her position: she has a relatively small house to clean, only has to cook for two persons, has a master who stays out of her way, doesn't have to wear indecent clothes or listen to strange requests, and has a lot of free time in her day.

Even Sena herself enjoyed this situation at first, but her master's obsession with old tomes and ancient knowledge has begun to annoy her.

I get that it's his job to research those things, but would it hurt to ogle me in passing every once in a while?

While she does keep their relationship strictly professional, Sena cannot help feeling something for Enklistar. She is not sure whether her feelings are strong enough to be called love, but a part of her wants to be seen as a woman by him.

Being of common birth, and with no living relatives, Sena

trained hard to become a good maid, so that she could live a decent life. Enklistar has given her far more than she could have hoped for, even though he himself is likely oblivious to that fact.

Once again, she lifts her hand and knocks thrice on the door.

“Master Enklistar,” she says, slightly higher than before, “may I come in?”

Sena knows she can hardly complain. Enklistar works directly for the king, which means he has good money and even some noble status, despite also being of common birth. Thus, this maid has a job that is secure and well-paying under a master who has few demands.

Nevertheless, she cannot help being annoyed at him. Every day she puts effort on her appearance and manners, only to be almost completely ignored by her master, as he is completely absorbed in his research. Not that she would ever confront him about this, of course.

Right now she is dealing with another annoyance of the job: Enklistar is so engrossed in his research that he is blocking out her knocking. Two rounds tend to be enough, but today he seems particularly deaf.

Frowning, Sena increases the strength of both her knocks and her voice.

“Master,” she nearly shouts, “I have an important message!”

Some seconds pass, but there is no response. She sighs and shakes her head, grabbing the doorknob. Fortunately for her, Enklistar rarely bothers to close the doors in his house—even the front door, sometimes—so she can barge into his study.

The door creaks open and, as soon as Sena steps in, she is struck by the room’s condition. There are chalk scribbles all across the floor and walls; some of them seem to form coherent words, but many are just lines, circles, and other shapes connecting to each other.

Even the furniture has been defiled. The desk by the window, where Enklistar usually reads or writes, is also covered in chalk lines; as is its chair, which has been toppled over. The bookshelves that line the walls have also been thoroughly scrib-

bled, and have had almost all of their books thrown open onto the floor.

This is the room of a lunatic. Said lunatic is currently crouched on the floor, chalk in hand, drawing on one of the few clean spots remaining. He has bags under his eyes and his lips move wordlessly.

Sena shakes her head at the state of her master's study. She walks towards him with soft steps, taking much care to avoid erasing any of the chalk inscriptions.

Towering over her master, Sena addresses him. "...Master Enklist—"

Enklistar's arm twitches and his chalk drags across the floor, its head crumbling as it leaves behind a thick white trail.

"I lost it." He hits the ground with his free hand, shaking his head.

"...Lost what?" Sena says.

"I lost my train of thought." Tilting his head up, Enklistar locks his tired eyes with the maid's and frowns at her. "Sena, do you know how many hours of work you've just made me lose?"

"I apologize, Master Enklistar." She bows deeply. "I ask, however, that you let me know when I may or may not enter your study."

For someone who cares so much about his train of thought, he takes too few measure to keep others from interrupting him.

Now aware of his blunder, Enklistar sighs. "Yes, in hindsight, I suppose that's on me. Anyway, I take it you have something important to tell me."

"Yes." Sena says. "King Norkos has sent you a letter. I've taken the liberty of reading it beforehand, and he has—"

"Tell Norkos I'll report to him once I'm done." Enklistar says.

"...Master Enklistar," Sena says, "I'm afraid the king has *demanded* your presence."

"Then tell him I'm sick or whatever." Enklistar says.

"Master," she says, "I apologize, but lying to the king is a crime and it would put you at great risk. I cannot do that in good conscience."

He turns his gaze downwards and starts scratching his chin, mumbling to himself. “Then what in the Three Heavens am I supposed to do?”

Seeing his distressed face, Sena walks closer to him and crouches down. This close to him, she can clearly see the dark outline around his eyes, and the stubble that has been growing on his cheeks.

“Master,” she says, “is there any particular reason you don’t wish to see King Norkos right now?”

Enklistar heaves a long sigh. “Will you humour me for a while?”

“Of course.” Sena says.

In fact, I’d like it if you talked to me more often. This place is awfully quiet most of the time.

“All right,” he says, “so, Norkos has ordered me to...Well, let’s just say I’m dealing with an important subject. Right now, I’m on the verge of a huge breakthrough as shown by...all of this.” He waves his hands, vaguely addressing all of the scribbles in the room. “Anyway, if I manage to finish it I’ll have exactly the results the king wants, but if I go to him right now, I’ll be delayed and he will be unsatisfied. That’s why I want an excuse to postpone this.”

“Master,” Sena says, “may I ask what exactly your research is?”

Despite her months of service for Enklistar, Sena only knows that he is an alchemist—what exactly he does is completely alien to her. The topic of his job never arose in conversation; that is mainly because there has been almost no conversation, but this is also the first time Sena has seriously considered the topic.

“...” Enklistar takes a moment to look at the floor; it seems he wants to be very deliberate with his words. “I feel comfortable in saying that...the king has hired me to research...a certain thing, which he doesn’t want the royal alchemists to know, because...there would be a risk of information leaking. Or something like that.”

This description of his job only raises further questions in Sena’s mind, as it says almost nothing about the nature of his

work. Still, she can tell he must have a good reason to hide it, so she decides to refrain from bothering.

“And this research of yours is...urgent?” Sena asks.

Enklistar frowns. “I wouldn’t say it’s exactly *urgent*, but...every day that goes by increases the chance of my results being needed.”

Still crouched and face-to-face with her master, Sena turns her eyes downwards and pouts, considering the situation. During her maid training, she was also instructed to help her master make decisions whenever he is in doubt.

“Well,” Sena says, thinking out loud, “since King Norkos knows how important Master Enklistar’s research is, I imagine he wouldn’t want to interrupt you unless strictly needed. Couldn’t it be that he has something important to discuss, like new information about the subject?”

“...But didn’t the letter say he wanted a report?” Enklistar says.

“Master,” Sena says, “you just assumed that on your own. All the letter said is that the king demands your presence. It seems you got too focused on your own assumption.”

“Oh...” He stares at nothing for a moment, then his eyes slowly widen. Without any more words, he hops to his feet and rushes out of the study, trampling and ruining many of his writings on the way out.

“Sena!” His muffled shout reaches her ears from somewhere else in the house. “We’re heading to the capital in twenty minutes!”

Wearing her usual emotionless expression, Sena rises to her feet and treads carefully through the same path her master used. After stepping into the hallway, she takes one final look at the madness behind her, then shuts the door.

II

Grand Luchesta

A sea of white clouds covers the sky, making the afternoon dim. In the heart of a grassland, surrounded by a few soft hills and some lone trees, is Grand Luchesta, capital of the Kingdom of La Luchena.

Sena and Enklistar are before the city's front gate; the two are dwarfed by the tall stone walls which, seen from below, appear to reach the heavens.

"It's been a while, Luchesta." Enklistar mutters to himself.

An autumn wind blows, made colder by the massive stone-brick walls. Fittingly, the maid is wearing a thick coat with a hood, as well as long boots that go up to her knees.

The master, similarly, has a coat of his own and a hat; his hands are on the coat's front pockets and, despite his small smile from seeing Luchesta for the first time in months, his eyes still look as tired as they did before.

Sena has to wonder how he did not collapse on the way here. It was less than a day of travel, but Enklistar looks like he could sleep for three days straight.

Without any more words, he walks towards the city's entrance, and Sena follows a few steps behind, as a maid should.

Guarding the gate are two armoured men, one on either side. Both wield spears and have stoic gazes. Enklistar nods to the nearest guard while crossing the gate, and he nods back. Sena just keeps on walking, thinking nothing of this: her master serves the king directly, so he must be well known in the capital.

Even though she had been born in the countryside, Sena lived here in the capital during her maid training. As such, after crossing the gate, she is met with a familiar view.

There is a wide paved road, directly connecting the outside to the castle at the heart of Luchesta. Lining both sides of the road are many buildings—near the walls, short and sparse; near the castle, tall and clustered. In fact, there are so many tall buildings in the deeper parts of the city that, even from far away, one can tell the road is cast in darkness from their shade.

Many paths of brick and dirt branch off from this main road, spiraling more organically the farther they get. A fair number of people walk on these paths, alongside horse-drawn carriages and children that caper around.

“I still love this view, you know?” Enklistar says as he strides down the main road, only vaguely addressing Sena. “I grew up in this place, so I can’t help feeling at home here. That being said…”

His eyes wander to the right side of the road, where children are playing with wooden swords and shields. They shout, run, and hit each other with their wooden toys. Enklistar then turns his gaze to the left side of the road. There, beside a wooden stall, a merchant waves at and calls out the passersby.

Turning to face the way ahead once again, he shakes his head. “As good as my memories of Luchesta are, this is no place for an alchemist. Too much noise and movement. Hard to concentrate.”

“..How do the royal alchemists handle this?” Sena asks him.

“Huh?” Enklistar twists his head back to look at his maid. “Did you say something, Sena?”

As expected, he was not really talking to Sena, but rather thinking out loud. Sena had noticed before that, particularly during his studies, her master talks to himself a lot. Still, the maid wants to take any opportunity she has to converse with her master.

“I asked how the royal alchemists handle this.” Sena repeats, expressionless.

“Oh,” Enklistar says, “that’s simple. They work deep inside the castle, which is pretty much the only quiet place during the day in Luchesta. But I didn’t have that luxury, back before I moved to the woods.”

“And why didn’t you take a position at the castle, Master?” Sena says. “I’m sure they have must offered you one.”

“I did get an offer,” Enklistar says, “but I wanted to pursue my own research. Well, I ended up working for Norkos anyway, but that’s a different story.”

After some minutes of walking, the two reach the short hill from which Castle Valthus watches over Grand Luchesta. Climbing serpentine stone steps, they reach the entrance of the citadel, where many guards stand watch. The large wooden doors they protect are closed.

Sena is not too sure, but Enklistar seems to analyze the guards. It could also be that his lack of sleep is finally hitting him, and his eyes are just moving back and forth.

Maybe there are more guards than normal? Or maybe less? I may have lived here for years, but a commoner has no reason to come up to the castle, so I really don’t know whether this amount of guards is too few or too many.

As soon as they are spotted, one of the guards walks towards them. He hits the blunt end of his spear on the ground, then bows to them. Or, more accurately, he bows to Enklistar, since Sena is a nobody in the capital.

Raising from his bow, he addresses the alchemist. “Welcome, Sir Enklistar. King Norkos is expecting you...” His eyes slowly move over to Sena. “Is the girl with you, sir? A servant?”

“My personal maid.” Enklistar nods his head.

“Forgive me,” the guard says, “but she must stay here.”

“Oh, I had no intention of taking her with me,” Enklistar says, then turns to his maid. “Sena, please wait for me out here.”

“Yes, Master,” she says, bowing to him.

“If you get hungry or tired, go to a tavern and grab something to eat,” Enklistar says. “I don’t know how long this meeting will take, so don’t force yourself to wait here in the cold.”

“Yes, Master,” she says.

“I’m being serious,” Enklistar says. “If this takes a long time, we’ll have to check in for the night at some inn anyway, so don’t

hesitate to spend your money on food. Just make sure to tell one of the guards where you're going, so I can find you more easily."

"Yes, Master," Sena says.

Following that, the guard guides Enklistar to the large wooden doors, which open sluggishly to let him in, then immediately close once again.

Now that her master is gone, a small smile and a light blush creep into Sena's usually dull features.

Hehe. He's worried about me.

"Oh, look at who's being all dreamy." A feminine voice from behind snaps Sena back to reality.

She spins around on her feet to face the owner of this voice and, to her surprise, finds a familiar figure. This is Erika, whom Sena met during her maid training, but lost contact with some months ago after starting her work for Enklistar.

Erika is a bit younger and shorter than Sena, with short mint-green hair and an adorable grin that she puts up for the smallest things. She is wearing a maid uniform but, unlike the one Sena got from Enklistar, this one barely has any skirt, showing off Erika's long slender legs.

Her arms, shoulders, and collarbone are also bared. If her chest were not almost completely flat, she would surely be sporting an overflowing cleavage. Whoever her master is makes her wear some skimpy clothes, despite the chilly weather. This prompts Sena to mentally thank Enklistar for being normal.

Erika holds on her arms a large box, probably a package of some sort, which seems heavy from the way she grips it. This betrays quite a lot of strength for someone so small and with such spindly limbs—in the cold, nonetheless.

"Hello, Erikam" Sena says, recomposing herself.

"So, why are you here?" Erika says, resting her chin on the box. "Did you come to visit me?"

Sena shakes her head. "No, I came with Master Enklistar. He is currently talking to the king."

"And he left you out here in the cold?!" Erika shouts. "What kind of master does that?!"

“Master Enklistar is an alchemist working for the king, and he is currently discussing a very important topic,” Sena says. “It’s a maid’s duty to know when and where she must follow her master.”

Besides, I don’t want to hear that coming from someone whose master makes her dress up like it’s summer in the middle of autumn.

With her chin still on the box, Erika pouts and turns up her eyes, likely in thought.

“Oh, I know!” Erika says, jumping on the spot. “Why don’t I take you on a date? Then we can talk about all that’s happened these past few months.”

“...Aren’t you in the middle of the job?” Sena says, pointing to the box.

“This?” Erika shakes the box. “I just need to take it to the castle’s storeroom, then I’ll be free for the afternoon.”

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Orange light streams through the tavern’s window; right beside it is a square wooden table, where Sena and Erika sit facing each other. Before them are half-drunk glasses and plates with sparse leftovers.

Erika rubs her small belly with a dumb smile on her face, rocking from side to side. She has always enjoyed eating—a bit too much—but doing so on a date with Sena seems to have put her in a particularly good mood.

“So, how is he?” Erika says, still enjoying her full stomach. “This Enklistar, that is.”

“He is very hardworking and doesn’t ask much of me,” Sena says, “but we barely interact.”

“Sounds lonely,” Erika says.

“That’s just how Master is,” Sena says. “He spends most of his days focused on his research, and I just handle things around the house to make sure he can make good use of his time.”

“Hmmm...” Erika pouts.

“...Is something amiss?” Sena says.

“Well,” Erika says, “when you put it like that, I don’t really get why you love him.”

Sena chokes on nothing, but promptly regains her composure. “I never said I love him.”

“Oh, come on!” Erika throws her hands up in the air, “I saw your smile back at the castle gates.”

“...I imagine that smile was nothing special,” Sena says.

“Please, that was the most expressive you’ve ever been,” Erika says. “I was together with you almost every day for three years, and never saw you properly smile like that.”

Sena feels her cheeks heating up and stares down at her empty plate, trying to avoid eye contact as much as possible.

Erika sighs. “All right, let’s say you just like him as a friend: why is it?”

Sena keeps her eyes down. “...Master Enklistar is a bit weird, but all he asks of me is an organized house and edible food every day. We live in a small house in the countryside, so cleaning is particularly easy. Overall, he has allowed me a comfortable life that I never thought I would get.”

“Comfortable...” Erika echoes. “Yeah, I can see how that’s appealing. Just clean some cabin in the woods every once in a while and cook some meals. It’s definitely less work than I have to do, but isn’t it boring? With how little you do, I take it he doesn’t have any other servants and doesn’t live with anyone.”

Sena shakes her head. “He doesn’t. While I’d appreciate it if Master Enklistar gave me a little more attention, it’s not like he has the time for that. The only reason he even hired me is because he needed more time for his research. I truly shouldn’t complain, especially since Master Enklistar has a sensible taste in maid clothes.”

Erika’s brow twitches. “Oi, was that a jab at me?”

“Perhaps,” Sena says.

Erika stretches out her slender arms, showing off her bare skin. “I’ll have you know I get a lot of boys looking at me whenever I got out shopping. Maybe your master would look at you if you worn something more seductive.”

Sena falters for a moment. Maybe she could indeed make Enklistar look at her, if only she wore something a bit more provocative. But she quickly abandons that thought—a maid’s job is to support her master, nothing more and nothing less.

“Aren’t you afraid someone will force himself onto you?” Sena says, diverting the topic back to Erika. “It seems dangerous to go about wearing so little.”

“Nah,” Erika says, grinning. “I like to show off, but I know no one is stupid enough to mess with one of the king’s personal maids.”

“...Excuse me?” Sena says.

She assumed Erika works at the castle, since the girl was delivering goods to it, but would never have guessed she is a personal servant of King Norkos. A small part of her feels hurt that her junior is technically of higher status now but, of course, the stoic Sena would never let that show.

“It’s true,” Erika says. “And the king himself chose these clothes for me. Actually, some of the nobles like to go even skimpier. Remember Hilda? She’s working for Duke Creston now, and he has her walking around on nothing but a two-piece swimsuit when she’s inside the castle. Though, I suspect she enjoys it even more than I do...”

I feel like I’ve lost a lot of my respect for the Luchestan nobility just now.

Once again, Sena mentally thanks Enklistar for being a regular person, rather than some deranged noble. She also thanks the gods for making her a normal girl, rather than some pervert with weird fetishes.

“And what is your job under the king?” Sena says. “Did he make you do...certain things?”

“Nope, I’m still a pure maiden,” Erika giggles. “King Norkos only fucks Queen Altessa.”

Sena sighs. “While I do appreciate the king’s monogamy, I could have gone on without knowing that. Honestly, Erika, do you hope to find yourself a good husband with such manners and your lack of modesty?”

Erika shrugs. "I'm cute enough, so I just need to find someone who's into that and wants to fuck me."

I was going to say that is unlikely, but considering what I've just learned about Luchestan nobles, she may have a good chance.

"Anyway," Sena says, "what do you do for the king?"

"I was Princess Laisha's handmaid," Erika says.

"Was?" Sena says.

Surprisingly, this upbeat and cheerful girl droops her shoulder. This is not some exaggerated or cutesy movement, as she usually does; instead, Erika seems genuinely sad.

"Yeah," she says, "Laisha got out of the kingdom a few days ago. She went to a neighbouring nation for diplomacy or something, and will be away for some months."

"...I take it you grew attached to her, yes?" Sena says.

Erika nods. "Yeah. She is around my age, and we've had a lot of fun together. I even sneaked into her bedroom some nights, so we could chat until morning without her father knowing."

"Since she was sent out for diplomacy," Sena says, "I imagine she might end up married to some foreign prince."

"Yeah, I thought about that..." Erika pouts. "We probably won't be able to hang out like before, right?"

Sena hesitates, but ultimately nods. "Most likely. But I'm sure she will still treasure you as a friend."

As if Sena's words were an oracle, Erika immediately regains her lively demeanour. "Right! Even if she's married to some prince, we'll still be friends!"

With the tiniest smile on her lips, Sena rests back on her chair and looks outside. The streets of Luchesta are far less busy now, with the night approaching.

I'm glad Erika has been doing fine. She was such a clumsy girl when I left, but she must have grown a lot in less than a year. Not just anyone gets hired by King Norkos.

"They're on the table by the window." As Sena basks in the afternoon glow, she hears someone talking behind her, near the tavern's entrance. Footsteps follow, approaching; when she

turns away from the window, she sees her master standing beside the table, looking even more tired than before.

He is not alone. Behind him, peeking out to look at Sena, is a girl. She appears young, maybe a little older than Erika, with round and soft facial features. Two long purple sidelocks frame her face, hanging down from the hood pulled over her head. Said hood has two triangular pieces of cloth jutting out, strangely similar to cat ears.

After looking at Sena for a moment, she turns her head upwards and looks at Enklistar's face. Her sidelocks wave around, following her head's movements.

"Is this your maid, Enk?" She says.

Enk? Just who is this girl?

Sena feels some jealousy at how intimate this random girl seems to be with her master, but she does her best to keep up a composed face: no self-respecting maid troubles her master in public.

"Yes, this is my maid, Sena," Enklistar says, "And Sena, this here is Kairas."

"Hmmm..." This girl, Kairas, stares silently at Sena. Her gaze then wanders to the side, landing on Erika. "Oh, hey Erika."

"Hi Kairas!" Erika raises her hand up high and waves, as if Kairas were far away. She gets excited at the smallest things.

"..You know her?" Sena says.

"Yep," Erika says, "Kairas is helping King Norkos with...uh..." She faces Kairas. "What are you helping him with, actually?"

Kairas grins and brings a finger to her lips. "It's a secret, remember?"

"Oh, right!" Erika places a hand over her mouth.

While they are talking amongst themselves, Sena notices that Enklistar is staring through the window at the square outside. His gaze is even more distant than usual.

"..Master Enklistar," she says.

This snaps Enklistar out of his thoughts, and he shakes his head.

“Sena,” he says, “we’ll be spending the night here in Luchesta. This tavern has an inn on the second floor, right? We can sleep here to make things easier. Kairas is staying with us, and we’re going back home at first light.”

Without waiting for her response, he turns around and walks to the reception desk.

“...Huh?” Sena frowns.

“He has a lot going through his mind right now,” Kairas says with a smile.

Now that Enklistar’s body is not hiding Kairas’s anymore, Sena gets a good view of it. As expected, this girl is as tiny as Erika, but her lacking features are hidden by a long and loose robe, whose hem drags on the ground and sleeves cover her hands.

“Kairas,” Erika says, “why are you following Sena’s master?”

Sena, too, wants to know the answer to that and, fortunately for her, Erika seems to be close enough to Kairas to ask that question without causing awkwardness.

“Norkos ordered me to help Enk with his research,” The purple-haired girl answers, then turns to Sena with a smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure Enk doesn’t have to overwork himself too much.”

Despite her saying that with an innocent tone and a smile on her face, Sena cannot help feeling mocked by those words. She knows Kairas likely means no harm and wants to help Enklistar, but the way this girl so casually addresses her master makes her uncomfortable.

As Sena considers her emotions, she spots Enklistar dragging his feet on the wooden staircase to the second floor. With a deep breath and a neutral expression, Sena elegantly raises from her chair and bows to Erika.

“Our talk was good, Erika,” she says, “I must go now to tend to Master Enklistar.”

“All right!” Erika says, grinning. “I’m usually in Castle Valthus, so stop by there whenever you come to the capital!”

Sena nods. “I shall.”

Leaving behind the table and her friend, Sena goes after her master, trotting up the wooden steps. Tired as Enklistar is, she manages to catch up to him in no time; once she does, Sena slows down to match his pace, staying a step below him on the staircase. Kairas follows after Sena, walking right beside her.

Enklistar says nothing, dark-rimmed eyes focused on the floor. Reaching the last step, the three go down a small corridor lined with doors, until the master stops by one of them and fiddles with a key in his hand, unlocking it.

The room's window lets in the fading sunlight, which illuminates the room enough to let Sena see what is in it: a table, a dresser, some chairs, unlit candles, and—to her surprise—a singular double bed.

Did Master Enklistar pick the wrong type of room by accident?

Without commenting on the room's layout, Enklistar shambles inside. He throws aside his coat, stripping down to his lighter underclothes, then drops onto the bed.

Kairas also enters the room, taking off her long robe and putting it over the dresser. This reveals plain underclothes which accentuate her childish, curveless body that has narrow hips and almost no chest. Her purple hair is also now fully visible, flowing down to her waist.

She hops onto the bed, facing Enklistar and—Sena's eyes widen at this—the alchemist hugs her. He is already half-asleep, so he must have mistaken Kairas for a pillow.

The little girl herself must just want to partake in some skinship — nothing worrying. Still, Sena cannot help seeing this as a challenge, or maybe bragging from Kairas's part. Why is it that the maid sees her as some kind of rival?

...Was I lying to myself when I told Erika that I don't love Master Enklistar?

With that thought on her mind, Sena focuses on the two. Kairas has her face buried on his chest, and Enklistar hugs her as if it were the most natural thing in the world. His eyes are closed and, considering how tired he has been these past few days, he must be already in a deep sleep.

She closes her eyes, that sight burned into her mind. What does Sena truly feel when she sees Kairas doing these things?

I'm angry. I can't stand looking at Kairas. Does this girl think she can just appear in my master's life and get all comfortable with him? Before today he barely talked to me, but we were living alone, just the two of us. I was the only woman in his life. I want to be the only woman in his life. He gave me more than I could ever hope for, and I want to repay him; but more than that, I want him to see me as his equal. I want Master Enklistar to hug me the way he hugs Kairas...No, I want him to hug me tighter than that.

Sena opens her eyes and once again looks at them—her master and the other woman, sleeping peacefully together while she stands by the door. She sighs and hugs her stomach.

"I love him," she mutters, softly and quietly. "I really do love him."

Finally shutting the room's door, Sena takes off her own coat and neatly folds it over the dresser, now wearing only her thin underclothes. She then climbs onto the bed, each movement slow and deliberate to avoid waking up Enklistar.

Crawling up to him, Sena carefully presses up her front against his back and wraps her arms around his neck, hugging him from behind.

With someone as forward as Kairas, I need to be a bold maid to get his attention.

Once she settles in, Sena feels Enklistar fidgeting. To her surprise, it seems he was not in too deep of a sleep, because even her careful movements woke him up. With half-lidded eyes, he turns his head backwards to look at the maid.

"...Sena?" he says.

"Yes, Master?" Sena says.

"Is...everything all right?" Enklistar says.

"Very much so," Sena says.

After staring at her for some moments, Enklistar turns his head back around and lays it once again on the pillow.

“...I think this is the first time you’ve touched me.” Enklistar says, his voice muffled since he is facing away.

“I believe so,” Sena says.

“...Is there any reason for that?” He says.

“Master Enklistar has been very troubled since returning from that audience with the king,” Sena says, ever so lightly tightening her hug. “It is a maid’s duty to support her master, so I wish to provide emotional support as well from now on.”

This is not a lie, but it is not the full truth either. Right now, to Sena, supporting her master is most important, and troubling him with matters of love would put further strain on a mind that is already heavy enough with troubles.

“I see...” Enklistar says. “Thank you very much, Sena.”

III

Losmerga, God of Souls

Crucial to all human life in this land is the World Soul. At conception, each and every human is assigned a tiny space in this colossal well of divine power. This space remains connected to one during his natural lifespan, and is freed once his mind is finally severed from his body, becoming once again available for a new life to claim.

Contrary to popular belief, one does not extract his own soul from the World Soul; instead, the human body has spiritual capacities that link it to the World Soul, allowing for sapience, free will, and agency over the world. The World Soul's divine essence never directly touches the physical plane, but it creates echoes that do.

The World Soul is subject to Losmerga, the God of Souls, who resides in the Second Heaven—that much both Enklistar and the orthodoxy agree on. However, since beginning his research on the World Soul, his vision has diverged from theirs on every other aspect.

In the First Heaven lives only the God of Creation, Naklaztor, who crafted both the lower heavens and the physical plane. In the Second Heaven live the few Higher Gods, who crafted the systems of the world and populated the Third Heaven. In the Third Heaven live the Lower Gods; dozens of divine beings who were created by the Higher Gods to populate the physical plane and watch over its balance.

Each Lower God is subject to one Higher God, and each Higher God has multiple subjects. The orthodoxy claims that the World Soul was created by Mosseriet, Patron of Human Souls, who lives in the Third Heaven.

Enklistar, through his research, has gathered sufficient proof

to say that Mosseriet and the World Soul are, in fact, the same being. Knowing the orthodoxy, however, it may take centuries for this to be accepted into the canon.

It is undeniable that Losmerga of Soul does have influence over the World Soul—indirectly, to the orthodoxy; and directly, to Enklistar. Such disagreements and Enklistar’s willingness to turn his back to the orthodoxy are what prompted King Norkos to sponsor his research.

Enklistar was once called by the king, following a grim oracle, and tasked with understanding the nature of the World Soul. After some months of research, the alchemist found exactly why that oracle had been so worrying.

The World Soul is decaying.

Through analysis of ancient texts—provided by Luchesta’s royal archives—and practical experiments to simulate the World Soul’s behaviour, Enklistar concluded that in the past decade there have been issues with the partitioning of spiritual zones.

In short, once a person is conceived, the World Soul fragment assigned to him is far larger than normal. This is corroborated by the sudden increase in magical prowess seen in the current generation, where new mages can easily outdo seasoned ones.

At first glance this may seem good, but there is only so much of the World Soul, and these excessively large slots are consuming it faster than they should be. If this continues for much longer, there will eventually be some heavy consequence for humanity as a whole.

Enklistar’s best hypothesis is that of a “soul crash”: once there is no more free space in the World Soul and a new child is conceived, the whole thing will collapse under the stress of this unassigned soul, killing the majority of humans through a psycho-spiritual shock. After that, it will be reduced to around a tenth of its original size, and slowly heal back to its original form over decades or centuries.

This is what King Norkos has tasked him with preventing, since members of the orthodoxy are too busy discussing trivial

matters and care little for that which diverges from the canon.

All these thoughts spin around in Enklistar's mind, almost drowning out his surroundings. The grave creaking of the large wooden doors is followed by a dull thud, meaning they have been closed shut behind him. He is now inside Castle Valthus, stepping on the long red carpet that leads up to the thrones.

Either side of the long room has a row of tall pillars, holding up walkways on the floor above. Those are usually populated by aristocrats, diplomats, merchants, and such; but, right now, both the walkways and the lower floor are completely empty.

Completely, except for the thrones on the opposite end of the room. On the left throne sits no one—that one is the queen's—and on the right one sits King Norkos: a man with a large frame, grey beard, and dressed in red-and-golden robes.

Standing to the right of his throne is a smaller figure, whose features Enklistar cannot discern from this distance.

Why is the throne room so empty? Where's Altessa? Who's this other one? Is any of this related to the high-security outside?

Whenever Enklistar came to discuss his research with the king, both of them would go to a meeting room in one of the upper floors, where they would talk alone behind closed doors. All of that was to make sure the subject of his research cannot leak to the outside, as it would cause needless panic at best, and major setbacks at worst.

Is the throne room empty because Norkos has decided to hold the meeting here? That is impractical, if so.

The one who can answer Enklistar's questions is here, so he shelves those thoughts and moves forward. As he walks forward, his footsteps echo through the lifeless throne room, hitting its stone walls, pillars, and arched ceiling. Soon enough, he is right before the king, the only separation between them being the few stone steps that lead to the thrones' elevated platform.

Up close, he can now tell the figure belongs to a small girl. She is wearing a long, plain robe that cover most of her body; its sleeves drape over her hands, and its hood has two triangu-

lar pieces of cloth atop of it, reminiscent of cat ears. Her purple sidelocks are long, hanging down to her chest.

Who's this girl? I swear I've seen her before...

The girl eyes Enklistar up and down a few times, then gives him a toothy grin and tilts her head. Even more than before, he is at a loss as to why King Norkos has brought this kid here.

"Sir Enklistar." The king says, catching Enklistar's attention.

The alchemist lowers his head; he knows that ignoring the king is unbecoming of a subject. "I apologize, King Norkos. I should—"

"Enough," The king waves dismissively, "Formalities won't buy us any time."

"...They won't," Enklistar shakes his head. "So, why have I been summoned?"

"First, what is the status of your research?" Norkos says.

"I'm on the right track," Enklistar says, "and I've been progressing swiftly for the past few days. I've thought about it, and I should be able to finish it by the end of next month."

The king's features darken. "I see..."

"...Is something wrong?" Enklistar says.

King Norkos extends his right hand to the side, landing it on that girl's hooded head. His burly hand almost completely envelops her small head, and he caresses her scalp through her hood. The girl smiles and nuzzles up to his hand.

"Do you know who this is?" Norkos says, strangely invested in patting the girl's head.

"I don't think I do," Enklistar says.

"Pay close attention," Norkos says.

Narrowing his eyes, Enklistar scans her features. Most of her body is covered by that loose robe, so he only has a face and some hair to work with.

Hmm... I don't know any little girls with purple hair, but her face does remind me of someone... Queen Altessa? Wait, no. She looks a lot like Princess Laisha.

"Uh... Is she another daughter of yours I'm not aware of?" Enklistar says.

The king gives him a soft laugh, but Enklistar cannot help feeling unsettled by it. Despite his expression being usually stoic, the king now looks weirdly mellow—sad, even.

“Close, but not quite,” Norkos says, still rubbing the girl’s head. “This here is Kairas. She is what is left of my dear daughter, Laisha.”

“What is... *left* of her?” Enklistar says, trying to make sense of this ominous statement.

“Yes,” Norkos says. “Our situation is dire so, after much worrying, I sacrificed my dear Laisha to the one god who can help us in this situation—Losmerga of Soul—and begged him for guidance. I received more than mere guidance: Losmerga, in all of his benevolence, incarnated his own daughter into the body of Laisha. Thus, we have a source of divine intellect among us.”

Though Enklistar hears what Norkos is saying, the impact of it has him mulling over the king’s words, speechless and with his mouth partly open.

He looks at Kairas, who smiles at him. This is the child of a god inhabiting the body of a sacrificed princess. She seems very carefree, for someone with such a background.

Losmerga’s child has been incarnated into the physical plane? This is...There are only records of Lower Gods ever sending their children unto us. A god from the Second Heaven doing so may be a first in history.

“Criticize me if you will,” Norkos says, misunderstanding the reason for Enklistar’s speechlessness, “but do so after finishing your research.”

Enklistar shakes his head. “No, I didn’t intend to criticize you. I’m just in awe that Losmerga would send us his own daughter. Though, now that you’ve mentioned it...Was that sacrifice really necessary?”

King Norkos takes his hand off Kairas’s head, which causes her shoulders to droop.

“Do you expect a god from the Second Heaven to fulfill half-hearted prayers?” Norkos says. “What could I expect from Losmerga of Soul if I weren’t willing to sacrifice what is most pre-

cious to me? He would think I am not serious about healing the World Soul.”

Though Enklistar is thankful to the gods—particularly so right now—this kind of reasoning is beyond him. Surely, there must have been other ways for Norkos to convey his seriousness about this subject. Other ways that did not involve losing exactly what he wants to protect. Nevertheless, Enklistar cannot argue with the results.

“In any case,” he says, “I imagine Kairas is here to guide my research, yes?”

“She is,” Norkos says. “Her knowledge has some limitations, since Naklaztor has forbidden the other gods from meddling too much with our mortal affairs, but she will prove useful.”

“Any help is very much appreciated,” Enklistar says, “But...why now? Has something changed? Since you have sacrificed your precious daughter, I assume our deadline has been significantly shortened.”

King Norkos heaves a deep sigh. “Unfortunately, the situation has indeed changed. A spy of mine recently returned from the capital of La Dorai, and he informed me that King Thalber has mobilized all of his royal alchemists and court magicians to hasten the soul crash.”

“Hasten the soul crash?!” Enklistar shouts, a mixture of anger and shock in his voice. “Has Thalber gone senile?! What does he hope to achieve with that?! He will just kill his own people!”

“Perhaps I put it poorly,” Norkos says, “Thalber merely wants to increase his people’s magical capacity by expanding their souls, and it seems he is oblivious to how that affects the World Soul.”

Feeling the blood drain from his face, Enklistar brings a hand to his forehead. This is exactly why he is the only alchemist of La Luchena working to prevent the soul crash: if there were more people involved, such partial information could leak and prompt fools to unknowingly work towards their own demise.

“...Have you tried contacting him about this?” He asks the king.

“Yes,” Norkos says, “but my warnings have been met with scorn. King Thalber believes I am trying to sabotage his developments so that we can gain a military advantage over La Dorai, despite our current peace. He has been blinded by power in his old age.”

“How much time has this cost us?” Enklistar says.

“Our deadline was already hard to estimate before, and I have little information about the specifics of La Dorai’s developments.” Norkos says.

“And so, it’s best for me to assume it could happen at any moment and finish my research as soon as possible...” Enklistar says, shaking his head at this predicament. “Is the castle’s fortification related to the situation with La Dorai.”

“It is,” Norkos says, “as is the current absence of Altessa and the other nobles. King Thalber showed too much hostility towards my warnings, and I would not put it past him to attempt an assassination.”

“Cautious as usual, I see,” Enklistar says.

“I merely do what I must to protect my kingdom,” Norkos says, once again patting Kairas’s head.

“...” Enklistar silently watches as Kairas pushes her head into the king’s hand, a big smile on her face.

I barely ever saw Norkos and Laisha interacting; but, from the few times I caught it, I could tell that girl meant the world to him. Yet, he decided to sacrifice her to save his people and his kingdom.

Enklistar shoves a hand into one of his pockets, grasping the neck of a small sack. He takes one more good look at the two before pulling it out and presenting it to the king.

“What is this?” Norkos says, extending his hand.

The alchemist drops the sack on his open palm, and Norkos retracts his arm.

“This is the last resort,” Enklistar says. “I was pondering on whether or not to give it to you, but...”

Norkos stops patting Kairas's head—once again, much to her annoyance—and opens the sack with both hands.

“...Small crystals?” he says.

“About one hundred of them,” Enklistar says. “I managed to make them a bit earlier in my research, and each should protect someone's soul from the crash, as long as he keeps it close by the time it happens.”

“And why haven't you made more of these?” Norkos says. “This seems like a good solution, if somewhat impractical.”

Enklistar sighs and shakes his head. “It's not a solution. All these crystals can do is offset the problem: they give priority to the souls of the ones who hold them.”

“Then,” Norkos says, “if I were to keep one of these near me during the soul crash, I would be guaranteed to survive at the cost of condemning someone whose soul would have been unaffected?”

“*Guaranteed* is a strong word,” Enklistar says, “but yes, in theory that's what is supposed to happen.”

“Hmmm...” Norkos carefully studies the crystals.

“Use them however you want, or not at all,” Enklistar says. “I trust your judgement, King Norkos.”

“Haven't you any for yourself?” Norkos says.

“I kept a few at home just in case,” Enklistar says, “but it's not like I'm eager to use them. I think you'll handle them much better.”

Norkos closes the sack and puts it on the armrest of his throne.

“Very well,” he says.

The alchemist and the king continue their conversation into the afternoon, discussing the current situation of the research and other specifics.

Once both are satisfied, Enklistar leaves the castle with Kairas right behind him. By the time this happens, the sun has nearly set. He talks to a guard near the castle door, who points him to the tavern Sena has gone to, and follows his maid's trail.

IV

Harvest

Blown by the wind, a few orange leaves flow downwards and land on the front porch's wooden floor. Warm-coloured leaves already blanket the land around the house, and they are now gathering by the front door.

A trusty broom in hand, Sena steps into the porch and starts sweeping away those leaves. She knows that in an hour or two they will have overtaken the porch once again but, having finished all of her other tasks, she does not mind idly sweeping against the unstoppable forces of autumn.

It has been three days since she returned from the capital with Enklistar and Kairas. Her master, as usual, has been hard at work during this time—the man has not had even one proper night of sleep.

Kairas, much to Sena's surprise, actually spends little time in the study. Enklistar consults her for a few things each day, then isolates himself to keep working. It seems that, even with help, an alchemist's job can be very solitary.

For most of the day Kairas just hangs around the house, sometimes watching the birds and critters outside, sometimes intently staring at Sena while she does her chores. In contrast to how lively she was when interacting with Erika and Enklistar back in Luchesta, she is quiet and reserved when alone or with Sena.

Her expressions are what bothers Sena the most. Yesterday, when watching Sena cook, she had her eyes wide open and her mouth split. She stared at Sena as if she had never seen someone cook before.

She must have been really sheltered when growing up to be amazed by such a mundane act.

After sweeping the last few leaves out of the porch, Sena rests her broom on the wall and walks inside. In the entry hall, she spots the purple-haired girl crouched down, staring at the floorboards as if they were the most fascinating thing in the world.

"...What are you doing?" Sena feels an urge to question her.

Kairas turns her head up, locking eyes with Sena. "I just thought this wooden floor was interesting."

"How so?" Sena says.

"We don't have wooden floors where I'm from," Kairas says. "I hadn't realized it back at the castle, but this is quite a clever use of resources."

Of all the ways to describe floorboarding, "clever" is not the first thing that comes to Sena's mind. Maybe she is from one of those desert nations in the south that do almost no woodwork-ing.

"Is that so?" Sena says.

As it is almost time for her to prepare dinner, Sena leaves the girl to her antics and heads to the kitchen.

"Wait a moment, please," Kairas calls out to her.

Sena turns around, and the shorter girl is now standing.

"Yes?" she says.

"Miss Sena," Kairas says, "I know you hate me, but would you mind listening to a request?"

"You...know I hate you?" Sena says.

She is normally not very expressive, and has put particular effort into trying to mask her annoyance at the way Kairas interacts with Enklistar. Just how did this girl figure it out?

Kairas nods. "I can tell that you love your master very much, and that you dislike how I act around him."

Sena now feels three emotions. First is embarrassment at how Kairas knows her feelings. Second is confusion at how Kairas managed to read her so well. Third is anger at how Kairas acted in that way even though she knew her feelings. With this mixture of emotions, she feels her face burning up.

"E-Explain yourself," Sena says.

“Of course,” Kairas says. “I’m very sensitive to people’s emotions, to the point where I can tell their exact feelings towards particular things. I was just born this way.”

“And you expect me to believe that?” Sena says, in a more aggressive tone than usual.

“I did find out that you hate me even though you tried your best to hide it,” Kairas says. “Isn’t that proof enough?”

Sena feels her face getting even hotter. “W-Well, let’s say I believe you. If that’s the case, then why did you keep acting that way towards Master Enklistar?”

“Because I felt that would help him,” Kairas says. “Enklistar’s heart is heavy with his duty and with a strong fear of failure. I could feel he would benefit from having someone with a cheerful and upbeat personality around him.”

...So, she did that to help Master Enklistar?

“Is that why you also act that way with Erika?” Sena says.

“Yes,” Kairas says. “Erika was very sad with Princess Laisha’s departure, so I tried getting on her wavelength to cheer her up.”

“Then,” Sena says, “you pretend to be a lively girl when you’re around them?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s pretending,” Kairas says. “I just like to adapt to those I’m around. For example, I know that cheerful personality would bother you, which is why I decided to be calmer and more serious around you.”

“The way you put it makes you seem detached from social matters,” Sena says.

Kairas smiles. “I guess you could say I’m detached from this place in general. Anyway, are you willing to listen to a request?”

“..Yes,” Sena says.

“Great,” Kairas smiles. “So, you’re going to cook dinner now, right?”

“I am,” Sena says.

“May I help you with it?” Kairas says. “I’ve always wanted to try cooking at least once, and I only got more excited about it when I saw you doing it the past few days.”

She has never cooked before. Not at all surprising, coming from the girl who is fascinated by floorboards. “All right,” Sena says, “you may assist me with dinner.”

* * *

The table set in the dining room is bountiful—for three people, at least. Sena and Kairas stand beside it, looking at the fruits of an hour of cooking. The maid may have been a little excessive with her cooking today, perhaps wanting to prove her value to her pupil.

Kairas, meanwhile, was very eager about doing this mundane task. Every time Sena asked her to chop something or mix ingredients, she did so with a smile. This smile was different from the ones directed at Enklistar and Erika; Sena felt, somehow, that it was more genuine.

Despite having no experience with these aspects of everyday life, Kairas managed very well to follow orders and do exactly what she was told. Whenever Sena asked, this girl would give her full attention.

“This was a lot of fun,” Kairas says, eyes focused on the plates before her. “Thank you very much, Miss Sena.”

“I also enjoyed cooking with you,” Sena says, “and...I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Kairas looks at Sena and tilts her head.

“For disliking you,” Sena says. “I thought about it while we were cooking, and...”

As Sena trails off, she feels a pair of hands on her shoulders. Kairas is slightly shorter, so her arms and head are angled upwards. Right now, she has on a strangely mature smile that is in stark contrast with her childish features.

“I can’t blame you for your feelings,” she says, “especially not when I acted so familiar with Enklistar. I’ll say it again: I only act in that way because I think that will help him calm down, and I have no interest in taking him away from you.”

“...Right,” Sena nods.

“So,” Kairas says, switching away from that mature tone, “shall we go call him for dinner? Enklistar has been holed up in his study all day, so he must be dying to eat our cooking.”

“Yes,” Sena says.

Just as the two start walking towards his room, a muffled scream reaches Sena’s ears. It is no mere scream, but one of agony.

“...Mater Enklistar?!” she shouts, running up to his study.

Slamming the door open, Sena’s gaze darts around the room—everything seems to be in place—then it lands on the desk that her master spends the days on. His chair is down on its side, and Enklistar is curled on the floor holding his stomach and shaking.

“M-Master Enklistar...” Sena walks up to him, her hands trembling. “Is everything—”

“The pouch!” He shouts through his clenched teeth. “On the desk!”

After a second of confusion, Sena spots a small pouch on his desk and grabs it.

“W-What do I do?” she says.

“Give me one!” Enklistar says through his panting. “Give it to me!”

Sena opens the pouch, finding a handful of pink crystals, each no larger than a finger. Kneeling down in front of her master, she takes out one and hands it to him.

Enklistar clutches the small crystal, his grip so strong that Sena worries his fingernails might dig into his palm. Slowly his shaking fades away and he relaxes his limbs. After spending some seconds lying on the ground with his eyes closed, he sits up, still holding tightly the crystal.

Once he opens his eyes, he looks at Sena, the behind her. She follows his gaze and spots Kairas standing by the door, rubbing her arm and giving Enklistar a worried look.

“Kairas...” The alchemist says with a weak voice. “It hasn’t even been a week. I knew we had little time, but this is...Has it really happened?”

“...Yes,” Kairas says, “I can feel it has.”

“...How many survived?” he says.

“Around one in nine,” Kairas says, “like you had estimated.”

With his free hand, Enklistar suddenly punches the ground—startling Sena—and begins muttering to himself. “Damn Thalber, damn La Dorai...I hope everyone involved is dead.”

“Uh, Master Enklistar,” Sena says, “is everything—”

“Sena,” Enklistar interrupts her, “do you want to know what my research was about?”

“Eh?” Sena is caught off guard. “Well, if you may tell me, then yes.”

Enklistar shrugs. “There’s no point in keeping it secret now.”

And so he tells her everything that has been happening: everything he knows about the World Soul, Losmerga, Kairas, and the soul crash. He tells Sena how the crystal she handed him kept his soul from vanishing, as well as how lucky she is for surviving the soul crash without one.

By the time Enklistar finishes, there are tears beading up in the corners of his. Sena does not fully grasp everything he said, since he delved into esoteric alchemical knowledge to explain some things, but she now understands the gravity of what has just happened.

“So,” she says, “only a tenth of humans have survived this?”

“Only if my calculations are correct,” Enklistar says. “It could be more, but I’m afraid I’m correct about this number.”

“And...all of this is because Thalber A. Dorai wanted to strengthen his army?” she says.

“If not for that fool,” Enklistar says, “I would probably have had enough time to finish my research and employ a counter-measure against the soul crash.”

Kairas, who had been standing near the door this whole time, sits down with the two.

“Actually,” she says, “there’s something I’d like to add.”

“...Do you know something else?” Enklistar says.

Kairas nods. "Remember: I'm the child of a god, so I'm limited in how much knowledge I can share due to Naklaztor's rules. That being said, now that the soul crash has already happened, I imagine I won't get into much trouble for saying this."

"So..." Enklistar says, "what do you know?"

"The souls of newborns began getting larger around a decade ago, right?" Kairas says. "What else happened at around that time?"

"What else...?" Enklistar frowns.

Around a decade ago...The war?

"That conflict between La Dorai and La Luchena was settled eleven years ago, wasn't it?" Sena says.

"Yes," Kairas nods. "By the end, La Luchena was far more powerful than La Dorai and had the means to annex its territories, but King Norkos decided against that and only made King Thalber sign a peace treaty."

"Are you saying the peace treaty had something to do with the soul crash?" Enklistar says.

"Not the treaty itself, no," Kairas shakes her head. "Near the end of the war, Norkos had received a message from my father, Losmerga of Soul, who urged him to kill Thalber and take over La Dorai."

"But that didn't happen," Enklistar says, "which means King Norkos went against the will of a god..."

"He did," Kairas says.

"So," Sena says, "was the soul crash a form of divine retribution?"

Kairas shakes her head. "No, or else my father would not have sent me here to help you. Norkos should have taken over La Dorai because he, unlike Thalber, would have been able to stop an underground organization that was messing with the World Soul."

Enklistar clicks his tongue. "Dammit. So, that organization is the one responsible for the expansion of souls that began ten years ago?"

“Yes,” Kairas says. “They had been working in the shadows until recently, but someone managed to convince King Thalber that supporting them would be beneficial to the kingdom. His funding is the reason the soul crash happened significantly sooner than it should have.”

Enklistar grabs his head, staring down at the ground. “If only Norkos had listened to Losmerga...”

“Please, don’t be angry at him,” Kairas says. “The only ones responsible are the fools who wanted to control the World Soul, and most of them should be dead by now.”

“Dead?” Enklistar says. “What, were they completely oblivious to the possibility of a soul crash? Didn’t they prepare countermeasures?” He shows the small crystal to exemplify.

“They tried to,” Kairas says, “but theirs didn’t work properly. Also, knowing King Norkos, he most likely didn’t use the crystals you gave him, in which case your soul is the only one that was saved by such a countermeasure.”

“So,” Enklistar says, “I’m the only one who killed someone else to stay alive...”

Kairas gives him a dry smile. “I wouldn’t put it that—”

“Yes, yes.” Enklistar waves his hand at her. “I know the implications of what I did, there’s no point in trying to comfort me.”

With that, he droops his head and stares at the floor with a stiff expression. Kairas, apparently affected by her inability to cheer him up, does the same. Seeing both like this, Sena feels the need to say something.

“What now?” she says, addressing neither Enklistar nor Kairas directly.

“What now...” the alchemist mutters to himself, then turns his head back up to look at Kairas. “Any ideas?”

“I believe we should just keep on researching,” Kairas says. “We may have been unable to prevent this soul crash but, once the World Soul heals, it will be susceptible to another one.”

“Right,” Enklistar says.

“We should also go to the capital,” Kairas says. “The people must be confused and scared, and there’s a good chance King

Norkos is dead, so we're the only ones who can explain the situation."

"Yes," Enklistar nods.

"Although..." Kairas frowns in thought. "Rather than going together, I shall go alone to Luchesta tomorrow morning."

"...What?" Enklistar says. "What are you talking about? I'm partly responsible for this situation, and people in the capital know I've been working with the king, so I should be the one to explain the situation to them."

"Enklistar," Kairas says, "I think you should just stay here with Sena. After all, someone who's seriously considering suicide shouldn't be out there stressing himself."

At first Sena is confused by this statement, but she immediately remembers Kairas's ability to sense emotions, which sends a chill down her spine. She grab's her master's hand and gives him a worried look.

Enklistar averts his eyes to the side, but does not try to break free from Sena's grip. "...What happened to that whole *we can't interfere too much* thing?"

"I'll deal with whatever punishment from my father or Naklaztor once I return to the Heavens," Kairas says. "I'm saying this of my own free will."

Enklistar scoffs. "And yet you didn't use this free will of yours earlier to help me stop the soul crash sooner."

Kairas sighs. "Enklistar, worrying about the well-being of a single person and doing something that could affect the whole world are fundamentally different and the consequences of—"

"I know, I know..." Enklistar says, finally reciprocating Sena's grip on his hand. "I'm just bitter right now, please don't take me too seriously."

Kairas nods. "I won't. So, are you fine with staying here to cool down for a few days?"

"...Won't you have any trouble in the capital?" Enklistar says.

"I may currently have a human body," Kairas says, "but I'm still the daughter of a god. I can handle myself pretty well."

"All right," Enklistar says, "I trust you."

Almost as if on cue, the alchemist's stomach rumbles. At that, Kairas giggles and gets up.

"The first step to cheering up is a full stomach," she says, "and this talk has gone on for so long that the dinner we prepared must be getting cold."

"...We?" He says.

"That's right!" Kairas smiles, as if their heavy conversation had never happened. "I want to try doing mortal things while I'm down here in the physical plane, so I helped Sena with her cooking."

Enklistar puts his free hand on his stomach and looks down at it.

"I could use some good food right now," he mutters, more to himself than to the girls.

* * *

The pale moon shines up in the sky; the stars twinkle and the chilly autumn winds blow. None of them care for mundane affairs, behaving tonight just as they did before the soul crash.

Sheltered from the uncaring winds by both the house's walls and the thick blanket, Enklistar lies on his bed, sleeping like a rock despite the stress and guilt he must surely be feeling right now.

Sena is nestled beside him, hugging him from behind just as she did that day in the capital. Unlike that time, however, Kairas is sleeping in a different room today. She said she will be waking up early tomorrow, and did not want to needlessly bother Enklistar's sleep, as he has been getting little of it for a long time.

Even after everything that has happened, Sena's heart feels weirdly at peace. From what Enklistar said, most humans have died today, and yet she is almost unmoved by this event.

It would be no use for me to worry about this. Only Enklistar and Kairas and people like them can do anything about this situation: the best I can do right now is support my master.

It would be a lie to say there is no anxiety within her; namely, she is worried about whether Erika and her other friends from her training days have survived. Statistically, at least a few of them must be dead, and Sena dreads that idea. But greater than this anxiety are her sense of duty and Kairas's words: she has to support Enklistar, especially when he is in such a state.

With that thought in mind, she tightens her hug and closes her eyes, ready to serve Enklistar tomorrow and forever.