

A Simple Sabotage
AKA Baby's First Crime of Passion

"What do you want?"

"I want to die."

"In time, in time. I'll have the steak and sunny-side up eggs. White toast, please."

I once found myself attempting to court a young woman with a face I have since forgotten and whose name I no longer remember. Granted, I was a young man of fifteen at the time, so it is possible I never knew them to begin with. We were walking through Firenze in the mid-morning and felt hungry, so I offered to go into a nearby café to acquire us some food.

When I tried to pay, I found myself with less money than I thought I had. The man behind me wore a golden amulet studded with gemstones around his neck, and clearly would have money to spare, so I turned and asked him if I could borrow a couple florins.

"Absolutely," he said. "Provided you are willing to pay it back with interest."

The concept of "interest" was too closely related to the idea of the future to worry me at that age, so I agreed. With the buns in hand, I went back to my date and did not think about that man for the rest of my life.

My youth passed me by and I moved to Florence to become a banker for the Medici. There I found a wife, made and lost friends, watched my children grow up and old and have children of their own. It was a good life and, at the age of eighty-seven, with my eldest son at my bedside, I had a good death.

For a long time, there was nothing. Then darkness, followed in rapid succession by agony.

The darkness quickly faded, chased away by moonlight. I was surrounded by walls of dirt at every angle of my peripheral vision. Standing over me, at the head of my grave with the moon at his back, was the exact face I had seen standing behind me in the bakery.

“Hello. I’m here to collect.”

The agony has remained.

It has been years since then. I have seen wonders beyond imagining, miracles beyond those of God himself, but a beautiful inferno does little to distract from the perpetual torment. Everyday I hope that I will finally become accustomed to the pain, but it has remained as sharp as it was when I first awoke from my final rest. The ceaseless cycle of my flesh; constant decay and regeneration, the agony of one indistinguishable from the anguish of the other. Madness refuses to come for me, to provide me with a refuge from this hell. The magic which roused me keeps my mind clear against my will, leaving me acutely aware of my every moment.

I have only been given one path to freedom from this nightmare; constant servitude to the monster who did this to me until I pay off my debt to him. And so I have served him for the last thirty years, waiting for my time to finally, mercifully, run out.

One of the things I have learned about this body which I once called mine but now was no longer truly my possession is that cold slows the cycle of decay, relieving the pain just the smallest bit. As such I had taken to getting the groceries during the early morning. Leave the house on Saturday ten minutes before the store would open, collect the groceries, drive back and put them away; a simple routine with little room for disruption. But disruptions were known to occasionally happen, as one did in late winter.

It started with me once more mourning the loss of my relative height. Of all the regrets that come to my mind, that is easily the most frequent. In my life, I was considered tall. Now my height is normal, even on the smaller side. It was a fact I was once more made keenly aware of by the sight of the young woman standing at the front door, even at a distance I could tell she

towered over me. Even with shoulders slumped from a school bag and knees bent as she nervously swayed left and right, her stature was undeniable.

It wasn't until I was already inside, putting away the produce, that I realized I didn't know who she was. It wasn't until all the food had been put away that I realized she didn't know how to get inside. I went back to the front and opened the door for her, proving my suspicions right; she was taller than me. Damn.

She was also nervous, a fact already proven thoroughly enough by her posture and fidgeting which made her stammering frankly redundant.

“Th- there wasn't a kn- knocker or a doorbell,” she said, looking down at me.

There also wasn't a lock, nor a keyhole. Those were for people with more sense than arrogance. She continued speaking, but I could tell her words were not meant for me. I turned away from her to return to my duties. She chose to take the gesture as an invitation to come inside the entry hall, closing the door behind her.

“Uhm, I wa-was told to come here and talk to...” her voice trailed off, drowned out by the thumps of a man descending a staircase. Clad in a white bathrobe and accompanied by a floating cup of black tea, the sorcerer made no secret of his displeasure.

“Why,” he said at her as he descended, eyes narrowed with lethargy and annoyance. His fingers rubbed at his eyes for a moment before sliding to his cheek, providing a buffer between his face and the wall he was slumping against. The cup flew around to his lips, helpfully tipping itself just enough to allow him to drink while still glaring at the poor woman.

She stammered even worse than when she had spoken to me, and the sorcerer lacked my patience. His eyes rolled midway through her attempt at an introduction. He started to turn around and head back to his bed. I considered giving her some aid but she proved to not need it, managing to force out the words “Baba Yaga sent me!”

Baba Yaga was and still is a close friend of the sorcerer's wife, and as such, one of the few names the young woman could have mentioned to make him pause. His hand slid from his

cheek to cover his eyes, rubbing his temples with his thumb and ring finger as his jaw noticeably tightened. “Of course she did,” he said with a sigh. He opened his mouth and the floating cup overturned itself completely, emptying into him before floating away to the kitchen sink.

He went down the rest of the stairs and into the kitchen, motioning for her to follow. I had to wash the cup and so bore witness to their conversation at the table, behind my back.

“Ah-I-I-” I could hear the woman stop herself to take a deep breath. “My name is Alexandria, I’m Baba Yaga’s apprentice. I took my final test to become a journeyman from her three days ago and I failed and I don’t know why and she told me to go to you for help. If I don’t pass I’ll-”

“Yaga’s an enchantress; I’m a sorcerer, what does she possibly think I could do to help?” he asked, interrupting her.

“I- I don’t-”

The sorcerer cut her off with an annoyed sigh. “What do you mean you don’t understand why you failed?”

“I did everything for the enchantment exactly as the book said, I even double-checked when I came home. It should have worked,” she mumbled. It was the sort of mumble you hear from drunks as they slide off their chair and wonder where it went wrong, but not quite as pathetic. “She said she’d give me one more chance to pass before failing me and sent me to you. This was supposed to be my last chance, I kept screwing up all the other tests. I spent years training under her and weeks for this test alone. I thought I had it. I just... I don’t...”

“Did it work when you were training?”

She took a deep breath. “I couldn’t try it out before the test. The enchantment requires a very rare conduit and Baba Yaga only gave it to me for the test itself. She said it was because sometimes I would only have one chance to make an enchantment and I won’t have the time or resources to practice.”

“So how did you study?”

“I got a book that had the recipe and memorized it. It was i-”

“Give me the book,” said the sorcerer. I heard a zipper being fumbled with, then opened, followed by the sound of something sliding across the glass of the table. Pages ruffled for a moment and the sorcerer asked, “You can read this?”

“Part of my training was studying ancient languages to accumulate recipes.”

“Ancient my ass, this thing is barely six-hundred years old. And I didn’t ask if you were bilingual, I asked if you could read this.”

She made a nervous noise. “N- not fluently, exactly. But I triple checked every line, I know I did it right!”

“Yeah yeah,” said the sorcerer. There was a long enough silence for me to finish washing the cup. I turned around to put it back into the cupboard and saw the sorcerer rapidly flipping through the pages of what looked to be a very old but otherwise perfectly normal book while the apprentice watched him and nervously twiddled her thumbs.

“Why this book specifically?” he asked as he flipped.

“The enchantment I had to make, a void rune, the instructions on how to make it are incredibly hard to find; only the people who discovered the enchantment were able to write the instructions down and they all only did it once and that book was the only version I could find that I would be able to access. It’s a collection of-”

“Where’s the enchantment?”

“Page two-hundred seventy-three through three-hundred seventeen.”

“Where did you get this book?” asked the sorcerer as he flipped to those pages.

“I rented it a month ago, I know I should have started studying earlier but it was checked out and there was waitlist and when it was available I was in Russia so I had to wait four days before I could pick it up and-”

“Where?”

“A bookstore called FlickerWisp, it’s in-”

“Lorenzo, go to the car. We’re taking a trip.” The sorcerer closed the book and picked it up as he stood from the table. He shrugged his robe off as cut cloth flew at him from his bedroom, wrapping round him and sewing itself up into a shirt and pants.

The apprentice started to stand, saying “I can lead you to-”

“I know where it is, just wait here. We’ll be back soon.”

A common magical trick to maximize space is to cram as many spaces into one area as possible. I do not know how it is done, nor do I particularly care. But I do know it makes me sick to my stomach every time I have to go into one of those expanded compacted spaces. I did not realize that the store was located in one of those until the sorcerer had grabbed the doorknob and slid it to opposite side of the door. In retrospect I think I prefer it that way, it meant I didn’t have to spend the entire two-hour drive dreading the experience. I exhaled as much air as I could before I stepped in and braced myself against the closest wall, closing my eyes to focus on my breathing. It did nothing to make me feel better, but it did make me feel I was in some way effecting my situation.

When I felt well enough to open my eyes I saw the store was filled with bookshelves a meter and a half tall, with the walls filled by yet more bookshelves and a pair of cork boards holding various flyers. The sorcerer had walked up to the register at the back of the shop and was speaking with a man who was no longer young but looked like he refused to admit it.

“Can I help you?” he asked with a bored look on his face, doodling on a pad atop the counter with a fancy black pen. Out the corner of my eye I noticed I was not the only one watching their conversation. A mousy young woman with a clipboard in front of her face was very conspicuously trying to inconspicuously look at them. The apron she was wearing matched that of the man at the counter.

“My name is Joshua Maerowitz, I’m sure you’ve heard of me,” said the sorcerer. The man clearly had, straightening up and trying his best to not look intimidated as he tried to figure out a response. The sorcerer, however, had no desire to wait. “I’m here to talk about old books.”

“Well, we have a lot of those,” said the man, attempting to sound casual. “Are you looking for any in specific?”

“I’m not looking for any at all, I have more than you do. I want to talk about restoration, getting them touched up. Not everything ages as gracefully as I do.”

“Oh,” said the clerk. He seemed at a loss for words again, but managed to find them faster this time. “Well, we don’t really do that here, insurance you know, some of the books we have are priceless,” he said, clearly expecting to impress the sorcerer and just as clearly failing. The failure made him falter, but he managed to recover. “But if you give me some time I might be able to find-”

“Don’t bother. Tell me about a book borrowed by this one girl, blonde, about eighteen/nineteen.”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“Really?” he said, casting a glance around the empty store. “You really get a lot of customers to fit that description?”

“I work in this place for a reason, man,” said the clerk, a slimy smile on his face.

“Gross.”

The sorcerer looked at the clerk for a long time, the clerk steadily getting visibly more uncomfortable as the silence dragged on and on. He wasn't the only one, the other worker seemed to feel awkward by proxy, playing with a strand of hair in front of her ear. I wondered if she was perhaps a student from the ink marks on her hand.

Personally I was quite enjoying the silence. I so rarely get to see my tormentor look like a fool. I could almost *feel* him straining to recall anything about Alexandria, frankly I was surprised he recalled her age and hair color.

Forty-seven glorious seconds ticked by before the sorcerer rudely decided to end my bliss, leaving me with only pain. "She's like five-foot eleven," he finally said.

The clerk started to let out a large sigh of relief only to quickly realize he would look foolish and instead tried to let it out slowly through his teeth. "Alexandria!" he said a little too enthusiastically. He seemed to realize this and quickly dialed it back, but the slimy smile returned to his face. "Yeah, she's been coming in here sometimes for the last couple years, renting books for her studies."

"Do you know which books she rented?"

"Off the top of my head no. Honestly I was focusing on other things whenever she came up here. But we do have a ledger for each customer. Sam!" he called out, making the girl jump. Her cheeks were bright. "Get Alexandria's ledger from the back." She darted away, keeping her head down as she speed-walked past the sorcerer and her boss.

"You keep an individual ledger for everyone?" asked the sorcerer.

"Yeah, you can never be too carefully. We keep track of who has all of our books at any given time. Sometimes people try to pull a fast one on us."

"What type of fast one?"

"You know, removing pages or stuff like that. Sometimes people even try to pull the whole book out and put the spine over something else."

“How do you spot the tricks?”

“I read all the books as they’re returned, and check them against their descriptions.”

“All of them? That must take a lot of time.”

“Not really, I’ve gotten pretty good at reading these old languages. My assistant helps sometimes, she was able to pick ‘em up quick.”

The assistant returned, bringing a small folder with her. She placed it on the counter and ducked behind a bookshelf.

“Oh yeah I remember now, Grigori’s collection. Yeah she was talking for a while about having to learn how to make a void rune, seemed crazy stressed about it. Said it was her final exam,” said the clerk as he opened the folder and pulled out a piece of paper. “Man, she had that diary on reserve for days. Only came back just in time to snag it before we gave it to the next one in line. Like it always took her awhile to make her pickups, but never that long. Shame I didn’t get to see her when she finally came in. Here you go, feel free to check it out.”

The sorcerer glanced at the page. As soon as his eyes beheld it, he turned to leave. “Lorenzo,” he called as he headed to the door. “It’s time for us to go home.”

I waved to the assistant as we left but she didn’t seem to notice. Her cheeks were still red.

For the entire ride back the sorcerer was speaking with his wife. I tend to tune out whatever they talk about, but this was strange because he was keeping his voice down. He normally has no restraint around Lucy.

Alexandria was still at the table when we returned, her face in her hands. She glanced at us as we entered the kitchen. Her eyes were a mess.

The sorcerer slid into a chair across from her and slammed his hands against the table, “So!” he said as he leaned back. “Do you want the bad news first or the good news first?”

Whatever Alexandria had been feeling had been replaced with shock from the noise, her eyes wide and back pressed against the chair. “Uhh, bad news?” she said in a manner not unlike a student hoping that the answer they had pulled from thin air was correct.

“Well the bad news doesn’t make sense without the good news, so you’re gonna have to wait. The good news is that it is not your fault that you failed the test, probably. The bad news is that now you’re gonna have to work even harder to study since you have to forget what you think you know and learn a new truth.”

“Wha-?”

He put the book on its spine on the table and let it fall open. “So, you see anything weird?”

“Uhhh.... No?”

“Exactly.” Without warning, the sorcerer summoned a ball of flame into his palm and slammed it against the book.

The apprentice shrieked, a mix of shock from the blaze, shock from falling down as her recoil put too much force on the chair, and terror at the priceless book being damaged. The latter was unwarranted.

“So here’s something neat about magician’s books that you clearly don’t know about,” he said as the fire spread around the pages. “The paper used to make them is alchemically strengthened. This lets them resist water, fire, lightning, rot, everything you could imagine. But with paper this resilient, obviously it is hard to mark. So, a special ink is used. The recipe for this ink has not changed in over eight-hundred years, it’s very good, high-quality ink and is able to withstand almost all that the paper can withstand. But it can’t withstand time.” He waved his hand and the blaze snuffed out. “Within a century, the ink will start to fade. Within six, it might be illegible. So you being able to read it at all is a miracle, Unless someone touched it up. I can understand why you didn’t notice that it was weird, none of the other books you had to study from were older than a few decades.

“Still, nothing wrong with a little touch up, books need them and its nothing to be ashamed of. But touching up a book this valuable would need a certain specific kind of expert, someone who has been specially trained to touch up a handful of specific books. Someone who would know,” he said as he flipped to the first page and jabbed a finger at what I assume was the byline. “That Griggori did not spell his name like that. He spelled it with two consonants in the middle, not one. It’s a common mistake, but not one an expert would ever make. That was enough to make me suspicious. This language is incredibly hard to write in, even harder than it is to read. I can’t do either of them, I just recognize his name since he was always huffy about it being misspelled like this.

“Looking through the rest of the book, I could see that pretty much everything had been touched up. This language is very easy to make a mistake in, especially for an enchantment which requires complex words. Whoever tried to repair the ink more than likely fucked up a lot, and I checked with someone who confirmed it. So you were learning from a wrong recipe.” He held his hand out and a moment later a book flew into his grip.

“So... so I didn’t screw up?” said the apprentice, her voice lifting for the first time.

“I have no way to know that, but if Yaga sent you to me to figure this out she probably knows you didn’t screw up for any normal reason.” He held out to her the book which had rushed to his grip. “This book was made by Chantelle Chauvelin.” Alexandria clearly recognized the name as her jaw seemed to drop.

“She worked with Griggori on the void rune. He wouldn’t stop bitching about her rejecting him to everyone who would listen, it was pretty pathetic. Anyways, somewhere in this is the actual recipe. I have the book touched up every century or so, so it is absolutely accurate. Just in old french, so you’ll have to figure that out.”

“You... you’re giving it to me?” she said, awestruck, nervously reaching a finger out to touch the cover.

“Absolutely not.”

Rarely have I seen someone go from euphoria to depression so quickly as Alexandria did. But she bounced back as the sorcerer kept speaking.

“I’m loaning it to you. Don’t worry, I’ll get it back eventually. I always do.” He flipped the book to her and she barely managed to catch it. “Good luck. Now get out of my house.”

“Th- Th- Thank you!” she said, bowing quickly as she grabbed her backpack off the floor and fled as fast as you will ever see someone flee from a situation in which there was no danger.

“Wait you forgot th... she’s gone. Great,” said the sorcerer, rolling his eyes. He glanced at the diary she had left on the table and tsked. “Well, I see no reason to give her a reason to return. Lorenzo, you go return this to FlickerWisp. For that matter, while you’re there, you should tell the owner he needs to fire that short chick.”

I didn’t say anything. I did not want to give him the satisfaction.

His ego-driven smugness couldn’t withstand my hatred-driven apathy.

He grumbled like a child and began his explanation unprompted. “I checked with Lucy on the drive back; aside from the spelling of Griggori’s name, the book didn’t have any errors except for specifically in the part detailing how to make a void rune. But they weren’t normal errors, they were all gotcha puns. Stuff that would deliberately read like a normal sentence to someone who knew the language, so would just assume what a word is without actually reading all of it, but people who weren’t so sure of the language and so were reading more carefully would catch them. You know, like the joke ‘Accordion to studies, people tend to not notice when words in sentences are replaced with musical instruments’. It was all that kind of stuff.”

He paused. I remained silent. He grumbled.

“The book couldn’t have been altered by someone who had it before her, since the shop carefully checks them on return. But it did sit there for five days, which would give someone plenty of time to do the restoration and make the changes before she picked it up.

“No matter what time of day she came to check out her books, the handwriting on her ledger only varied between two different styles. The way the owner wrote on that little pad next to the register matched one of them, and the other style was consistent with the restoration job.

“The girl had fresh ink marks on her hand and when she ran past I got a glance at her clipboard to make sure the handwriting matched. She’s the one who made the restorations and messed with a priceless book. So, she should probably not be allowed near them anymore.”

I continued to be silent, but the sorcerer was apparently satisfied with his explanation. “Now, go return the diary.” He stood from his seat and his clothing flew off of him to be replaced by his bathrobe. His head tilted back from the force of a yawn as he exited the kitchen and returned to his bedroom, leaving me with my task.

Two hours are short in retrospect, but agonizing in the moment. This holds particularly true when the moment in question is a drive that has one of those infernal compressed spaces as the destination. You would think the nausea of anticipation would in some way diminish the pain of deterioration and regeneration, but no. The two sensations proved to get along with each other quite splendidly in their shared goal of torture.

Luckily, I had something to occupy myself with. The sorcerer had neglected to explain why the assistant had done this to begin with. Two hours is a lot of time to think. I had also managed to peek at the clipboard, she had angled it slightly my way when she ducked back behind the bookshelf. It was tidy and clean, held in a way to make sure not to disrupt anything on it. Her apron was cleaner than the owners, but clearly not new. Not to mention learning ancient languages even the sorcerer could not read. Even if she had an otherworldly aptitude for them, learning dead languages was difficult. It spoke of someone who cared about their job, who cared about doing it well. Why would she do such a serious offense, risk not only her job but steep fines and jail time, to specifically interfere with Alexandria. That was beyond malice.

I had not noticed the chimes the first time I had stepped into the bookstore. It had taken me a long time after my awakening to accept that hearing chimes with no bells was not a result

of magic. Things I had never even thought about enough to believe were impossible were now commonplace.

The man who was at the register before was now nowhere to be seen. The assistant had taken his place behind the counter. She looked at me with nervous eyes, her lips twitching as she tried to force a smile but could not make it happen.

“You are Sam, correct?” I asked her as I put the diary onto the counter. She nodded and moved to slide the book away, but my hand on the cover kept it where it was. I gestured to myself as I made my introduction. “Lorenzo. I am here to return this on behalf of Alexandria. Don’t worry, she doesn’t know you were the one who sabotaged her.”

The color drained from her face and her wide eyes glued themselves to the floor.

“I’m not going to tell your boss either, you seem smart enough to have had a plan to fix the book when it was returned.”

She let out a small noise of relief, but kept her head down.

“She’s a striking young woman, isn’t she?”

She nodded, lower lips between her teeth.

“How long have you desired her?”

Her eyes shot up, wide and panicked. “You didn-”

I held up my hand in an attempt to calm her. I had not been certain of my hypothesis before her confirmation, but it seemed the most likely out of all others. “I didn’t tell her about that either. It is not my place. But you should not have done this.

“I just...,” she muttered, twisting her fingers in her palm. “I didn’t want her to leave.”

I state that which she did not. “You were hoping if she kept coming back, she would eventually express interest in you.”

No nod this time, but I could see nervous tears collect at the corners of her eyes.

“Afraid to express interest of your own? Afraid of rejection?”

Her silence was a louder confirmation than any words could have been.

“What if she had not been offered a second chance of her final? You had no way of knowing she could get one.”

“She always did before,” said Sam.

“She was not supposed to this time. Baba Yaga’s generosity can only stretch so far. And even if she did, why would that change your situation?”

Her grip on the book grew tighter, her knuckles turning white as the tears threatened to spill. Clearly, I was not telling her anything she had not been repeating to herself for who knows how long.

“I know how scary it is to ask someone out when you do not know what they think of you. But that’s no reason not to do it. Be honest, despite the horrors your fear can whisper into your ear, do you really think Alexandria would do anything worse than politely say no?”

“...”

“Well, I do not. And I know that ‘no’ can be bad enough. To hear that someone who you have pined for does not think of you that way can be disappointing to say the least. But then you will know for sure, and can move on with your life. One less question, one less uncertainty to torment you. But if you never take that risk, the option will eventually go away and you are left with is the uncertainty. Uncertainty that will fester and turn into guilt and hatred and regrets. I can not tell you for certain if Alexandria will ever come back to this shop. But if she does, I strongly recommend you take the chance and remove the uncertainty. Because trust me, disappointment is fleeting but regrets...” I dug my nails into my forearm, gritting my teeth as I burrowed into the muscle to rip off a chunk of myself, revealing a layer of decayed cells side-by-side with fresh. “Regrets last forever.”

I put the torn flesh back into place, and within moments it seemed to have never happened. But I saw the look in Sam's eyes, and knew she would remember it.

"Have a nice day, Sam," I said with a nod. When I had left the store, she still had her hand on that book, her eyes glazed in thought and her teeth grinding from introspection. I do not know if she ever took my advice. I do not know if she and Alexandria ever courted. But honestly, I do not care. I did everything I could. And so, I was able to go to sleep that night without regrets.

Though, I still do not know why Baba Yaga sent her apprentice to be helped by the sorcerer. It seems to me like he could have only helped with that specific issue, and in that case Baba Yaga would have had to already be aware of the exact issue before she sent her apprentice, and could have fixed it herself. But who can understand the games immortals play.