

What Remains of Edmond Fisk

DAY 2

My name is Edmond Fisk and I am beginning to suspect that I am trapped in the Chambre.

There is neither night nor day in the Chambre, only sleep. Sometimes I tire and slumber, other times I am awake. And since there are no windows or doors, I can scarce recognize the passage of time. Does time even exist here? With no alternative, I shall measure my time here as though every sleep equals a new day.

So how did I come to be trapped in the Chambre?

Two months ago, while exploring an abandoned Parisian manor, I happened upon the painting, Dame de la Chambre, by Christian Toth. It was a small portrait of an enchantingly freckled woman. She wore her melancholia like she wore her lurid violet robe: proudly and defiantly. Never before had I found a painting that drew me in like a moth to flame. Her perfect cheeks, her auburn hair. I wished to lift her from sadness, though she was just a painting.

The portrait's background was a dark-bricked chamber with golden glowing sconces, a writing desk, and a painting on the wall. This painting intrigued me. As I looked closer, I found it was indeed this very same portrait! Christian Toth had miraculously painted in miniature the Dame de la Chambre within the background of the real one, and even more impressively, another even smaller one within that! A painting within a painting within a painting. There was only one unmissable difference between them: the Dame de la Chambre in the background was upside-down. What an odd design choice. To better inspect the minute details of the inverted background painting, I turned the real one upside-down.

It was then that I discovered Toth's secret.

DAY 3

It has become apparent that the Chambre is not an average room. There is no food here, neither rodent nor insect. Yet despite not eating for three days, my hunger has not grown! Does time truly not pass in the Chambre? Though why must I still sleep?

In addition to the cease of hunger, the ink well in the writing desk does not dry. I have been writing for three days without the well nearing spent. Additionally, the candles do not drip wax, the matchbox is always full, and this journal's unmarked pages never decrease as I fill them. If all this remains true, then I could continue living in the Chambre and writing in this journal for an indiscernible amount of time.

The first time I encountered the Chambre was when I held Christian Toth's painting upside-down. As I did so, the world around me suddenly went dark. When I awoke just a second later, I found myself standing in an entirely different room. The bricks were uneven and dark grey, almost cobblestone. It was dark, a few candles on golden sconces shed their amber light. The floor was wood; the ceiling, timber beams.

And my hands...

I looked down to my hands. No, they were not my hands. This skin was pale, dotted with freckles. I had thin feminine fingers, small muscles in my arms, and what was hanging from my chest? My whole body was draped in a lurid purple chamber robe.

I was the lady in the painting!

How was this possible? Was it magic? Was I dreaming?

No. ~~I could~~ She could feel the pain of her toe against a table leg, a pen nib stabbed in her hand. (I immediately regretted that one.) All was real. Somehow, by inverting the painting, I had become the lady inside it.

DAY 6

I have decided to only write on days of particular significance. I came to this decision not through reason, but because I forgot to record the last few days.

Nothing interesting happened. Whilst time seems not to exist in the Chambre, neither does anything of interest. There was the writing table and sconces as I saw in the painting, but also a whole dimension to the room not shown before I came inside.

The Chambre was larger than the painting portrayed. The walls extended out to include a bed, a French easel, some blank canvases, and a set of drawers. Within the drawers was a little hammer, a few spare nails, and a wide array of oil-based paints, and fine horsehair brushes.

And just as before, the Dame de la Chambre hung on the dark-bricked wall. However, unlike before, it was now right-side-up. Not only that, it looked back at myself. It moved! Since I was now the lady in the painting, when I moved, the painting moved as me. A mirror of paint.

As I lifted it off the wall, the floor shook. Or rather, I did. I felt a shift in gravity that nothing else did. No brush rolled, no blanket churned. As I turned the painting ninety degrees, I was not swept off my feet, though I felt I should have been. As I finished the full one hundred and eighty-degrees, my vision went blank.

And I awoke where I had been standing in the real world, the Dame de la Chambre at my feet.

What far-away memories these seem now. If time does not pass, then I have already spent a thousand eternities here. It sure feels like it. This is only day eight? Preposterous. How do I know that when I sleep, that equals a day? It could be year for all I know! There are no windows, no doors, no light but for the eternal candles.

I am Tantalus. Though I have diced and boiled no little boy, I have been eternally trapped under a metaphorical fruit tree which, whenever I reach for the fruit, raises its branches away. I have not eaten for six days. Six eternities. Thankfully, I am not cursed by hunger, though I sorely miss the warm fill of mother's stew and the sweet juice of a Harvey apple.

I wonder how my family is? By now my disappearance must have been noticed. Are my sisters combing my estate, is mother sick with angst? The thought of their worry outweighs even my miss of them. Edith, Olivia—if you ever read this, I wish you to know how sorry I am that I ever found this painting.

DAY 26

Over two and a half months have passed since I found the painting. Almost two weeks—supposedly—since I got trapped here.

Today I was thinking of my sister when I realized I had forgotten her name! Was it Elinore? Evandra? Ellen? I remembered I wrote her name a few days ago so I turned back to day six and—
I had two sisters?

The realization hit me so hard my soul may well have died. Not only did I forget Edith's name, but I completely forgot about Olivia. How long have I been in here? Only twenty-one days? That cannot be true. It must have been longer than that. How could I already forget one of my own two sisters? Is there anything else I have forgotten?

Now that I think, I am noticing that my mind is a patchwork quilt with holes quickly forming. I am losing my memories!

Because I only remembered Olivia after looking back in this journal, I shall attempt to record crucial information which I cannot afford to lose.

Name: Edmond Fisk
Mother: Catherine Fisk (Maiden name: ~~Gra Green~~ unknown)
Sire: Marmaduke Fisk (deceased)
Sisters: Edith and Olivia Fisk
Date of entrapment: September???
Date of Birth: February 12th, ...
Age: well, if I forgot the year...
Gender: ~~unn-~~ mind is male, body is female
Place of Residence: an estate, according to Day 6's entry
Marital Status: unknown
Children: unknown
Just about everything else: unknown

Every fleeting memory tantalizes me as I try to wrestle them like greased piglets. They are right there, I can feel them, then they are gone. Perhaps the Chambre degrades my memory? Regardless, if I remember anything more, I will write it here.

DAY 35

I remembered something. Whilst asleep, I dreamt. It felt more real than the Chambre. I could not have made it up, it must have been a memory.

I remembered how I escaped the Dame de la Chambre three months ago. Since I had entered the Chambre by flipping the painting whilst staring into the sub-paintings, I tried repeating this with the painting inside the Chambre. My vision faded and I awoke again in the real world, the real-life painting at my feet. I repeated the whole process and discovered I could enter and exit the Chambre at will.

I wondered if this was a magical painting. The Dame de la Chambre, a heathen relic of a forgotten time, and Christian Toth, both artist and sorcerer? A visit to the library shed little light on Toth. Only one book mentioned his mysteriousness, but it cited only rumours. Toth was a romanticist said to disappear for months on end, and some even claimed to have attended his one hundred and thirty-second birthday. Now these mysteries began to connect.

I also read that, because his works were so rare, the Dame de la Chambre likely valued more than all I owned. Its true value, however, was beyond finances. This one painting gave the owner the abilities to disappear and to escape death. And I was quick to exploit this.

It started with a dinner party where I disappeared before my guests' eyes. They were astonished. Word soon spread and I started a little show, first for my family—yes! Edith and Olivia, I remember their names!—then for others. In the show, a curtain lowered for a second and when it rose I was gone. Tickets to these shows swiftly soared in price, making me a small fortune. Whilst I could have

continued, I knew a one-trick show would eventually lose interest, so I abandoned show business and settled into a nice country manor.

That was the end of my dream.

When I awoke, I pulled the covers over my head. I needed to sleep, I needed more memories recovered. Why had I not written more in the first few days!

But the dream was lost. I was awake. Thus back under the fruit tree's branch.

DAY 78

I discovered the true meaning of eternal damnation: boredom. There is nothing to pass the time. All I have is time! And a journal.

A few days ago, I started playing with the paints. Since there is an easel with canvases, paints, and brushes, I wonder if Christian Toth invented the *Chambre* as a refuge for his painting? Here he'd need not burden himself with cooking, nor cleaning, and in this absolute loneliness, he was left solely to his thoughts. Sleep is the only bodily burden, though since sleep resets the mind, it makes sense as the one burden he kept.

To test my skills, I painted a simple landscape. A grassy field, some red flowers, a little sunshine. For my first attempt, it was not utter rubbish. Perhaps my mother would have almost loved it were I three years old. Whilst my memory of the real world was degrading by the second, I was pretty sure the sun was devoid of a smiley face.

My next attempt was a recreation of the *Dame de la Chambre*. I thought, since I had a copy, I could study it and attempt to recreate the style. Whilst this time my mother would have recognized what the subject of the finished product was supposed to be, it was nowhere near Toth's skill. I am not a sorcerer, after all.

A few weeks passed and gradually, after many new works, I earned a shallow talent for Toth's hobby. My latest attempt is a close detailed view of the candle and sconce above my bed. I used my new talent for perspective to illustrate the candle, seemingly warm to the touch, with its flickering brilliance lighting and heating the wall behind. And best of all, I have perfected my handwriting for my signature in the corner.

This painting, which I named *Candle de la Chambre*, is an escape from here, a portal to a new world. I even flipped it upside-down just in case I would be transported to a new *Chambre*. (Sadly, it did not work.)

It was an interesting journey mastering the art of painting. Though, I do not feel the pleasure is earned. In the end, I signed my painting as Edmondine Fisk, since it was the lady in the painting that made it, not I.

Now there is nothing new to explore with painting. Surely the summit of victory has been made all the sweeter by a more arduous ascent? But no. With no more for me to experience through painting, I put my brushes aside.

I wonder what other task I shall employ to occupy me for eternity?

DAY 84

There is nothing in this room. Nothing to keep me entertained. I knew it would eventually dry of entertainment, but I hoped it would not be so soon.

I have scoured every square inch of the Chambre more times than I can count. Three days did I once spend staring at a single knot in the wooden floor. Three days! It appeared a colossiseum where tiny ant people and tiny ant lions would fight. Edmondates was my favourite gladiator, whilst Totheous was his arch rival. They both fought and killed thirteen ant-lions before their rivalry was to be settled in true one-on-one gladiator combat.

Edmondates wore the bronze armour that his mother, Catherinias, had gifted when he was young. She hugged her son before the battle, speaking with the softest of loving words.

“I am so proud of you,” she said to him.

“Even though I left you and never came back?” Edmondates asked in tears.

“Of course,” Catherinias cooed. “I know it wasn’t your fault. You never meant to hurt me like this. Now, I want you to fight Totheous and slaughter his moronic, self-centred, god-forsaken little—”

... Then Totheous won.

DAY 126

I apologize for not writing for quite a while. After Day 84, I found writing a tad too painful. I have good news, though. I finally completed an inventory of everything in the Chambre. To date, I have discovered that there are exactly 461 bricks in the walls of the Chambre, as well as 29 planks in the floor, and 23 in the ceiling. There are 3 sconces (each with 3 candles, 9 in total), 4 pens, 1 ink well, 24 colours of oil paint, 10 horsehair brushes of differing sizes, 1 water jar, 12 paintings by Edmondine Fisk, 1 by Christian Toth, 1 mattress, 1 goose feather pillow, 1 pillow case, 1 sheet, 1 feather blanket, 1 writing desk, 1 set of drawers (with 3 drawers), 1 easel, 1 hammer, 1 saw, ~~43~~ 14 spare nails, 1 chair, this journal, and the lady in the painting. Plus Edmond, if you count the presence of his mind in Edmondine’s body.

DAY 130

An update to the Chambre’s inventory: I completely forgot the specks of dirt on the floor! I shall count them and update the inventory.

DAY 134

A breakthrough!

There are exactly 4, 879 specks of dirt on the floor. That is exactly seventeen times the number of freckles on Edmondine’s body!

Recently I have wondered if there is something I am missing. Perhaps this is actually an escape room and I have been missing the clues. What a fool!

The correlation between Edmondine’s freckles and the specks of dirt on the floor is too unlikely to be a coincidence. Escape must have something to do with dirt!

DAY 157

I am sorry, dear reader. It seems as though my sand-and-freckle theory was incorrect. There is insufficient evidence to support the escape room hypothesis, so I am regrettably forced to abandon the idea. I was so excited, but now I may never escape.

DAY 205

For the last few weeks, Edmondine and I have grown quite close. In fact, I brought her on a date yesterday to the little nook beside the bed. We chatted for hours.

I really impressed her last night, so she let our relationship become more intimate. This was not our first time doing it, but it is our first time doing it with love.

DAY 206

Today I asked Edmondine to marry me.

I know what you are wondering: how are we to be wed if there is no priest? Here is my logic: if the Chambre is separate from reality, than me and Edmondine are the only two people to exist here. Me as a mind and her as a body. Thus, we are not dissimilar to Adam and Eve, correct? And who wed Adam and Eve?

I actually don't know. I should have gone to church more.

But my point is that they had children! If they were allowed to do that, than surely God should not be all that displeased if me and Edwardine get married.

Right?

DAY 208

Edmondine called off the wedding!

It was supposed to happen on Day 212, but that was her mother's birthday so she couldn't make it. Then we got into a big fight over how the deposit for the venue (the floor under the desk) was nonrefundable. Then she said we we're not meant for each other and cancelled the whole thing!

How am I supposed to go on living? Edmondine was everything to me, and now she is gone.

DAY 871

~~The Chambre does not exist.~~

~~There is no solid evidence to support the conclusion that the realm inside the painting exists. When I sleep every night, I dream of a world unlike this one. In that world, I am a hero. In this one, I am a lonely coward. Thus, it is just as likely that the Chambre is the dream and my dreams are reality.~~

DAY 1 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND

The jagged shores of Jarlheim glistened in the morning sun as my ship came in to land. "Onward, fellow conquerors," I spoke to my loyal friends, "for today the White Cliffs of Jover are ours!"

"Huzzah!" my men cheered, for they followed the mighty King Edmond into battle!

When I was betrayed by who I thought was my best friend, these three champions stayed loyal to me. Braesin the Barbaric, Orest the Wise, and Hallstein the Unkillable stormed off the boat behind me. They never left my side when ~~my mind~~ Jarlheim turned against me. They were true loyal friends.

And now my kingdom of Jarlheim was before us. I had left my home but never abandoned it, for I sought revenge on the tyrannical King Tothiliand. He usurped me from my home and trapped me. He used a beautiful maiden to do that. But now I shall reclaim my kingdom!

As I and my fearless champions scaled the white cliffs, a call came from above. "King Tothiliand, look! The coward Edward has come running to us. Shall we fire the flaming arrows?"

“Of course,” said Tothiliand. “That coward deserves eternal damnation. Fire!”

Over my head came a hail of arrows to cast a shadow over the cliffs. I’d have been done for, if not for the loyalty of my faithful men.

“Worry not my liege!” said Hallstein the Unkillable as he climbed above me and bore his shield, catching the arrows headed for me.

“Take this,” Orest spoke, handing me a painting of a freckled maiden in a dark chamber. “This is a magic painting. You may trap the souls of unworthy cowards within it, but be warned. To be trapped here is to suffer a fate worse than death. Should you trap yourself inside, to escape you must—”

Right then a flaming arrow struck him through the heart.

“No!” cried I. “Leave me not, Orest, my loyal friend. Especially not with such incomplete instructions!”

“Come closer,” Orest beckoned, and I brought my ear to his lips. “To escape you must...”

That was the last he ever said.

“Orest!” cried I. “How do I escape? How!” But it was over.

“Men!” cried King Edmond with tears of sorrow streaking his face. “~~Toth~~ is Tothiliand is to blame for all my suffering. A cease of sorrow will only be achieved with Tothiliand’s head on a pike! Onward, gentlemen. Charge!”

Then I awoke.

I was in the bed, the sheets wrapped tight. Normally, when I am torn from my heroic conquests in Jarlheim, my eyes never open, I simply continue the dream in my mind.

However, the death of Orest the Wise spurred in me a longing for remembrance. With my past life now naught but faint glimpses of a dream long ago, I feared my memories of Jarlheim would suffer the same fate. And so, though I pained to stay in the Chambre, it offered me one benefit: this journal. Because the days I spend here are much less significant than those spent in Jarlheim (and because I forgot to keep counting), I will switch to a new dating system. Today officially marks Day 1 of the Year of Edmond.

Today and every day hereon, I shall awaken to record the tale of King Edmond, his loyal friends, and their legendary adventures through Jarlheim.

DAY 2 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND

As Orest the Wise released his final breath, King Edmond inspired his loyal friends with a rallying behest. Thus did the companions top the White Cliffs of Jover to face the tyrannical King Tothiliand.

He had betrayed me, my armies betrayed me, Edmondine betrayed me. I had lost everything. All but my three loyal friends: Braesin, Hallstein, and Orest. They came when I needed help, told me what a brave and independent man I was, and with them at my back, we would now take back what was rightfully mine!

Braesin the Barbaric dove into Tothiliand’s archers, carving into them with his battle axe like lumbermen to a forest. Hallstein the Unkillable charged after, carving a path through Tothiliand’s knights so I could follow straight to the tyrant king.

“And so we meet,” said I, “on this day of fate. You, the man who stole from me all I had, and I, armed with the one thing you could never take!”

“And what is that?” he tyrant hissed. “A blade you hid, a shield you wrought?” An evil smirk split his face. “Or perhaps you refer to your loyal champions?”

I followed the tyrant’s gaze to my friends behind. Braesin, outmatched, surrounded by fifty pikes. And Hallstein, his shield rent, his armour torn.

Tothiliand gloated. “Surrender yourself, former King Edmond, and I shall not kill your champions. Yet.”

I saw in my friends’ eyes the fear I once had. I was alone, cowardly, forgotten. But I had risen from that.

“You are wrong,” said I to Tothiliand. “Whilst you have trapped me in this eternal chamber, there is one thing you can never take. My sanity!”

I leapt like a mountain lion up to Tothiliand and held the cursed painting before his eyes. Then I spun the painting round and he disappeared. Trapped forever in an eternity of torment. He deserved it. All my suffering was because of him. Now he would suffer like me.

~~Toth~~ Tothiliand was defeated. Now I was the true master of my ~~mind~~ kingdom.

DAY 3 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND

Today Edmondine (the fake one in the Chambre) congratulated me for reclaiming Jarlheim from Tothiliand. She said it was a great first step in restoring the health of my mind. I knew not what she meant at the time, but now I realize she was trying to change me.

After the congratulations, Edmondine said the next step in my recovery was to accept the non-reality of Jarlheim. “What do you mean?” I asked her.

“It is great that you found this method of coping,” she said, “but to fully recover, you must now accept that it only exists in your imagination.”

After all this, she still believes Jarlheim does not exist. She claims my imagination invented it on Day 871 as an escape from the Chambre. When I looked back, I indeed found on Day 871 that I discovered the truth. The Chambre is fake. It is the dream—the nightmare—of King Edmond whenever he slumbers in Jarlheim.

Thus, to prove my point, today I scratched out the entire entry for Day 871! No longer will I pretend this Chambre has any merit! Jarlheim is more real than the Chambre, more real than my past life. Here I am a ghost; there I am a hero.

DAY 4 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND

After the tyrant Tothiliand was defeated, my armies became loyal to me once more. They released Braesin and Hallstein and gave a grand procession as I marched back to my castle.

Princess Edmondina waited for me on the steps to my throne room as I returned. Her face was fine as a masterful painting, her gown a lurid violet, her expression hung between regret and joy.

“My king,” she said as I dismounted and climbed to her. I could see excitement flash across her beautiful face. Forty-four freckles, nothing more radiant. “You were right,” she said, “Jarlheim is real and the Chambre is false. You truly defeated Tothiliand and reclaimed yourself, as well as my love. Your suffering is over. You are free.”

And we embraced. I remembered once feeling her warm body, her soft skin. But in this moment, I could not feel her. Jarlheim was real. My freedom was real.

So why couldn't I feel her?

DAY 5 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND

The first thing I did this morning was tell Edmondine what Princess Edmondina said to me. I said that she said that the Chambre was false. I described how I defeated Tothiliand and that I was now free.

Edmondine stayed silent for a long time.

Finally, after another eternity, she responded. "I'm glad you're happy when you're in your little kingdom... But I'm scared."

"Scared?" I asked. "Of what?"

Again she left me in silence for a long while. "I'm scared of losing what little remains of Edmond Fisk."

"What?" I did not understand. "Jarlheim helped me recover myself."

"Yes," she said with a weakening voice. "But when will you start losing yourself? When will your little kingdom dive too deep and make you forget who you've become? Who we've become?"

I gripped the writing desk by the leg and flipped it over! The led snapped off, ink rained down, papers were ruined. "You're scared I won't need you anymore!"

Edmondine ran off deep into my mind where I could never find her. Papers drenched in ink littered the floor. What had I done?

I righted the inkwell, grabbed the papers, laid them flat. I lost the Chambre's inventory. It was all black. I found the Candle de la Chambre under the desk and found it torn through the centre. All my work, everything that brought me joy, was lost.

Why had I done this? I was angry. Angry at Edmondine. She tried to stop me from going to Jarlheim. She couldn't stand seeing me happy so she destroyed what brought me joy. This was her fault! She did this!

DAY 8 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND

I married Princess Edmondina today. She never argued with me, she wanted me to be happy, she was a true loyal friend! We got married in the chapel. Braesin was the best man, Hallstein gave a speech. It should have been the happiest day of my life.

So why did it feel wrong?

I pondered this question for days. First, I wondered why my happiness did not feel real. Had I not earned it? There was something deep within me that said otherwise.

Was my suffering truly Toth's fault? I had been so sure of it, but now I could not help but wonder. Did he do this to me, or did I?

A nightmare consumed me that night. Was it a nightmare? I am not sure. When I retired to my royal chambers, Queen Edmondina was missing and atop my bed laid a newspaper. The sight of the thing struck me like a knife, for I had not seen one of these since... since my past life.

Bold black letters ran across the page. 'National Gallery accepts Toth portrait thought lost for decades, donor remains unknown.'

Until then, my memory had been a patchwork quilt held together by mere threads. This newspaper stitched it up.

I remembered when I first found the Dame de la Chambre. I discovered its magic, a tool unlike any other. After a month I had grown bored (this made me laugh) of retirement in my manor. After all, why shouldn't I utilize the Dame de la Chambre's full potential?

September 18th, 1875. After a day had passed inside the painting, I left the Chambre and awoke inside the collections chamber of the National Gallery surrounded by all their newly acquired works of art. It was perfect! No guards, plenty of time, and enough unprotected paintings to have made me a millionaire literally overnight.

I started with a Turner Claude, then moved on to some Carraccis. I took no preferences, save to those which might have had the most value. Fifteen pieces was the limit of my strength. An obstacle, however, presented itself when a light shone through the door. I abandoned the paintings and hid.

The guard stepped in, a rotund man in a red uniform with gold buttons too tight for his waistline. The light of his chamberstick flickered over the rows of shelves, his boots echoing on the floor. It was the only sound, save for my shuddering breath.

"Is someone there?" he beckoned, noticing the random assortment of paintings hastily flung aside. Soon I'd be caught. My only escape was the Dame de la Chambre. If I could disappear inside, I would be safe. But it was across the room.

As the guard turned away, I leapt! Out from the paintings, across the aisle, into another. The man heard me and gave chase, but I was faster. I made it to the Dame de la Chambre, turned it around, looked into her eyes and—

All was quiet.

I awoke in the Chambre, my body no longer spent from the chase. But then, a shatter of glass of such a volume to rend reality in two. All myself and my mind and memories felt ripped to shreds like canvas under shattered glass. My ears tore, my mind broke—then it was over.

What had happened? In the Chambre there were no windows nor doors to see the outside. I could have flipped the painting and returned to reality, but that guard may still have been there. I decided to wait, just a few minutes, before grabbing the painting from the wall and turning it around and...

And nothing happened.

I tried again. Nothing.

I know now why I dreamt this. It was my greed that trapped me in the Chambre. I tried to steal art, so eternal damnation was my punishment.

From Day 1 I had blamed Christen Toth for my misfortune when, to find true fault, I needed only look in a mirror.

~~DAY 14 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND~~

Dear reader,

It is my fault that I have suffered a thousand eternities. I shudder at the thought of suffering a thousand more. Since Jarlheim does not exist, nor Edmondine, Braesin, Hallstein, or Christian Toth, I have naught to lose but myself.

When I had broken the writing desk, the leg sheared off to form a sharp point. I initially threw it aside, though now I see its true value. Thank you, dear reader, for following my story so far. I have come such a long way without going anywhere. I deserve every second I have been here, and I deserve more. But now I want Satan to be my captor, not I.

Farewell.

FEBRUARY 17TH, 1954

My first sight when I opened my eyes was her face. Edmondine. The light behind her was so bright, the halo of an angel.

“Are you okay, sir?” she said to me.

“I failed.”

Her brows skewed. “Failed what?”

“My end.” I shivered at the memory of the desk leg, the pain. “I am sorry for having done that to your body. I see now what you tried to tell me. But I took no heed.”

“It’s okay, you didn’t scare me that much. But, do I know you?”

What an odd question, since we were spending eternity together. I opened my eyes slightly wider and found Edmondine wearing a white laboratory coat. And her face, her freckles. It looked like her, but it was not! There were less than forty-four freckles! I was laying on the floor. The wrong floor! Where was the wood? This was, this was...

Concrete.

Before this unknown woman could jump back, I was already on my feet. The walls were not the Chambre’s walls, yet I recognized these bricks. Above me was a bulb of light, it hurt like the sun to peer at. The ceiling was wrong, the walls were far away, the floor was grey, the furniture was off.

And my hands...

I looked down to my hands. No, they were not my hands. This skin was dark, the freckles gone. I had thicker fingers, thicker arms, and my chest was flat! This body spurred in me something I had lost long ago, something hidden deep down that only now came to surface. I was no longer the lady in the painting.

The woman before me spoke. “Should I ring security?”

“Where am I?” I asked.

“I-I don’t—”

I grabbed her by the shoulders. “Where am I!”

“The restoration workshop!” she blurted.

“Of?”

“Of the... National Gallery?”

National Gallery... National Gallery... The words rung in my head as I remembered that night. The floor, the walls, the ceiling, I knew them! This room was filled with desks and paintings and no people but I and her. It was dark in here, just one glowing ball hung over the woman’s desk. And on it was the Dame de la Chambre. It had its frame. It had its glass.

“When am I?” I asked.

The woman’s face was blank as concrete.

“What time is the present?” I rephrased. “Has eternity passed? Is it judgment day at the end of time when the trumpets sound and our sins are laid bare?” I gasped. “You’re not Satan, are you?”

“What, no?” she said. “It’s Thursday. And I’m Carina Toth, just an art restorer.”

Toth... That name. I knew it. For so long had I cursed it.

I stepped energetically, so much room to move. I came to the painting and pointed to it. “This painting, it is by Toth, yes? Christian Toth? The painter? Know you him, do you knowing?”

“Do I know him?” Carina repeated. “Yes. I am a descendant of his. In fact, he’s what got me into art restoration. We found this painting a few days ago under one of the shelves surrounded by shattered glass. I just finished putting a new frame on it.”

I turned away, astounded. Edmondine tried to save me before, but I did not listen. Now Carina saved me.

“Are you okay, sir?” she asked. “What’s your name?”

“Thank you, Miss...Carina.” The beauty of the name rolled from my tongue. “You may not understand, but you saved my soul from eternal damnation.”

Every inch of my astoundment confounded her further. “H-happy to help?” She studied me, a fear in her eyes. Not of me, but for me. “Who are you?”

“I am King Edmo—” No. I know who I am. “I am Edmond Fisk.”