

What Remains of Edmond Fisk

Bane Janzen

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Day 2

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

There is no night or day in the *Chambre*. Only sleep. Sometimes I tire and slumber, otherwise I am awake. And since there are no windows or doors, I can scarcely recognise the passage of time. Does time even exist here? With no alternative, I shall measure chronology as though every sleep equals a new day.

How did I come to be trapped in the *Chambre*?

Two months ago, while exploring an abandoned Parisian manor, I happened upon the *Dame de la Chambre*, a painting by Christian Toth. It was a small portrait of an enchanting woman in a tenebrous violet robe, her hazel eyes hung low with melancholy as she gazed out through the frame to the world outside. A world of freckles graced her sculpted face. But she bore her loneliness like a bowing roof bore moss. Never before had a painting drawn me in like Narcissus to the pool. Her perfect cheeks, pointed nose, auburn hair. I wished to lift her from her sorrow, though I reminded myself it was just a painting.

The dame was in a chamber of greyish-brown bricks with timber beams and golden sconces with candles glowing ochreous. Behind her was a writing desk upon which a painting sat. That painting intrigued me as, upon close inspection, I discovered it was indeed this very same portrait! A miniature *Dame de la Chambre* in the background of the real one. What miraculous skill Toth had to paint so miniscule. However, the smaller painting was inverted, as if the lady had been inspecting it upside-down. To see it closer, I brought my face near the painting and flipped it around.

It was then that I discovered Toth's secret.

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Day 3

It has become apparent that the *Chambre* is not an average room. There is no food here. Not even a rodent or insect. Yet despite not eating for three days, my hunger has not grown. Does time truly not pass in here? Though why must I still sleep?

Hunger is not the only anomaly. The candles never shorten, the matchbox is always full, and this journal's unmarked pages never decrease as I fill them. I clumsily knocked the ink well to the floor but, when I sat it back on the desk, it filled up again with ink. It seems one could perhaps live here writing in this journal for a infinite amount of time.

What a chilling thought.

I first encountered the *Chambre* when I inverted the painting in the manor. As I did so, the world around me suddenly went dark. I awoke standing in a much warmer room in an entirely different building. The bricks were uneven and of an earthly hue, distant from the white limestone of Haussmann's Paris. And it was dark. A few candles on golden sconces shed their flickering amber light. The floor was unplanned wooden planks, the ceiling of timber beams.

And my hands...

I looked down at 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 my chest was much rounder than before. My whole body was draped in a tenebrous purple chamber robe.

I was the dame 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 dame inside it.



Day 6

What am I to write if nought separates each day from the last? I have decided that this journal shall tally my days trapped here, as well as anything of particular significance.

Whilst time seems not to exist in the *Chambre*, neither does anything of interest. The room is much larger than the painting portrays. The walls extend 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* was sat on the desk. However, unlike before, it was now facing me. Not only that, but it looked back at me. It moved! Since I was now the dame in the painting, when I moved, the painting moved with me. A mirror of paint.

The spot on the wall from which the perspective originated was bare. No window, no pinhole camera. The *Chambre*, in fact, has no windows at all. No cracks in the boards revealed a world beyond. Existence seems to exist purely in the *Chambre* and nowhere beyond.

When I lifted the painting from the desk, the floor shook. Or rather, I did. I felt a shift in gravity that nothing else experienced. 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 stood in that Parisian manor, the *Dame de la Chambre* in my hands.

What faraway memories these seem now. If time does not pass, or if it passes infinitely, then I have already spent a thousand eternities here. This is only day six? Preposterous. How do I know that, when I sleep, this equals a day? It could be a year for all I know! There are no windows, no doors, no light but for the eternal candles.

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.

As I gaze into that painted mirror, I cannot help but think of Narcissus. What a beautiful woman the dame is. I lift my hand, touch my chin. But it is not my chin. I shall go no further. I never thought of the hurt I caused others. A just desert, this fate may be. But I shall learn

from my mistakes. This is not my body and this is not my chamber. I shall escape. I am sure of it.

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Day 26

Over two and a half months have passed since I found the painting in that manor. Almost two weeks now (*supposedly*) since I became trapped here.

Today, I am reminded of my sister

What is her name? I am not one to forget names. Is it Elinore? Evandra? Ellen? I wrote it down a few days ago. Let me just turn to day six and—

Edith and Olivia. I have two sisters.

The realisation hit me so hard that my soul may well have left me. Not only did I forget Edith's name, but I completely forgot Olivia. How long have I been here? Only twenty-one days? That cannot be true. It must be longer. How could I already forget my own sister? Is there anything else that fled my head?

This is concerning. I am now realising that my mind is a patchwork quilt with holes quickly forming. I am losing my memories!

Olivia has not been lost because I have immortalised her in this journal. I shall therefore 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-ish

Date of Birth: February 12th, ...

Age:

Gender: ~~male~~ mind is male, body is female

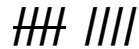
Place of Residence: an estate, according to the entry from Day 6

Marital Status: unknown

Children: unknown

Just about everything else: unknown

Every fleeting memory tantalises me as I wrestle with them like greased piglets. An image of an estate house crosses my mind. There were sheep. I was on the road quite often. The memories are right there, I can feel them, then they are gone. If I remember anything more, I shall scribe 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-painting, I tried repeating this inside the *Chambre*. My vision faded and I awoke again in the real world. I repeated the whole process and discovered I could enter and exit the *Chambre* at will.

I had 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 him, and all it said was that little was known. It cited only rumours. Toth was a romanticist said to disappear for months on end, with some contemporaries even claiming to have attended his 132nd birthday. “Bollocks,” I thought then.

But it now makes sense. I doubt one ages in the *Chambre*. A perfect retreat to focus on one’s artistry.

In this dream, I had also read that, because Toth’s works were so rare, the *Dame de la Chambre* was likely worth more than all I owned. Its true value, however, was beyond finance. This one painting gave its owner the abilities to disappear and to escape death.

And I was quick to exploit it.

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! — In the show, a curtain lowered for a second and when it rose, I was gone. Tickets swiftly soared in price, making me a small fortune. Whilst I could have continued, I knew a one-trick show would eventually lose interest. I therefore abandoned show business and settled into a nice country manor.

That was the end of the 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. Back at the mirror.

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Day 78

I discovered the true meaning of eternal damnation: boredom.

There is nothing to pass the time. All I have is time! There are very few activities here to keep me occupied. But there is an easel with canvases, paints, and brushes. And so, on day 41, I started playing with the paints. And I dare well say that, over the last 37 days, I have achieved a respectable skill in the art of the brush.

At first, 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 (Catherine) would have almost loved it were I three years old. Whilst my memory of the real world is perhaps now long gone, I am pretty sure the real-world 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. This time, my mother would have recognised what the subject of the finished product was supposed to be, though it was nowhere near Toth's skill. I am not a sorcerer, after all.

A few weeks passed and, gradually, after the stack of used canvases in the corner grew two feet in height, I earned a shallow talent for Toth's hobby. One honourable mention is my portrait of the dame. I took the stance of Hamlet holding Yorick and, as I studied her body through the painted mirror, I was, in effect, my own model. The background I made a dreary cemetery under natural grey moonlight. To respect the dame (who, I unfortunately add, was never asked if she would like to appear in my painting), I ensured that her most feminine parts were thoroughly covered under a cloak. One might wonder, though, why this Hamlet has a blanket draped over her shoulders. I wished to name the work after her, but I do not have her name. And so, as a joke, I dubbed it *Edmondine's Soliloquy*.

My latest painting 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, its flickering brilliance lighting and heating the wall behind. I dubbed it the *Candle de la Chambre*. I even flipped it upside-down just in case I would be transported to a new *Chambre*. (Sadly, as mentioned above, I am no sorcerer.)

It was an interesting journey mastering the art of painting, though I do not feel the pleasure is mine. I did not paint. The dame did. Her fingers have learned to wield the brush, not mine. But, as mother always said, every painting deserves its maker's name. After some thought, I decided that my name shall not grace the *Candle de la Chambre*. But I do not have the dame's name. And so, she signed it as *Edmondine Fisk*.

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 and breaks the monotony, it makes sense that it was the one burden he kept.

But time still is a shackle. After 37 days, I am now thoroughly bored of painting. I wonder what other task can occupy me for eternity?

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Day 84

I have compiled an inventory of every individual item in the *Chambre*. To date, I have recorded exactly 461 bricks, 29 floorboards, and 4 beams holding aloft the 23 planks comprising the ceiling. There are 3 sconces (each with three candles, 9 in total, around 9 inches tall), 4 fountain pens, 1 ink well, 24 colours of oil paint, 10 horsehair brushes, 1 water jar, 12 paintings by Edmondine Fisk, 1 by Christian Toth, 1 mattress, 1 goose feather pillow, 1 green and brown patterned pillow case, 2 white sheets, 1 feather blanket, 1 blanket cover matching the pillow case's pattern, 1 writing desk, 1 set of drawers (with 3 drawers), 1 easel, 1 hammer, 1 saw, ~~13~~ 14 spare nails, 1 chair, this journal, and Edmondine, the dame in the painting. She has 2 arms, 2 legs, 1 head, and 287 freckles. She is 13 bricks tall from the shoulders, her arms are 4.1 hand-lengths from shoulder to fingertip, her waist is 5.8 in circumference, her hips 6.5, bust 6.0 (just in case I decide to sew a dress from the bedsheets, of course). And the *Chambre* contains 1 Edmond, if you count the presence of his mind inside Edmondine's body.

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Day 88

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.

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Day 92

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!

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Day 155

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.

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Day 226

I think, therefore I am. But, unfortunately, I am, therefore I think.

There is nothing in this room. Nothing to keep me entertained. I knew I would eventually run dry of activities. But I had hoped it'd not be so soon.

I have scoured every square inch of the *Chambre* more times than I can count. Given that every material source of amusement has been exhausted, I have naturally turned to the immaterial. Three days did I once spend staring at a single knot in the wooden floor. Three days! I imagined it as a colosseum where tiny ant people and tiny ant lions would fight. The story was so tense that I dared not look away.

Edmondates was my favourite gladiator, whilst Totheous was his archrival. They both fought and killed thirteen ant-lions before their rivalry was to be settled in true one-on-one gladiatorial combat.

Edmondates wore the bronze armour that his friend, Edmondina, had gifted him. She hugged her friend before the battle.

That sent a shiver down my neck. She touched him. Touch. A tiny thing. Oh how you never realise how much you need something till it is gone. Even just imagining her touch made me feel less alone.

~~I imagine that one who descends into madness first embraces that which does not exist. I realise that now. But, I was desperate. Edmondina brought new life into my durance vile.~~

She spoke to him in the softest voice.

"Do not give up," she said. "We will get through this together."

"I am sorry," Edmondates said. "I do not belong in this chamber, nor in your body. I have done what I can to respect you, but I fear I cannot escape."

"I forgive you," Edmondina cooed. "We can only do our best. Now, I want you to fight for us. Fight Totheous and slaughter his moronic, self-centred, god-forsaken

Totheous won.

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Day 379

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.

You see, we have much in common. She too is trapped in the *Chambre*. It is strange how, after being cripplingly lonely for so long, I finally have someone with which to share my burden. Oh how woe am I turns into woe are we.

Day 379 Update

I am ecstatic to report that my relationship with Edmondine has become more intimate! This was not our first time doing it, but it is our first time doing it with love.

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Day 380

I have come to a realisation. I cannot believe that I was so idiotic as to not have realised this earlier. You see, on day 226, my naïve self wrote that one goes mad when one embraces that which is not real. And, to be fair, I was correct. But the *Chambre* is not real. My imagination is. The *Chambre* is a nightmare wherein I suffer miserably. But how can I know the room and the desk and this journal are real when they give me no joy? In contrast, my imaginings give me joy and happiness and fear and pain and grief and love. They are no imaginings. They are more real than anything else. And I shall prove to Edmondine that I am committed to our love.

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Day 382

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, then Edmondine and I 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 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, then surely God should not be all that displeased if Edmondine and I got married.

Right?

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Day 383

Edmondine called off the wedding!

It was supposed to happen on day 395, 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 were 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.

To exist is to be damned.

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Day 1,096

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 Hygeland glinted in the morning sun as my ship came in to land. “Onward, fellow conquerors,” I said to my loyal brothers in arms, “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 the one I thought I loved, 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 Hygeland turned against me. They were true loyal friends.

And now my kingdom of Hygeland 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 can 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~~ Tothiliand is to blame for all my suffering. A cease of sorrow will only be achieved with his 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 Hygeland, 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 Hygeland 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 Hygeland (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 Hygeland.

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?" the 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 was defeated. Now I am the true master of my mind.

^Tothiliand

^kingdom.

DAY 3 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND

Today Edmondine (the fake one in the *Chambre*) congratulated me for reclaiming Hygeland 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 realise she was trying to change me. She said the next step in my 'recovery' was to accept the non-reality of Hygeland.

"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 Hygeland does not exist. She claims my imagination invented it on day 1,096 as an escape from the *Chambre*. When I looked back, I indeed found on day 1,096 that I discovered the truth. The *Chambre* is fake. It is the dream — the nightmare — of King Edmond whenever he slumbers in Hygeland.

Thus, to prove my point, today I scratched out the entire entry for day 1,096! No longer will I pretend this *Chambre* has any merit! Hygeland 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 spoke as I dismounted and climbed to her. I could see excitement flash across her beautiful face. “You were right,” she said, “Hygeland 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. Hygeland 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 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 am glad you are happy when you are in your little kingdom... But I'm scared."

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

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

I did not understand. "Hygeland helped me recover myself."

Her voice weakened. "But when will you fully lose yourself? When will you dive too deep into your little kingdom and forget who you have become? Who *we* have become?"

I gripped the writing desk by the leg and flipped it over! The led snapped off, ink rained down, papers were ruined. "You fear that I need you no more!"

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 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 Hygeland. 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 loyal! 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 I not feel it?

It was all wrong. The *Chambre* had become so dry of feeling that I discovered it was not real. But Hygeland is real. So why can I not feel happy? Have I not earned it?

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

DAY 9 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND

A nightmare consumed me last 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. 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 Unknown.*

Until then, my memory had been a patchworked 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 of retirement in my manor. After all, why not utilize the *Dame de la Chambre's* full potential?

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. 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 Carracci. I took no preferences, save to those which might have had most value. Fifteen pieces were the limit of my strength. An obstacle, however, presented itself when the door creaked open. 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 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 and turning it around and...

And nothing happened.

I tried again. Nothing.

From Day 1 I have blamed Christen Toth for my misfortune. But, to find true fault, I needed only look in the painted mirror.

~~DAY 14 OF THE YEAR OF EDMOND~~

Dear reader,

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

I have painted a gold and white narcissus. It seems fitting. Though, I left it unsigned, since I am a mere ghost soon to join Edmondine and the others.

When I had broken the writing desk, the leg snapped 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 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 wider and found Edmondine wearing a white laboratory coat. And her face, her freckles. It looked like her, but it was not! I was lying 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 recognised 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 at 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 rang 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 her and I. It was dark in there, just one glowing ball hung over

the woman's desk. And on that desk 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 the 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 replaced the broken glass."

I turned away, astounded.

"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 astonishment 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."