

The halls of the palace were silent in the late night, their stone walls cold to Grace's touch. Her hand grazed one side as she wandered aimlessly, enjoying the peaceful quiet.

Tonight had been a rather strange evening. During dinner, King Hernan and High Priest Henda, someone Grace was beginning to know well, were both absent, leaving her to eat alone, or so she thought. Once the main course was served, featuring a succulent roast boar paired with mouth-watering gravy, the light mage master named Emilea joined her. They spoke a handful of times before, but it was always strictly professional, and Grace prepared for the casual conversation. Oddly enough, Lady Emilea asked rather personal questions about her home and her family before sharing more about her own life. Although she was taken back at first, Grace warmed up to the light mage almost immediately and found herself engaged in their talk. What happened after the dancing began startled her the most.

"Is your husband here?" Grace asked while scanning the room. From what the mage told her, the man called Clearshot had an infectious personality, so she wondered what it would be like to meet him.

With a sigh, Emilea shook her head and, as she glanced around the room, her mind went elsewhere. "I'm afraid he's on an assignment in Dala for a while longer."

"Oh!" Grace exclaimed when she recognized the name and remembered Coura, Marcus, and Will. Emilea's following sidelong look made her giggle and explain. "Sorry, my friends were reassigned to Dala as well."

At that, the master mage's eyebrows lifted in surprise. She asked Grace who they were, and after she explained Emilea fell silent for a while.

"They are strong and reliable," Grace added. "I am sure if your husband is as likeable as you say then everyone will get along well."

"Tell me about the one with the... I mean, Coura. How do you know her?" the woman asked in a controlled, neutral tone.

As Grace explained how they met and the meals they shared with the others, she found herself becoming more enthusiastic. Meanwhile, Lady Emilea's features were unreadable. After Grace ran out of things to say, the mage politely thanked her for the conversation before excusing herself. Grace left a few minutes later and went to her own room.

For most of the night, she stared out of her window and wondered what her friends were doing. *Did I say something wrong to displease Lady Emilea when I brought up those in Dala?* she wondered, recalling the woman's change of behavior at the mention of them, specifically Coura. Then, Grace remembered her own first impression. *That is right. I almost forget the demonic presence I sometimes sense from her. I am sure as a light mage Emilea notices it too and dislikes Coura for it.*

A gentle breeze tickled Grace's face, making her realize just how awake she was. After grabbing a shawl to wrap around her shoulders for warmth in the chilled halls, Grace wandered without a purpose, becoming lost in her thoughts. She wondered what Dala was like and when she would see everyone again, but mostly her mind went back to Emilea's reaction to her friendship with Coura. Over time, Grace began to consider if the master mage was justified in doubting their relationship, and her trust wavered.

Perhaps I was too impulsive to befriend her because of how lonely I was. Do the others know about her demonic presence? They might not because I never heard anyone mention anything, even when Coura wasn't around. But... A longing tugged on Grace's heart at the memory of when they first met. Everything about Coura has always been genuine. I might not know what she is, and we have only known each other for a few months, yet I really like her. I want her to be my friend! No, I want to be her friend too. Could it be some new manipulation spell we are all under? Grace felt like striking her head against the nearest wall for having such a thought.

When she reached the opposite end of the palace, she decided to return to her room. In that time, Grace made up her mind regarding Coura. *I will try reaching out to her tomorrow. Not only will I be able to see how they are all doing, but I am going to ask about what she is. I believe her true reaction will reveal if she is lying or not. At least I will have some-*

"Idiot!"

Grace's mind and body froze at the word echoing through the nearest empty hallway. She held her breath as a stream of curses followed much softer, and recognized the low voice hissing with frustration.

The voice is the same one who sent out the mysterious orders only a few months ago. I could never forget it!

With as little noise as possible, Grace turned on her heel, ignored those around who paid no attention to the outburst, and followed the now hushing voice. Just like before, it led her farther into the center of the palace. A metal door shone dimly in the light of a single torch placed just outside with no one nearby. Grace's heart started beating faster, hammering her chest as she approached and listened carefully to the conversation taking place.

"You had *three* orders, did you not? Yet here I stand, without a prince and with the base still intact!"

Another voice, much quieter than the first, spoke barely loud enough for Grace to understand. "Your Greatness, I apologize on our behalf..."

"Not only did you manage to disregard my initial orders," the angry man continued, "but you screwed up the last!"

"I take full responsibility for the demon girl," a third, more rich masculine voice said.

"I don't need a reminder of where the blame should be placed," the first man growled.

“I did not know the blade should not be removed,” the third voice replied as if the first said nothing.

“Of course you didn’t. You know why? Because *you* were not the one who was given this dagger to seal the demon. *You* had your orders, and *you* failed to complete them!”

There was a heavy pause followed by mumbling too faint for Grace to understand. Then, three footsteps and a painful-sounding slap after. Another moment of silence and more shuffling made her concerned they were preparing to leave.

Without another thought, Grace tiptoed back to her room, never glancing back even as she closed the door to her room and leaned against it. Slowly, she sank to the floor and listened with her breath held. She remained that way for a ridiculous amount of time before crawling into bed and putting the covers over her head. While her body feigned sleep, her mind raced with the new information.

Those must have been the angels sent out to Dala a while ago! Why did it take this long for them to return? The man said they failed to take the base and capture Prince Aaron. That is positive news, so why am I frightened? “Demon girl” someone said... Could he have meant Coura? I cannot wait. I have to try reaching out to someone!

Grace closed her eyes and stretched her mind as far as it would go before it faded, yet she still wasn’t able to reach Dala. After another moment, her head began to throb, which meant she was using too much of her power too quickly.

I cannot do it, she thought on the verge of tears when she reeled in her mind. How else can I reach them in time?

An idea came to her once she relaxed a bit.

Master Emilea is a light mage. I wonder if she would be able to lend me some of her energy. That would mean revealing some of what I have learned though...

As Grace contemplated her next move with growing confidence, the excitement of the evening caught up with her and she fell into a deep sleep.

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The first rays of sunlight peeked through the window of Grace’s room, something she initially didn’t care for when she moved to the eastern side of the palace. Today, she was grateful for the signal to rise. With more energy than she’d had in days, Grace washed up, threw on a casual lavender gown, and pulled her hair up into a tight bun before hurrying out the door.

She greeted each person she passed with a polite smile. Some were surprised to hear her speak to them and babbled out a response with a bow. Grace made it a point to see if she recognized any voice among the people on her way to the mage’s quarters.

Since she wasn’t sure where Emilea could be, she stopped several of the students wearing colored robes to ask. Most claimed she was never on palace grounds until mid-morning while

others weren't sure where the woman lived. Grace was about to give up hope until she recognized the high priest coming her way.

"Your Grace!" She curtsied and smiled up into his jolly face.

"Why, Lady Zelnar! It feels like ages since I've seen you. I suppose that's what I get for squeezing in business in place of meals and gatherings," he said with a gentle voice and chuckle.

Grace laughed too before continuing. "Would you be able to help me find Master Emilea? I have been told mixed answers all morning."

High Priest Hendl's eyes widened a bit and he glanced at the ceiling in thought. "No wonder you haven't had any luck. Lady Emilea and her family live just outside of Verona to the west. Where exactly I do not know, but it's mostly woods save for their home."

"I see." Grace stared at the floor, contemplating the priest's words.

"If you would like," he added with a hand on his breast, "I may be of service. What is it you are hoping to learn, young one?"

She glanced up into his face. He smiled, cheeks so high his eyes were nearly squeezed closed. *Should I tell him? I am not even sure if I will share with Lady Emilea...*

"Thank you kindly," Grace began and bowed. "I truly appreciate the offer, but I am afraid it is something I think only the master mage can help me with."

"Oh." Hendl blinked in surprise, then opened his mouth to say something else before rethinking his words.

"Good day, High Priest," Grace decided to say before slipping by him and hurrying to her room. Within the next few minutes, she had a cloak in hand and was outside of the palace and in the streets of Verona.

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What am I doing here? Am I lost?

Grace followed the slim path leading her deeper into the woods beyond the capital city. With how early it was, she felt confident enough to explore until the sun was high in the sky. Besides the beautiful day, which was unnatural for the middle of winter, she was reassured in her course by the well-worn trail leading off of the eastern main road in Verona. For a while longer, she wandered on, taking pleasure in the peaceful surroundings and the fact the guards posted at the palace entrance trusted her on her own after months of supervision.

Leafless trees allowed the beams of light to break through and shine upon the brown grass below. In the distance, she spotted another color besides the grays and browns. A red shone brightly, and Grace moved faster toward the building. The trail opened up to a wide space where the two-story home sat.

"This has to be it," Grace told herself with a growing anxiousness.

She went to what she assumed was the front door and knocked three times as firmly as she could. There was no response for a while. Grace swallowed her nerves and pounded a fist on the wood again. Her heart leapt at a voice from just inside telling her to wait a moment, and she saw movement beyond the curtain in the nearest window.

“How can I help you?” the master light mage began as she opened the door with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. At the sight of Grace smiling up awkwardly, Emilea’s mouth fell open before she put a hand to it.

“Hello, Master Emilea.” Grace curtsied while the woman opened the door wider and gestured for her to enter.

“It’s an honor, Lady Grace. Please, have a seat while I grab you something to eat and drink.”

Emilea disappeared into the kitchen to Grace’s right, and she hung up her cloak before smoothing out her hair and dress.

“Who are you?”

She froze and glanced over at the space to her left. Seated on the arms of a leather chair were a young boy and girl who watched Grace with curious expressions.

“H-Hello,” Grace stammered and curtsied again, unable to figure out a proper greeting for the children.

They continued to stare at her as she moved into the room and accepted another armchair opposite from the occupied one. Her body sunk into the cushions, relieving most of the tension in her body. Moments later, Emilea returned with a cup of warm tea and a sandwich Grace found contained ham and cheese.

“I made extras for lunch earlier,” Emilea said and handed the plate and mug to Grace.

She thanked the woman for her hospitality before sipping the drink. The boy and girl eagerly moved out of the chair as their mother, or so Grace assumed, took her seat.

“Now, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

As the voices from the previous night echoed in her mind, Grace dropped her eyes. Emilea did not press for an answer, but only sat with a slight smile.

“I…” She cast a glance at the children who remained on the chair’s arms to continue observing.

The light mage seemed to understand the importance of the matter then. “Mace, will you please take your sister upstairs while I talk with our guest,” Emilea asked while she patted the boy’s head.

He pouted, but grabbed his sister’s arm and led her away. Once they were gone, the master mage met Grace’s eyes as if urging her to go on.

“You see,” Grace began with a growing confidence, “our talk at dinner last night made me think of how long it has been since I spoke with my friends in Dala. You are well-aware of my goddess gift I presume, but I am unable to reach them from this great of a distance. I was hoping you could try lending me some of your light energy.”

While Grace sat with a controlled expression, her palms became sweaty. Emilea watched her with a tilted head before narrowing her eyes.

“You’re lying,” the woman said flatly.

“What?” Grace squeaked out, startled by her words. Even as she did so, Grace realized she gave away her innocence.

Emilea’s smile widened. “I’m a mother. I have plenty of experience from when my children and husband are lying. You’re also not good at it.”

“I see.” Grace’s face turned to the floor again as she contemplated her next move.

Suddenly, Emilea rose and came over to kneel in front of where Grace sat. The woman took both of Grace’s hands in her own in a comforting gesture.

“My Lady, I would be honored to work with you so you may speak to your friends. However, I sense there’s more than just that. Please, you can be honest with me.”

The sincere nature of the light mage and her willingness to help snuffed out any doubt in Grace’s mind. She returned Emilea’s smile and nodded. “Alright, I will tell you everything.”