

The Time Travelling Magician - Story 1

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Submitted: October 26, 2014

Updated: October 26, 2014

Apsida is a Sputnik, a magician who can travel through time. However as compensation for this ability, she can never do anything important with her life.

There is one loophole, however--what is important to the world and to an individual on an emotional level is often very different.

Utilising this loophole, Apsida helps people in a way that only she as a time-traveller can do.

To the world what she does is insignificant. To the people she helps, it means the world.

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The Time-Travelling Magician

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Story I

- Ideal -

- Prologue -

This is the story of Apsida, a female magician of the Sputnik breed. In a world where several millennia of interbreeding have caused the disappearance of pure-blooded magicians, she is a rare example of someone who is 75% or more of a single bloodline. The unfortunate thing for her, though, is that this 75% is Sputnik. Each magical breed has a different speciality, and for the Sputniks that is time travel. Apsida works as a freelance time traveller, performing odd jobs for anyone who requests her services. This is quite rare for a Sputnik, actually. Most of them either ignore their magical properties and live and die like normal human beings, or train themselves in generic magical abilities so that they can take some sort of unspecialised magic-based job.

You see as a sort of cost, or compensation for their amazing ability, Sputniks are doomed to a life of mediocrity: Nothing they do can ever be of much importance. People would pay billions for their services—assassinating political enemies, going into the future for advanced technologies, preventing peoples' deaths—the Sputniks would probably be the most paid breed of magician, if only there wasn't this restriction which means that no matter how hard they try, they are doomed to insignificance.

Time enforces this restriction. It will step in whenever a Sputnik tries to do something important—usually just hindering them in some way, like getting them lost or making the trains run late, but when there is nothing else it can do to prevent a significant change in history, it will have no choice but to kill the Sputnik.

There is one loophole, though. Time has trouble distinguishing what is important in terms of emotions. If a group of people show a wave of happiness or anger or sorrow it can tell this is a significant change that must be stopped, but since what is important and unimportant to individuals on an emotional level is a very personal thing, and is often not all that important to the world at large, time doesn't step in to prevent a significant change in these situations.

Taking advantage of this loophole, although it is hard to tell whether she herself is aware of it, Apsida goes out and helps all kinds of people with their problems, regrets and curiosities that only she as a time traveller can do. To the world what she does is insignificant and paltry. To the people she helps, it means the world. This is her, and their story.

'41 Gilbey Street, this looks like the place.'

Apsida stood on the footpath of a peaceful suburban road, lined on either side with large, two-storey houses with lush gardens and thick driveways accommodating many an SUV and station wagon. The sky above was clear save for a few wisps of thin, spread-out clouds, and the soft chirping of late-autumn birds permeated the cool, late-afternoon air. Behind her, the skyscrapers of the inner-city reached towards the sky like many towers of Babylon, and the soft whirr of cars speeding along some unseen highway could be heard in the distance, breaking the almost rural calm of the quiet street.

The girl called Apsida, who by her stature and general appearance looked to be about 16 years of age, was wearing a short-sleeved, black knee-length dress reminiscent of a stereotypical witch, a drooping, wide-rimmed witch's hat, a dark-purple shawl with golden-trims, black gloves, and small brown boots. Her skin was fair and untainted, her body slim, almost to the point of sickness (although this could be attributed to her young age), and her hazel-yellow eyes shone like beacons on her pale face. In her right hand she carried a broom rising up to her shoulders, which although showing marks of wear and tear, gleamed with a waxed finish and cleansed straws that showed it was well taken care of.

'Are you sure this's the right place?'

'Yes, why would you ask that?'

'Well there was that one time you got off on the wrong stop and ended up being an hour late to see the client.'

'That was your fault, remember? You said you were absolutely positive that I had to change trains there.'

'Hey, the public transport system's changed over the past 15 years, I couldn't help it.'

'Well we found another client because of your mistake and managed to get some extra work in, so it was okay.'

'Yeah, and the guy who'd called us up to begin with was pretty pissed off when we came late, but by the end of it he was bawling his eyes out.'

Having finished the conversation, the girl made her way up the driveway, turning left at a paved path flanked by badly-pruned bushes that led to a large mahogany door. She pressed the doorbell, then looked out at the small garden to her left as she waited. A dry fountain trickling malachite-green mould along its structure stood in the middle, surrounded by a bed of overgrown grass with several unkempt, flowering bushes marking its perimeter. Judging by the propagation of weeds and the state of the bushes, no gardening except a lawn mow or two had been done for a significant time.

Before long the mahogany door opened with a creak and out popped the face of a woman in her early-20s, with dark brown hair tied up in a bun.

'Uh... you must be the person Mr. Cabale called for... A bit young, aren't you?' the woman, although nice and maid-like in her bland-brown dress and white apron, had an edge of impertinence in her tone that suggested she was probably working part-time, and did not intend to make a career out of housekeeping.

'I am a fully-certified Sputnik, as the client requested.'

'Yeah, that's what the old man wants.'

The woman, addressing herself as Yasmine, allowed Apsida into the small foyer where an elegant chandelier hung from the ceiling, complemented by a romanticist painting of a pastoral scene on the right wall.

'I don't know what he wants with you,' Yasmine said as she took Apsida through the hallway, 'you Sputniks can't do anything too important, can you? I guess he's gotten to the stage where he'll try anything, since he's got so little time left.'

Apsida said nothing, only looking inquisitively at the elaborate kaleidoscope-like pattern of the carpet beneath her feet, and the various metallic trinkets sitting upon the tables and cabinets. Combined with the paintings on the walls, lace tablecloths and prevalence of sepia-like colours, the whole house gave the impression of some relic of the Victorian era.

Yasmine stopped before a door to the left, which she rapped with her knuckles three times. She waited for a raspy voice from inside to tell her to come in, before carefully opening the door and taking on a much more humble tone and stance as she entered.

‘Mr. Cabale, the Sputnik you requested has come.’

The room was much like the rest of the house, with a fireplace that seemed like it had not been used for years off to the left, a window opposite the door laced with wispy white curtains, and to the right a bed in which an old man was laying supine. The room was unnecessarily large—the space beyond the bed extended for two metres before meeting the wall, and the space between the bed and the fireplace was just as distant. This emptiness, coupled with the minimal furniture, gave an aura of isolation to the man in his lowly bed.

Yasmine offered a wooden chair from the table beside the bed to Apsida, and spoke to her as she sat down:

‘Would you like something to drink? I can take your hat and broom if you wish,’ Yasmine reached out to take these things, but a sudden voice stopped her.

‘Hey, hands off the merchandise, lady!’

The voice was masculine, with a youthful, boyish tone edged with acrimony like that of a high-school delinquent. For a moment Yasmine felt a rush of anger redden her cheeks, thinking that the little girl who hitherto seemed soft and sweet (if a little emotionless) had suddenly conjured that voice in an act of mockery. However, on second thought, she realised it was probably someone else talking.

‘Oh... You’re one of those, enchanted item hat things. I’ll just take the broom, then...’

‘It’s the BROOM that’s talking! Now shove off, we’ve got business to attend to!’

‘R... Right... I’ll be going...’

Yasmine rushed out of the room, closing the door quickly behind her.

‘You shouldn’t be so rude, Cotyl. She’s not the client, but she is close to him. If you keep up that attitude I might eventually lose work because of it.’ Apsida’s voice was calm and soft as usual—only Cotyl, who had worked with Sputniks for so long, could detect the tinge of censure that enveloped it.

‘Hey, I was defending YOU! She was looking down on you for being young and a Sputnik.’

‘But she’s right—I AM young and a Sputnik—so what’s there to be angry about?’

Cotyl was about to say something, but the man interjected; ‘I’m... sorry about Yasmine. She’s young and inexperienced... But she’s all I can *cough* afford, anymore.’

The man tried to sit up in the bed as he spoke, but falling into a coughing fit, gave up and lay back down on the bed. His hair was long and white, his skin floppy and parched, and his eyes gleamed blue—a strong contrast to his pallid body, although even they were beginning to fade.

Apsida took off her oversized hat and placed it on her lap, revealing her mid-length, wavy brown hair. It was a quiet afternoon, and the sunlight coming in from the window kept the room warm and cosy, as she waited patiently for the man to be ready to talk again. After several minutes the man finally turned his head on the pillow to face her.

‘If you don’t mind me saying, though, you are quite young... If I had a granddaughter maybe she would be about your age...’

‘I am 16 right now. So you don’t have any grandchildren?’

‘Ah, I see... I don’t even have a wife. I never got married, so I’m all alone.’

‘What about Yasmine?’

‘She hasn’t worked here for long—nobody ever did. I always hired servants to do the housework, but

they get married, have children, move away... And when my health started deteriorating, I was unable to work, and well... with no income it slowly drained my savings, so that now I can barely afford a part-time maid...'

'Oi, wait,' piped up Cotyl, 'we don't work for free, you know? Quid pro quo, you've gotta give us something.'

'I've already arranged it with your manager... Once I sell off one of the paintings in the hallway, I'll send a portion of the earnings your way... It'll be a shame to see it go, though...'

'I noticed you have a lot of vintage items here. How old is this house?' asked Apsida.

The man's eyes brightened at these words.

'Oh, yes, I bought the house thirty years ago, and it was about 60 years old then... So it'd be 90 years.'

'What about the furniture and paintings?'

'Back when I was healthy and had a little more money, I'd go around various shops and markets collecting them. It was my hobby—what I did instead of going around getting married and having kids like everyone else. People seem to be always wanting their homes to look "modern" and such, but I find this more reassuring. I grew up in a house like this, so it reminds me of my carefree childhood days, I suppose.'

'Are we done with the chit-chat, Apsida?' said Cotyl.

'I'm just asking questions because I find the house and the client interesting.'

'I know you like listening to people's stories, but we can do that AFTER we've done the job.'

'Why are you being so disruptive?'

'Remember that one time you let that blabbermouth lady talk until the last train left? Agarinnu was pretty pissed off about having to drive out and get us. She told me I've gotta keep you in check and make sure you're not getting sidetracked.'

'But I am actually using the conversation to gain information. For example, I know that the client has no wife or children, so the task probably has something to do with someone he regrets not marrying...'

Apsida paused for a moment as she considered this, '... in which case I cannot help.'

'I'm sorry, it's just been so long since I've had anyone to talk to about my hobby... I got a bit carried away. Miss Apsida, was it? You're sort of on the right track. What I want you to do... Is to find my first love.'

There was an interval of silence as Apsida tried to figure out if there was some metaphorical twist she could apply to the man's words. She found nothing.

'I think you've mistaken me for an Ishtar. I actually work as a subdivision of Ludari's Information service, so if I could just borrow your phone I could-'

'I've forgotten the girl's name... It was a long time ago, you see. There's a good chance she's not even alive, or she's forgotten me as well, perhaps entirely... I just want you to find out who she was...'

'But what about after that?' interrupted Cotyl, 'what are you planning on doing with the information? Are you gonna call her up or meet her? She might be happily married, in the same state as you, or, you know, worse. Even if we do find out who she is, there's a good chance everything beyond that won't be pleasant for you.'

'Does... that mean you're not willing to help me?'

'Hey, so long as you pay up I'm fine with anything. It's just that this girl...' Cotyl pointed to Apsida, insomuch as a broom could point to someone, '... feels guilty if the client doesn't get their desired outcome. Feels like she duped them, y'know? She doesn't show it much, but she's actually pretty concerned with getting the job done right. We can find out the woman's name for you, but you've gotta be aware that it's not gonna lead to any big change or last-minute fortune in your life—it can't, or else Apsida's inability to do anything important would kick in and stop us.'

'I understand that it seems like I'm an old man on his death bed... desperate to find someone to love before his life ends, but it's not like that. I'm...'

The man fell into another coughing fit, turning his head away from Apsida out of courtesy. The birds continued chirping outside, their sprightly voices seeming almost condescending towards the man in the warm, shaded room whose corrosive spluttering slowly settled.

'... For all my life I've been quite cynical, focusing all my time on my work and hobbies instead of love or relationships. Now I am too old to be angry and mistrusting of the world. But what is left? Only a long life of doing the wrong thing... Now I'm near the end, and when you come to that stage... You can't help but look back at everything, and see things you wish to goddamn hell you could change. But that's not possible. The only thing I can do is to grab hold of some unattainable ideal and cling to it... But I'm not an artist or creator. My *cough* imagination is limited... I need some basis for my fantasies. She is the only person I can imagine myself loving purely and honestly. The only one who knew me when I could still be saved from this wretched life I ended up living ... I want to know who she was, how she lived, what she did... I will not contact her—no, that might break the dream by drawing her into my reality... I just want to know enough *cough*, just enough, to imagine what could have been... So what do you say, Miss Apsida? Are you willing to help me?'

Apsida said nothing, only nodding slightly then asking the man for further details.

'Thank you... It was when I was ten. 1952. During the summer holidays, I went to the park near where I lived every day. It was there that I met her, and we used to play all day long, just the two of us. The area's been turned into a shopping complex now—Ackland Mall in Penny Heights...'

'What time exactly should I go? Month, week, hour preferably.'

'I'm sorry, it's been so long, I'm not exactly sure... I know we met each other near the beginning of the holidays, and she suddenly stopped coming to the park a week before it ended.'

'Do you know which school you went to? If you could lend me your phone, I could call up the Ishtar company I work for and find out when its holiday period was.'

'Of course... I went to Shelly Grove junior school, and hour... Perhaps in the early evening—around half past four.'

Apsida nodded, 'I presume you don't remember what she looks like, so I'm going to have to know what you looked like instead.'

'Oh, yes...' the man reached over to the bedside table to his right, fidgeting with a small photo album until he procured a small, worn photograph. He handed it quickly to Apsida, then turned away and fell into another coughing fit.

In the photo was a young boy wearing shorts and a cap, in the sort of granulated, monochrome hues of a mid-21st century photograph. It was hard to imagine that this dark-haired, smiling boy was now the lank and withered man that lay in the bed before her, convulsing in assent to the force of each cough.

'I'd... actually like to request that you don't talk to me, only the girl. I remember being told to be wary of strangers, even if they were a nice-looking girl like you *cough*... And, well... knowing myself, I might try to show off... Your *cough* manager said... that the cost for retrying a job that you failed *cough* the first time is considerably higher, since there is *cough* much more risk involved for you... I'd rather you didn't put yourself in danger, not to mention I wouldn't be able to afford the price *cough*... I'm sorry,' his words became more harsh and aspirated, 'I haven't talked this much... *cough* For so long... I seemed to have *cough* pushed myself... *cough* A bit too far...'

'That's okay,' Apsida said as she stood up, 'you rest, and I'll go find out your first love's name.'

- II-

'This should be the direction towards the park,' Apsida said as she walked along the footpath of a

quiet, suburban area at half past four in the evening, the sun still high in the sky and the heat of summer clawing at the hems of her dress. Things didn't look all that different from her time—the architecture of some of the houses, and of course the models of the cars parked in the driveways had a distinctly vintage vibe to them, but apart from that it was more or less the same.

'I reckon that's the park,' Cotyl pointed out a row of artificially-planted trees on the other side of the street, behind which the cries of children as they played could be heard. Apsida crossed the road and came into the park, ignoring the sports ground to the left to focus on the wide playground to the right, adorned with swings, a sandpit and various other playground equipment. She took the photo out from her pocket and made her way along the gravelly ground, searching carefully for the boy.

'Now remember,' said Cotyl, 'don't actually approach the girl 'till the boy's left. If you stuff up, it'll be too risky to go back and try again.'

'I know that. I graduated from magic school, not you, remember?'

'And I've been in this business longer than you. Plus you suck at people skills. The old man was right in being wary of you being able to find out a person's name without coming across as creepy.'

'I'm not that bad.'

'Hey, I have better people skills than you, and I'm a BROOM!'

'I've gotten a lot better than when I first started working.'

'Thanks to me telling you what you did wrong when you stuffed up! What if you saw one of your teachers on the street? "Wow Apsida, you've become so much more talkative than when you were in my class! What happened?" "Oh, a broom helped me with my social skills."'

'So maybe you've given me some advice every now and then, but I can hold a conversation with a ten year-old girl without making a fool of myself...'

Apsida was so busy arguing with Cotyl that she almost didn't notice a young boy, who looked strikingly like the one in the photo, sitting in the sandpit right in front of her. Instinctively she darted towards some nearby bushes, diving behind them clumsily then poking her twig-infested hair just above the shrubbery (her hat having fallen off during the diving).

'Yes,' Apsida said quietly as she held up the photo in comparison, 'that is definitely Mr. Cabale when he was ten years old. So the girl beside him must be his first love.'

Mr. Cabale was kneeling down in the sand, getting his argyle socks and blue shorts all messy, while his white shirt was crumpled and untucked. Conversely the girl, with prim blonde hair with a red cloth hairband with a bow, was wearing a red dress, white socks and small black shoes, and was crouching as best she could to avoid getting dirty.

'If we can just hear him say her name once, that'll be enough for us to finish the job,' said Cotyl.

'But I can't hear what they're saying. Should I get closer?'

'What're you going to do? Just stand there in the middle of a playground listening intently to their every word? Or walk back and forth past them until you hear something? You'll stand out too much, and that's the last thing a Sputnik wants to do.'

'What if I pretend to play in the sand a metre or two away from them?'

'Yeah, a 16 year-old girl in a dark coat and carrying a broom suddenly crouching down a metre away and playing in the sand BY HERSELF. That won't scare them away.'

'Okay,' Apsida took her hat and began standing up.

'I was being SARCASTIC!' Apsida crouched back down again.

'Mummy, why is that girl sitting behind those bushes and watching the sandpit?'

Apsida turned around to see a young girl pointing curiously at her. The two stared at each other without saying anything, and Apsida watched as her mother quickly took her by the hand and dragged her away, all the while mumbling something about "not getting involved".

'Hey, stay sharp! They're moving away!' Cotyl's voice brought Apsida's attention back to Mr.

Cabale and the girl, who had finished building their sandcastle and were heading off towards the inner playground.

Apsida picked herself up and followed carefully behind, the twigs still sticking out of her hair like little antennae. Although some of the other people in the park were staring curiously at the girl carrying a broom and sporting strange hair accessories, the pair of children were too caught up in themselves to notice, as they made their way towards a large wood and metal structure in the centre of the playground with various slides, climbing racks and such. There they blended into the swarm of other children scurrying about, so that it was all Apsida could do just to keep track of them.

‘What do I do now?’

‘If you stay nearby to listen to them talk you’ll look suspicious—and don’t even think about nonchalantly joining them in the hope that you won’t stand out... Just sit on a bench and wait.’

Apsida did as she was told, finding a place with a good vantage point where she could keep an eye on the little red dress and bowed hairband that were unique to the girl.

Apsida yawned as she sat down, placing her hat on her lap and leaning Cotyl against the bench. Despite the racket the children made it was peaceful and calm in the park. The multitudinous scattering of voices blended into an unfathomable mass which was neither unpleasant nor jarring, and the refreshingly cool wind blew the tip of the hat on Apsida’s lap back and forth with every gust. Amidst the calm of the warm, early evening Apsida was struck with a wave of drowsiness that made her eyelids feel heavy, and it was all that she could do to keep herself from drifting off. She remained like this for some time, her head occasionally rocking back and forth like her hat, and it was only when the sun had just begun to hide behind the palisade of trees surrounding the park, that Apsida caught a glimpse of the little red dress moving away from the play structure.

She followed once again, keeping her distance to avoid being noticed. Mr. Cabale and the girl ran back to the sandpit to look at their castle, which had lost one of its towers. The girl sat down to fix it, but Mr. Cabale, looking at the clock nearby, saw that it was already past five. The pair shared a brief discussion which Apsida could not hear, before waving hands and parting ways.

‘Should I go up and talk to her now?’

‘If not now then when? Hurry up.’

Apsida carefully approached the girl. She stopped half a metre away and crouched down to get closer to her height, then smiled ever so slightly (Apsida was not good at showing emotion in any manner) as she began;

‘Hello little girl, what’s your name?’

The girl eyed her suspiciously. Apsida felt like she had failed already.

‘I just want to be your friend...’

‘Who are you?’ the girl’s voice was young and sweet, but with a remnant trace of the squeakiness that accompanies middle childhood.

‘I’m Apsida. Nice to meet you.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘My mummy told me not to trust strange adults.’

‘Actually, I’m only 16 so in many senses I’m technically still a child.’

‘So what? You’ve got sticks in your hair. That makes you look really weird.’

Apsida rummaged through her hair with her left hand, and finding that there really were several twigs in there, began pulling them out. Once she felt she had found them all, she turned around, took a few steps, and began whispering to Cotyl.

‘What do I do now? I’ve made a bad first impression.’

‘That’s YOUR fault! What’re you doing with twigs in your hair?’

'I didn't notice them. You should've told me.'

'I'm NOT your HAIR STYLIST!! It's not up to me to choose what accessories you wear!!'

'That's not what I mean. As my partner you should be on the lookout for things I can't pay attention to...'

'Um, excuse me?'

The young girl's voice made a cold rush slither down Apsida and Cotyl's spines. Slowly Apsida turned just her head around to see the girl standing, arms behind her back, in an innocently inquisitive manner.

'Yes?'

'Is that a talking broom?'

'Why, yes it is a talking broom.'

The girl's eyes lit up.

'I want to play with him!!'

'Actually,' Cotyl began, 'I'm a very fragile broom and it's probably better if...'

'Of course you can,' Apsida said.

'Yay!'

'Wait what!?' Cotyl's bristles bristled, 'what're you trying to do Apsida!?''

'Come on, if we do this we can win her trust.'

'You mean if I do this! You know how much I hate kids...'

Apsida handed Cotyl over to the girl, now absolutely beaming with happiness, as she turned him around so that his bristles were pointing upwards (which for him was the wrong way). He heaved a heavy sigh.

'Hello, my name is Cotyl,' he said in a voice that rivalled Apsida's in chilled disinterest, 'what's your name?'

'I've never talked to a broom before!! Did you make him talk yourself!?' the girl completely ignored Cotyl, addressing herself only to Apsida.

'No, a professional Techno enchanted him.'

'Wow, you're so cool! What do you like talking about?' This time the girl's attention was all on Cotyl, and she stared at his bristles (technically his rear end) as she talked to him wide-eyed and bated-breathed.

'Oh, you know. This and that about world politics, the stock market, I like to discuss philosophy and art—Plato had many interesting ideas about the concept of self—slightly less pertinent in this day and age but still fascinating, I also enjoy engaging in light-hearted debate, sipping a cup of hot varnish while sitting around a table with my good friends Mr. Hammer and Miss Screwdriver. Come to think of it I still don't know what your...'

'I don't understand most of what you said, so it must be broom talk!' The girl placed Cotyl between her legs and began running around the sandpit, 'does he fly?'

'Technically yes,' said Apsida, following the girl with her eyes as she zoomed about, 'but you have to be an Icarus, which I'm not.'

'I know!' The girl suddenly screeched to a halt, then without any further explanation leaped out of the sandpit, Cotyl in hand, and ran away. Apsida stood in dumb silence for a while, but soon realising that the girl had just taken her partner and escaped, possibly forever, she ran after her. Apsida followed the sound of Cotyl's doleful pleas through the playground to a set of tall, yellow metal poles attached by another green pole which shouldered two wooden swings, where the girl was carefully edging herself onto the right swing where she had placed Cotyl.

'Help Apsida! She plans on using the swing as a thruster to take off into the air with me never to return!' Cotyl cried.

‘No, I want to pretend like I’m flying,’ the girl made sure that she was secure, ‘can you push me?’ Apsida made her way behind the girl, and ignoring Cotyl’s grumbling began pushing. Although her pushes were weak and her timing terrible, the swing slowly gained momentum, taking the girl higher and higher until each swoop lifted her as far as the swing would allow.

The squeals of delight from the girl as she flew higher and higher was enough to shut Cotyl up, and even Apsida, though only watching from the ground, felt an uncanny rush of childlike wonder just from seeing the expression on the young girl’s face, almost as if they were sharing the same experience.

She had never felt anything like this before. It was magical—the lingering moments at each end of the swing’s trajectory enveloped the girl in the air, the sight, the sensation of hovering at the altitude of the tree leaves, making her feel like she really was flying a metre and a half above the boring, grounded world that she had lived in all her life. The new and exciting possibilities that unfolded before her in this unexplored world were splendid, blinding and fierce. She was free—free in this world of air and clouds and birds, where every pain, fear, regret that clung onto her like lead on the surface was flung away and replaced with a sensation of unrestrained liberty. For a moment, if only in a world that was tantalisingly out of reach, she felt invincible.

‘That was incredible! That was incredible! That was INCREDIBLE!’ the girl shouted with her arms in the air, when she had had her fill of swinging and was back on the ground.

‘I’m glad you enjoyed it,’ smiled Apsida, ‘I enjoyed it too.’

‘What should we do next!?’

Apsida looked down at Cotyl, expecting some grunt of resistance, but to her surprise he only replied ‘dunno’, and nothing more.

‘I’m not sure either. You decide.’

The girl rubbed her chin thoughtfully for a moment, ‘how about we go to the see-saw then?’

‘Okay then,’ said Apsida, ‘let’s go.’

The three continued to play together—Apsida straggling on behind like an older sister who doesn’t quite understand what the younger one’s games are all about, Cotyl being dragged around, sat on and generally treated like a toy in the good humour of a loving father, and the little girl at the fore, eyes wide and arms swinging as she lead them all across the park, her mind still invigorated by the rapture she had experienced.

Apsida forgot about her mission, completely losing herself in the adventures of the young girl through all expanses of imagination, until the looming neon-orange rays of sunset cried out that the day was ending, and the girl realised that it was time to leave.

‘Well, it was really fun playing with you, but I have to go home now or mum’ll be angry. Thanks for playing with me, Cotyl,’ the girl hugged him (holding him the right way up this time) and then Apsida.

‘It was nice playing with you too,’ Apsida said in her usual soft and disinterested voice, ‘I really enjoyed it,’

The girl put her hands on her hips. ‘It doesn’t sound very convincing when you say it like that.’

‘Trust me,’ said Cotyl, ‘she’s not very good at expressing herself, but she means what she says.’

‘You were enjoying yourself too,’ said Apsida, ‘you always act mature and level-headed, but you like playing just as much as I do.’

‘W-well... It’s a wise man who knows when it’s okay to act like a child.’

‘You’re not a wise man, you’re a broom.’

The girl watched the pair decline into a heated argument, with Apsida’s cold, rational retorts only fuelling Cotyl’s anger.

‘It’s really funny watching you two,’ she chuckled.

‘Huh?’ Cotyl stopped shouting, ‘why?’

‘You’re so... close, and all. Even when you’re fighting I can tell how close you are... It must be great

to have someone you care about always by your side. I'm jealous.'

'What about Mr. Cabale?' Apsida paused for a second when she realised Cotyl was glaring at her, 'oh... I mean Richard? Isn't he someone you care about?'

The girl's face lit up. 'You're right! So Richard and I are like you and Cotyl?'

'Yes, you are.'

'That's grand!' the girl grinned the sort of flawless grin that only children are capable of, then with a last wave and goodbye ran off.

'WAIT!!' Cotyl shouted, 'what's your name?'

Apsida realised that she had been enjoying herself so much that she had completely forgotten she had come here to find out the girl's name.

'Saya Procopius!' the young girl yelled back, and then waving for one last time darted off into the distance.

'Saya Procopius... Well, we got the name, let's head back.'

'Procopius...'

'Yeah, that's right.'

'There was an Icarus in my class back in magic school, whose last name was Procopius... Cotyl, you don't think..?'

'An Icarus? yeah, it's entirely possible. It only takes six generations for intrinsic magic ability to go below critical value, after all.'

'So the reason she was so obsessed with you..?'

'Yeah, could be.'

Apsida continued to stare through the looming darkness of the evening in the direction that Saya had gone, even though she had long disappeared. Her face took on a pensive look, which was accentuated by the loneliness of the twilight playground and the way that the wind played with the brim of her hat.

'Whats wrong, Apsida?' Cotyl asked.

'If Saya felt so close to Mr. Cabale, why did she suddenly disappear?'

Cotyl pondered the thought for a moment.

'I dunno. Maybe her family had to move and she didn't have time to say goodbye.'

'That's sad. It seems like she really liked Mr. Cabale.'

'Yeah, maybe she really is "the one who got away" as that guy seems to think she is.'

Apsida's face turned from being pensive to being ever so slightly excited.

'If she's still alive, maybe she remembers Mr. Cabale? We could find out what happened and reunite them!'

'Yeah... ' Cotyl's voice trailed off, '... we'll find out what happened first.'

'Okay,' Apsida turned around and began walking, 'let's go.'

- III -

It was late evening, with the sun taking its last gasp of breath above the horizon when Mr. Cabale was woken up by the sound of a soft knock and the door creaking open. He had been asleep, and the close-curtained room was mostly shrouded in darkness. Slowly the barely-visible silhouette of Apsida slunk into the room, placing Cotyl against the side of the chair in front of the bed before sitting down.

They remained in silence for a while, Mr. Cabale taking the time to fully wake up. Finally he began through wispy breaths:

'Did you find her?'

'Yes.' Apsida's voice was barely audible. She did not attempt to continue.

'What was her name?'

'Saya Procopius.'

'I feel like it rings a bell, but at the same time, I feel like this is the first time I've heard it... Can you tell me more?'

'She was a bright, happy girl... with blonde hair and lightly tanned skin... She was full of energy, and had the most beautiful smile...'

The pair remained in silence. Finally the man took a deep breath:

'You're surprisingly easy to read at times, Miss Apsida. I can tell that you looked her up... and did not like what you found.'

Apsida remained silent.

'She's dead isn't she?'

Apsida nodded.

'Don't be so sad. I was fully aware that might be the case, and I was ready... One way or another I had never planned on meeting her...' the old man paused to let out another coughing fit, 'please, tell me more about her. Is she still in this city? What job did she have? What were her hobbies? Her family life?'

'She... She was... She was...'

The man looked curiously at Apsida.

'There is something else... Something you're not telling me... That you don't want to tell me. Am I right?'

'I... No...'

'It's no use hiding it, Miss Apsida... You're too honest.'

'Some things...' Apsida began, 'there are some things you're better off not knowing, because they will break the dream for you...'

'Even with your warning, curiosity will *cough* get the better of me... That is what us humans do. If you don't tell me, I will *cough* find out another way. Please, Miss Apsida, I want to *cough* hear it from you...'

'But...'

'Look at me. Even if I *cough* regret knowing... I will not... regret knowing *cough* for long...'

Cotyl was about to say something, but the tightened grip of Apsida's hand on his handle stopped him.

'Saya Procopius...' she began, 'died in the summer of 1952, one Sunday afternoon during her school holidays. She was hit by a car while crossing a road, near a local park...'

The room fell into silence. The birds from earlier that day had gone, and only the harsh ticking of the grandfather clock in the hallway, echoing into the room like the dogging footsteps of a relentless stalker reminded them that time was still moving forward.

'I'm free,' the man finally said after a long time, 'I'm *cough* free. All this time I thought it was *cough* my fault that I *cough* will die alone... But it's not... It was *cough* an unfortunate coincidence which *cough* ruined my life. Fate and chance *cough* ruined my ideal.'

The man spoke his next words in a harsh, hideous wheeze, almost like the whimpering of a young child:

'My happiness was never *cough* anything but an unobtainable dream.'

The man fell into another coughing fit, this time doubling over on the right side of the bed, where he had towels to mop up the blood that was now trickling out of his mouth. When the coughing finally subsided he lay back down on the bed, and staring straight up at the ceiling, continued;

'May I ask just one last favour of you, Miss Apsida..? Could you... stay here tonight? I... You just *cough* seem so much like the granddaughter I wish I could've had... I know it's selfish, and idealistic, and really... just a lousy way to *cough* make myself feel better, but that is the way that I have lived for all my life—would you... be willing to *cough* accompany me just this one last time?'

Apsida nodded slowly, her facial features invisible in the darkness.

- IV -

Apsida walked down the paved stones lined by tousled bushes on either side, and onto the same driveway she had been on the day before. It was early morning and the air was still, with a crisp, almost biting tanginess that comes from the lingering remnants of the preceding hours of darkness. Apsida fixed her large witch's hat, and gave one last look at the dusty, old-fashioned house where she had spent the night, before continuing onto the street.

'Do you think I should have talked more?' she said.

'No,' Cotyl replied, 'he seemed pretty weak, and he probably wouldn't've had the strength to listen anyway.'

'But he did ask me to be with him, because he wanted to imagine what having a granddaughter would have been like. Wouldn't a granddaughter talk instead of reading a book?'

'He was the one who told you to read so you wouldn't be bored. Plus you already know that just someone's presence is enough to make some people feel better—that's the whole reason why you stayed with him, right?'

The pair continued on in silence for a while, taking in the scenery of the early morning suburbs, which was deserted save for themselves.

'Did you notice..?' asked Apsida quietly, 'when he died?'

'No. As far as I know he could've died anywhere between when he had that soup for dinner and when you said good morning to him and he didn't respond.'

'Wasn't there anything else I could do?'

'Hey, he hired you to do something. You did it, it didn't give him the result he wanted, but you and he were fully aware of the possibility of that happening beforehand—and it's not because you're a Sputnik. There are some things people can only, or could only do for themselves.'

Apsida fell silent again, but she could not keep quiet for long.

'Do you think he was happy?'

'Honestly, I dunno. But if he could've seen the way the maid broke down in tears, he would've at least felt something akin to happiness. I thought she was incapable of that kind of emotion, but I guess she's still human.'

'How would you understand what makes humans humans?' asked Apsida, 'you're a broom.'

'Hey! I'm an intelligent being capable of impartially observing your species and what you do because I'm free of all the nitpicking and sappy emotions that drag you all down!'

'Well if you're free of nitpicking, you won't mind if we go to the library to find the book I was reading—I didn't think I should ask to borrow it in that situation, and I'm curious about how it ends.'

'You really think this is a time to be reading books?'

'Well, would you rather go see a movie?'

'Wha? You-', Cotyl was about to respond, but when he saw the expression on Apsida's face he stopped, and then with a much gentler tone continued, '...Yeah, a movie sounds good. How about a comedy? I think there was a decent-looking one being advertised on billboards right now. We can go to the library after that if you want.'

'Okay,' said Apsida, 'let's go.'