

The air smelled of mint and pine. A breeze wrought by neither machine nor nature drifted through the Magus Library, bringing this scent to the twitching nose of Tali, a leopard sorceress clad in robes dyed a royal violet. She was a proud yet introverted figure and, lost in thought, her lack of speaking made her seem almost difficult to approach. Still, those who knew her would say that it would be foolish to assume her unfriendly.

Tali the magus was also Tali the magician--and thinking back to earlier that day, when she had accidentally let herself cast a light spell during her theatrics, she couldn't help her quiet laughing. Quiet though it was, it drew the attention of the man across from her in the Loom, a mouse who beforehand remained in his own little world as she did.

This mouse, Sven Nelhal, wore loose hooded robes like hers, but these were a dark brown to her violet, and were littered with various pockets, each filled with little pouches of dusts and unknown things. His features were sharp, but his voice was even and gentle. His hood was down and his silvery hair, wound into a perm, was readily visible.

"What's so funny?" Sven asked. He wasn't sure if he had come off as rude, but he still knew that Tali wouldn't take it that way even if he did. Her striking turquoise eyes lit up attentively.

"I've just been thinking a bit," replied Tali. The leopardess closed the book she hadn't even begun reading and stretched. "Sometimes it's hard sorting out the real magic, what I'm used to, with the old parlor stuff I do every day. I'm thankful nothing has suggested that my mistakes have been noticed yet." A nonchalant wave of her hand served both as punctuation and as the conduit through which the book returned to its shelf of its own accord. The bookshelf of the Loom lining the curved walls embraced its oft-used child without qualm.

In the city Tali lived in, there were two kinds of people: the Magfolk and the Keenfolk. The Magfolk were less common, but were also much, much larger and taller. The Keenfolk were their antithesis--tiny people with uncanny numbers. Both could be magi, both were normal people, and yet Tali found herself strangely drawn to the Keenfolk. As such, she spent much of her time as one of them with a simple shrinking spell she had all but mastered.

In this city was stationed the Loom, the Magus Library, where she also worked as a bookkeeper. Non-magi would have no use of the Loom, so it didn't matter that it was made for Keenfolk, but Tali preferred it that way nonetheless.

"Uh huh. Still, even if someone noticed, it's not as if magic is unimpressive. Quite the opposite, as I'm sure anybody would attest to...." The telephone on the main desk behind Tali jittered and begged for her attention, but she did not answer. Her friend was here, so as far as she was concerned her job was over. Nobody ever called the Magus Library anyway, nobody but recordings and ads.

"Of course--if you consider cheating to be impressive. Would that I'd do it all legitimately, you know." To Tali, using true magic during her theatrics was all but taboo. She'd done it before, certainly, and continued to do so by accident.

"True." The mouse couldn't bring himself to debate any further. "Have you considered finding other work if it's so difficult?"

"Nothing is quite the same. People get so excited about the same few things I do a bit differently every time they visit. It's almost...funny. Besides, it's fun too. Not many folks can say they get paid for having fun." Tali leaned forward, one elbow upon the desk before her. "And it's not that it's all that difficult. It's simply a bit of a challenge to juggle two sides of one coin and land on the right face every time. I don't mind a challenge."

"Which I respect." As if in realization, he paused. "And you're a librarian here too. I tend to forget that."

Sven took that moment to look again around the Loom, the one building that served as the go-to for magi resources. Domed in shape for ease of access, everything a caster could want or need was found here. Most prominent was its impressive collection of tomes and scrolls, though various reagents for the more exotic spells were also kept in storage.

Neither of the two bothered to mess with reagents other than simple things such as powders and orbs, however. Sven refused to find them anything but suspicious and risky, let alone useful, but Tali was of such innate prowess that she could cast powerful magic without their consumption. That skill was something she found far too easy to boast about for her liking. Still, they were both grateful they lived with such easy access to whatever they needed in regards to their special talents.

"Indeed. It's a quaint job, and such a good way to relax at the end of the day." Though it was perfectly suiting for a sorceress of her knowledge to make sure the materials remained where they belong, Tali was prudent in not dedicating all of her free time studying magery.

After all, librarian was only a part-time job; magician was what everybody knew her to be. "Everybody", naturally, being her inch-high audience that she loved to generously cater to.

"Well, it's about time I went home. Want to walk with me?" Sven stood up and put all things he borrowed from the Loom back in their respective proper places.

"No... thank you though. I think I'll be staying this size for the rest of today. I do enjoy these conversations, though. Fair to expect you tomorrow?"

"Of course. I look forward to tomorrow's show as well!" Sven said warmly. The grey form packed his things and left Tali's presence with the light clinking of door chimes. Shortly after, loud thuds boomed in the distance for a few moments, growing softer as they departed.

Sven was a person that Tali had realized she took for granted. They had been friends ever since her entry to Ethro University, an esteemed school for magi, and both were non-Keenfolk living in a quaint Keenfolk town. Sven opted his time outside the company of Keenfolk, preferring to live in his normal home miles away--that distance being a good fraction at his normal height--but still spent any of his

other spare moments with her, especially when visiting her routines at the theater.

Tali's mind drifted a little. Today had reminded her that magic was inherently an ancient and chaotic force. It had taken all of her willpower to prevent what could have been a raging fire by dampening it into little entertaining sparks--they added flair at the time, and nobody had noticed that it was real magic, certainly, but there was always the danger. However, that 'danger' was arguably part of the reason Tali loved her job so much. After all, magic was almost never harmful unless intended; chaotic at times, but not strictly harmful. On the other hand, it still muddled her clear conscience to accidentally intertwine the two things.

"Tricks and magic... obviously so different, but why so similar?" Tali muttered, folding her ears back ever so slightly. The leopardess found her eyes shifting lazily as she lay back in her chair.

It was then that a voice caught her deft ears. It drew her to the source, even in spite of her tire. The bronze chain that linked a grimoire with the belt of her robes clinked nonchalantly as she moved. As she came closer, the voice's familiarity grew clear.

On one desk in the far end of the Loom, two men and a woman sat in a triad. Two were a couple, each an aged, gold-furred canine. The third was the voice she had heard before, coming from a brown ferret: her manager. As far as professionalism went, she'd never seen him in such a comparatively informal state. And beyond that, she had no idea why he would be here.

"...And you know, the thing that makes the idea of necromancy scary is what makes the thing partially alive. How would you get rid of that anyway?"

"It is all theory, mind you," replied the male dog. "As far as anybody knows that's all myth--and if it wasn't, the apocalypse would have happened long ago. Of course, my stake on the matter is that the magic itself would serve as a sort of brain."

"Yes, interesting." It was then that Tali made her presence known via a light cough. He turned over his seat to find its source. "Tali? Fancy meeting you here, eh?"

"I could say the same, sir. Are... you a magus?" At this, the ferret stifled a laugh and waved a hand.

"Oh, heavens no. I'm just having a bit of a meeting with Mr. and Ms. Darry here."

Sean Darry? What is the wealthiest entertainer in the world doing here? Tali thought in a panic.

"Mr. Darry?" she then asked without breath.

"Heh, indeed," said the dog. "You must be the pretty face Warren's been telling me all about. He won't shut up about you." Tali felt a warmth upon her cheeks; it was not unlikely that Warren had used the exact words 'pretty face'. Her modest beauty was, after all, part of the reason she had been hired so readily all those years ago. She had started out her career as a mere assistant, and on more than one

occasion post-show she had found herself turning down would-be suitors.

"We're good friends, Tali," Warren added. Tali felt impressed; there must have been some kind of honor in being friends with such a celebrity.

Tali could not keep herself any longer. "Mr. Darry, I've always been really inspired by you. I know you don't perform anymore, but really, I've idolized you for years!"

"And that makes me proud," Darry responded in a manner that could only be described as fatherly. Mysteriously, he did not state why. "All's well, it's good to see nonetheless. It is time for us to leave. Regards, Warren; lovely meeting you, Tali." With practiced promptness, Darry uncrossed his legs and stood straight, taking his wife by the hand. Warren waited until the two disappeared from sight to speak.

"You know who that is, then?" he asked.

"Of course. He was the reason I came to you," Tali replied with a nod.

Warren hummed. "Well then, you'll be excited to hear this. He's interested in a potential business pairing. He's waiting to see how you do in person."

Tali's heart stopped. Did she hear that correctly? Of course, there was no way she hadn't, and she knew that. It would be excellent news if she wasn't so terrified.

"When is... this going to happen?" she asked with a subtle whimper. A bump of her book against her waist startled her momentarily, but she ignored it.

"We've scheduled to tomorrow's performance. Isn't that great?" Tali felt she may have hidden her disdain too well, for Warren was nothing short of oblivious to it. "Also," his voice hushed to an anticipatory whisper, "He's proud because of how well you've been doing lately. He thinks you might take his place!"

"That was close," Tali wiped her brow free of nonexistent sweat. "For a moment I thought I might have respite." The book at her belt beat once or twice more on its own, forcing a glare from Tali.

"Well there's no need for sarcasm... besides, what could go wrong?" He paused, as if realizing some potential irony. "You'll do fine, don't let it concern you. I'll be heading home on account of the lateness. And you?"

"Oh no, sir. I still have another hour." She now pressed a hand against the book.

"Don't be too tired to come tomorrow. I need you." Warren flashed a wink and proceeded through the doors leading out. Unlike Sven's leave, there were no thunderous sounds after; such reminded Tali of just how often she opted to stay small. So often, she wasn't sure how many people knew her true size at

all.

Certainly, Sven was the only one...

The thrashing of her book suddenly intensified as it bumped repeatedly against her hip. Muffled grunts could be heard from its pages. With a sigh, Tali unlinked the chain binding it to her and set it down upon the closest table. She gently stroked the spine, feeling the indentations caused by a single word--Ethro--bump her fingers. The shaking ceased. Then did she undo the buckle locking it cover to cover, only to watch it fly from her grip in some rage.

"Oh yeah, that's some quality treatment right there," its words were. "And you're a librarian! Sometimes I wonder why I still hang out with you."

Tali rolled her eyes. "And sometimes I wonder why I animated you..."

"Worry not, Tali, I won't let you forget; you had to show you could make your own spells in order to graduate Ethro University as a top percentage student, and I... was the result."

"I didn't mean it literally, Tom." In spite of herself, Tali couldn't help but smile.

"You don't know literal."

"Oh, your life is so bad. Quit flapping your pages; besides, if had I let you say whatever's on your mind then I would be in more trouble than it is to keep you shut. You came with the lock anyway." The book quieted and settled to a hover just above the table. Tali sat back down. "What were you flailing about, anyway? Any longer and I'd have to excuse myself before he thought me mad."

"You were freaking out more than I was! It's not like you're bad at what you do. That's why Darry or whatever came by, isn't it?" At that, Tali felt the smile return; it wasn't every day she received compliments from her companion.

"And... I still can't get over that you aren't putting your magic to use. I'm living proof that you have talent, so why aren't you going to make the life you gave me worth something? Especially when you complain about how hard your job is." Again, Tali returned to a frown.

"You're not helping." Tali sighed, crossed her arms in front of her on the table, and buried her face in them. "I get mixed up every now and then, you know? What if something went wrong tomorrow of all days? It would be simply terrible. And... really, Tom, I love magic, it's just a matter of one or the other when it comes down to jobs. At least here," Tali motioned all around with a twirl of her wrist, "I get as close to it as possible."

"Well," Tom started again, "Why not both?"

Tali scoffed. "Psh. As if mixing spells and tricks together hasn't been thought of before." Just then, she

stopped and thought for but a moment. "...Has it?"

"How should I know? But the fact that most magi--and I would know--are damned if not tunnel-visioned leads me to say: probably not." Tali sat straight now, clearly in deeper thought.

"I don't know. It's not a risk I'm willing to take right now." Tom had nothing to say in return as the leopardess looked at the clock hung behind her. "Oh, it's late. Let me just clean up a bit and we can go."

"Wonderful, back to lock and chain with me. I am silenced yet again," the book yelled dramatically. Tali grunted in response as she sorted the books splayed over the various desks of the Loom. "Not that I have a problem with being attached to your waist, of course. Why would I? Just try not to run too fast home, you know. The bumping ruins it."

Tali found it too easy to forget how childish Tom could be; that said, at least it wasn't when he was trying to be helpful.

"...Shut up and let's go."

The next morning, Tali had found difficulty in three stages: getting up, dressed, and leaving the house. She was so hesitant to do all three, and it was to little wonder given the circumstances; she suspected she'd hardly slept at all. Still, she managed, and it was scant hours before she found herself upon the sidewalk, Sven at her side, as she made her way to the auditorium.

"Warren didn't even give you a day's notice? That doesn't sound very fair," said Sven. Though Tali may have been a little biased, she saw her friend as a true mediator--and a correct one. Even before yesterday's proposal, Tali hadn't been terribly fond of her manager. He seemed selfish, lecherous, and a little sleazy; all three of these aspects seeming to coincide with just why, aside from her talents, he had hired her.

"I know!" Tali replied with a sigh. "But there's nothing to be done except go through with it. If all goes well, it will be amazing for business."

"You don't care for business much." The mouse eyed her warily.

"No, I simply like seeing the little ones' faces. They're like little sconces, lighting up and growing brighter with every act. It's quite entertaining, really."

"I have been meaning to ask about that." Somehow, he knew his question was greatly anticipated, and he looked around twice just in case they were overheard. "What draws you so much to the Keenfolk? They're hardly special. I mean, I don't hate them, but you spend half your time as one of them."

Though Tali wanted to go into detail about how complex her feelings were, they weren't. There was no

real story behind the Keenfolk; for as long as she and anybody she knew remembered, they were just... there. And nobody had any qualms with that. As such, she settled with a simpler answer.

"To be honest, they're cute. Homunculi of me and you running around, doing their own little things. They drive me a tad curious as well."

"Hm." Sven found the answer to his question: he would never quite understand her. "Well, I've thought a bit since yesterday, to change the subject. You graduated from Ethro University, and yet you're not, say, a professional magus? You could easily be a professor at Ethro, or better, a headmistress." Even with the last, Sven talked with an even, unenthusiastic tone.

Tali gripped her book tightly, as it bounced around once again as if to attempt saying "I told you so!" over and over. Ethro University was an esteemed school, albeit one strictly for those with skill in the magical arts. Tali liked to think that Sven's monotonous demeanor was part of the reason he got in.

Tali deflected Sven's question with a shrug, refusing to discuss it any further. A scapegoat appeared to her in the form of her destination: the theater. It was early, so there were few out and about, but she needed more time to prepare and less to continue talking about what she could do.

"Well, we're here. Thanks for walking me, Sven. I'll do my best."

"Please do. You'll be fine; just take it easy." The two took their separate paths as the gold-furred cat made her way backstage.

Tali changed her attire from robes to more suiting clothing: a leotard hidden mostly by a dark cloak, revealing most of one of her legs while the other remained draped. It was the same outfit she had worn as an assistant, but she had found it to make her more identifiable. She disdained wearing it, though--there was little Tali hated quite as much as revealing dress. Still, it was all part of her persona... and she couldn't really refuse if Warren thought it would work well.

It was a few hours more before Tali's anticipation truly began to loom. At noon on the hour, she would test her mettle against the judgment of Darry, one of the most famous entertainers alive. For a budding young one like herself, it was no easy task to remain calm in the face of such a daunting deadline--especially not for one so quiet as Tali. She kept only the tightest weave of people she would talk to; what chance did she have to impress a crowd and a celebrity?

In hurried thoughts, Tali unlocked Tom from her side and held him with both hands, reading the notes she had jotted down earlier within his pages.

"For my first act, I plan to--" Tom began, reading aloud what she had written.

"Knock it off, Tom," interrupted Tali sternly. "I need your advice. I'm up in half an hour and... oh, I don't know what will happen."

"You'll ace it, is what will happen. You'll see. I've never seen you so antsy about things like these; I thought you didn't care much for what the Keenfolk thought of you."

"This is too different. Darry is watching..." she said nervously, her tone a far cry from what calculation or calmness she may have otherwise spoken with.

"Oh, Darry... that doesn't change much. You won't be needing these notes anyway." Tom Ethro promptly shut his pages and refused to reopen. Not even to her prying claws did he release.

"You can be so frustrating sometimes!" The tome said nothing in return. It was like talking to a rock--or perhaps a book. Now Tali was uncertain which mood of his she liked less; the one where he refused to talk or the one where he talked too much.

There was nothing the unnerved cat could do but wait. She had her performance planned out and she felt as ready as she was capable of being; she just hoped she would not let her magic slip by again. Nonsense, she thought. As long as I stay calm, I have complete control over it.

The time had at last come. Tali locked Tom back to her belt where he couldn't cause trouble and poked her head through the curtains. She noted the audience: dozens of people this time, perhaps more than the last--and in the back, the blurry shape that could only be Darry awaited patiently. She took a deep breath, reassured herself mentally one last time, and walked out. The crowd fell to silence and ceased their rumbling conversations. Tali introduced herself with a shout of enthusiasm and proceeded with her acts.

She began modestly with things she had done before. As time went on, however, her performance did not seem to improve as much as she had hoped. Surely the number of times she was told that she would impress was beginning to wear away at such an ability. Confidence remained stagnant within Tali; though each act was arguably better than the last, from illusions to causing tables to disappear beneath cloth, nothing was making her feel any better. She caught Sven in the sea of people once, clapping and smiling, but not even that ascertained her mental victory.

Though her thoughts were vague due to her focus, a few came up regarding the loose sense of wanting to be bigger than her crowd, to get above her nerve—she could do this, she could. ...Could she?

However, as she warmed herself to wrap up her final tricks, something strange began to happen. As she feared may occur during what seemed so long ago, Tali felt a tingle in her stomach. Such was the sign of some magic. It spread throughout her body, invisibly imbuing her veins and bones. The audience was completely oblivious to what was happening for the moment, but the leopardess knew that obliviousness would not last long as she realized what the magic was doing to her.

She had accidentally undone her shrinking spell.

Slowly, the process that kept her inconspicuous began to reverse. At first the changes were unnoticeable, but before long Tali had already regrown a whole foot of her normal height. Her clothes

did not feel tight for they were also affected by the spell, but her terrified sense of claustrophobia was unmatched. One more moment, another two feet--and by this time, everybody in the auditorium began understanding that something was happening to their favorite magician. As she grew bigger, they grew fearful. Like trickling water, they hesitantly began to flee the auditorium entirely; even Darry and Sven.

"Oh God, oh God," Tali chanted. It wasn't long before the ceiling met the brush of her fur atop her head. Tali's ears splayed, she folded her arms and crouched, but her attempt to make herself feel smaller was in vain. Still the spell refused to lock, and with a quick burst of growth the wooden frame above gave way with little trouble.

Tali was treated to a view of the city around and shortly she found the crowd that was now outside. They had gathered around the building in behold of her true stature and might, in awe of the power that clearly belonged to a magus. At her height and state of mind, the squeaking noises they made held no significance--the heart-pounding in her ears was all she could hear, or wanted to. The redness she felt in her face burned hotter than any flame.

A single leg remained inside the building while she was forced to step out with the other. The theater remained just the size to contain the lower half of one of her legs, but no more. She refused to step out for two reasons: her body was locked out of sheer shock, and she did not want to risk further destruction even if she could move. She simply wanted to run away and hide until the chaos died, to just never attempt the stage again...

At last, her growth halted. But as if the situation could not get any worse, more magic: blazing missiles erupted from the confines of her cloak, soaring to the sky like angry hornets before erupting with sound-shattering cracks. Gouts of flame fell slowly from where the fireworks exploded, dissipating into dazzling sparkles of various color.

Tali's mouth agape, she could only watch.

The audience still did not move. Tali wondered, with her hastened thoughts, why. She was angry at what had caused this to happen, so confused as to why, and most of all, more scared than she had ever been. It was one thing to be embarrassed in front of a crowd, but to her, the very idea of losing so much control over her own magic was disconcerting and frightening.

Tali did not wait for an answer for their stillness; now that she had stopped growing, Tali could reapply her shrinking spell. It took a few moments for her to regain composure. A whispered incantation, a light whip of wind, and her body was forced downward and inward at a slow pace, and she stepped her other leg back inside as she did so. All faces watched as the giantess was pressed back down into the ruined auditorium, disappearing entirely from their sights.

"I can't believe this," Tali whispered to nobody in particular. The seats had been wrecked and the stage had collapsed where she had stood. She sat down on the edge of an imprint in the stage caused by one of her paws, heart heavy with a weight like lead. Lead and guilt and confusion.

Moments later she found herself running home via an alternate exit, away from the theater and away from prying eyes.

The next day, Tali had worked up the courage to speak with her manager about what had happened. Surely, he would be both appalled and furious; she might even be fired. Not because of the mess--magic could undo all of it with a little time--but because of the sheer surprise and fear she had no doubt instilled within everybody.

"Sir, I am so sorry about yesterday," she said to Warren outside the remains of the theater, once again her smaller size. "I can clean up and fix everything, just please forgive me."

Silence reigned for what seemed like hours. Warren's brow furrowed, but from what cause, Tali could not figure. She just hoped it wasn't out of disbelief to her claim of repairing the theater.

"Forgive?" Tali's heart struck an odd chord. "Natali-freaking-DeCoryza," Warren sounded almost breathless in his spout of Tali's full name. Tali saw it more as butchery than much else, but still she braced herself.

"That was amazing! I had no idea you could grow, the crowd loved it more than anything, and Darry is absolutely doing the partnership!"

"What?!" Tali found herself nearly shouting. That simply did not make sense; was it really that impressive? To her, it had been the epitome of terror, and she wondered how everybody else didn't feel the same.

"Yeah. We were wondering where you went afterward. He has a special opportunity for you to become what he calls a 'stage-mage', so you can incorporate that awesome stuff you did into your routine."

Tali experienced the oddest mix of joy and sickness. She held one hand to her stomach, but there was no nausea to prevent. No, there was just excitement and confusion... and all of a sudden she knew who she ought to have a word with.

"I... I believe I need a moment. I will talk to you later today." Warren nodded and let her off.

Tali made her way to the Loom in a hurry. As soon as she arrived, she settled to the counter where she normally worked, a black telephone inches by her elbow. Once again she released Tom from his binds. He seemed quite eager to speak again.

"And who told you what?" Tom bragged.

"No, seriously, you were right," Tali said, conceding as her eyes remained fixed on the open book in front of her. "This is incredible! Now I can really do what you and Sven suggested. But what is strange is

the fact that my magic went so awry when I was so calm. How does that figure?" Tali took a seat and rubbed her forehead with one hand.

"Isn't that, like, the first thing about magic? Don't try and make sense out of it?"

"It is strange, you must admit. Magic does not simply act without source." There was a moment of quiet, wherein she wondered if Tom had been listening.

"Yes," Tom started. "Magic doesn't, and it didn't." Tali immediately understood.

"You did that...? But why? Surely you didn't expect that outcome," said Tali.

"Ah, but I did! You can thank me whenever you like." The leopardess felt an extreme concoction of joy and rage, and they briefly battled to determine which way Tali would react.

However, she knew that the future looked brighter thanks to Tom--even if whether he knew what he was talking about was somewhat difficult for her to credit.

After a moment, Tom found himself being snatched out of the air and pressed against the chest of his larger companion, just underneath her breasts. Even he was at a loss for words, and the ink upon his pages snagged in the air with surprise.

"Thank you," Tali said sweetly. "Sometimes I can understand why I animated you, even if it means putting up with the rest. But fireworks? Really?" A sharp chuckle escaped the confines of Tom, but still, it did not take long for the grimoire to realize where he was.

"Oh Tali, you're too kind," said Tom. "I think this is how you should thank me from now on." Tali didn't recoil and push him away as he expected. After a few moments, it was just the opposite: she pressed him harder. The experience became a little bittersweet for the book she now squeezed.

"For all the words written on you, you're a moron and a lecher, Tom... but the strangest thing is that I wouldn't have it any other way. Perhaps it's because you're a book." Perhaps, indeed, for even though she had animated him, such a spell did not bestow upon him true senses. "And perhaps it's also because you're a good friend." After a few moments, she let him go and watched as he held aloft.

"Aww, you're gonna make my ink wet," he said, his tone a mix of genuineness and heavy sarcasm, as if he couldn't decide which way to respond. And yet, Tali could swear she saw a tiny dribble of black just at the bottom of one of his closed pages.

Before Tali could say anything, he spoke again, "I shall no longer take you for some conjuror of cheap tricks, as you had made yourself out to be. You're going to prove to everybody that you're much more."