

It's a pretty ordinary day for the merchant bird: while it is true that the affluence is quite low at the store, the few daily customers are more than enough to keep their business going, and this suits them. It keeps a relative quietness here, sometimes interrupted by the coming of a customer, and therefore a problem to solve. The good thing is, Tobias loves solving problems. A drizzle pours outside of the store, hitting the asphalt with a sweet sound, accompanying the characteristic flavor of such weather...

Something they became accustomed since decades. So unlike any smell whence they came. Tobias briefly halts their newspaper's reading, and looks at the storefront, the sole rampart which separates them from the outside.

"Petrichor. Sign of a tranquil day."

They appreciate those kind of relaxing days. That's a thing they've only known here, in the mortals' realm.

"For sure, not something I could have known below..."

The magpie will not get the opportunity to resume their lecture, though: the doorbell is ringing. A customer enters in the store. They put the newspaper on a table near, lifts up from the armchair and puts their best smile on.

The mechanism is set on motion, once again. Tobias approaches the desk, on a calm and confident step, keeping an eye on the freshly arrived person.

"Hello and welcome! What brings you here today, dear customer?"

She stays silent, still peeking and browsing this curious place, and its surroundings.

Tobias has to concede that naming their store *The Devil's Bargain* makes its place selective by design, letting the curious mind in and keeping the obtuse ones out.

The bird decides to wait a little longer, preferring to not bother her, moving quietly behind the counter then leaning on it, holding their head on their hands, eyes-sweeping their own place, full of thoughts, doing their best to not focus on her face.

She comes finally to the counter, in front of Tobias. The magpie straighten up quietly, then initiate the conversation anew.

"So, dear lady, shall you have the kindness to explain why you came in my place?"

"I... want to solve some problem."

She seems worried and quite anxious, and is still looking for something. They tries their best to not shook her, avoiding eye contact.

"Like all the ones who preceded you before, and all those will follow after you. After all, the store's renown comes greatly to my ability to solve the others' problems. You can talk about it here, you don't have to worry."

"I have... Difficulties when it comes to join groups, I mean, in a social scale... I suck at talking with people, that's that."

"Well, you're talking with me at the moment, and quite normally, but I suppose said problem is a bit deeper than that. Please, explain further."

"It's like that I encounter difficulties to, let's say, start a conversation. Showing that, I am a person with hobbies and activities... A life outside of my work, in fact. I can't tell why, but I can't do that properly."

"And so, you've said to yourself that I probably have an adapted medium which may, in a short amount of time, solve that problem as easy as snapping with fingers. Is that it?"

"Well... yes."

The customer looks embarrassed, avoiding the magpie's warm smile.

"You know, there's nothing wrong about it. We're living on a world going faster and faster everyday, and people are at a point they search the simplest and fastest option to get out of their struggles. It is, in its way, normal: We mostly follow the flow, and, it happens that we struggle to

keep up the pace, just like you're encountering right now. It may make us anxious sometimes, and give us a mental block, when we're trying to get out of it."

They briefly pauses, putting their thoughts in order, then resumes.

"Well... You see, in order to take its substance and going beyond the small talk, a chat needs topics. It is a bit like a lock box: if you leave it empty, there will be, theoretically, nothing to say, even if some sharp tongue are able to spread the box's emptiness and make it a topic in itself. But that's not the most important here. What do you need here, is the key to open it."

The explanation ended, the customer shows now a pinch of curiosity about it.

"A... Key, you say?"

"Yup! I'll show you that, just wait a little bit."

Out of the counter, the bird pulls a wooden lock box with an iron lock. In its front is engraved, on a thick metallic frame, a pentagram. Except that detail, it looks very plain. They also puts, near to the box, a key.

"Here is a lock box. Let's say, in that case, it may represent everything about you. Of course, it's metaphoric, don't take it literally."

"And this... Is the key which opens it?"

"Maybe. As I've said, the most difficult part is to open the box. In that case, it's simple, the key is near, like some coincidence, a twist of fate, an opportunity. Let's represent that with a practical example: What's the little thing that makes you happy each morning?"

"Ehm, Let's say, taking my time while I'm sipping my first coffee, with one sugar, listening to the radio and looking outside of my window."

Tobias giggles lightly.

"You see? This is a key. I gave you a simple question which brings them to chatting and goes out of said small talk. Maybe it's not what do you want to talk at first, but it gives to you an opportunity to open the box, in our case."

Like an incentive to speak up, they slides the key, just in front of her.

Tobias strike a pose like they usually does, putting the lock box in evidence without pointing it, then puts one of their hands on it.

"Go ahead, open it. You have my permission."

She takes the key, bringing it to the lock, inserting it, then slowly turns, clockwise.

The box unlocks, and the magpie calmly opens it, revealing what's inside.

"What do you see?"

The young woman tries to identify the box contents, but, surprisingly...

"Is that... Empty? Oh wait, no... There's another box?"

"Indeed. A topic may brings to another topic, just like a box opening to another box. Sometimes, the chain ends to an empty box, unless it eventually contains something you expect, like a hobby or a personal thing you want to highlight. You may open the box inside, if you want to go further."

It's in the quietness of the store that she opens the other box. She finds two things: a figurine, and a metallic seal. The bird takes a peek towards the box in the box.

"So, tell me... You do paper role-playing games?"

She seems a bit surprised, as much as the content of the box as the merchant's question. She calms a bit then answer.

"Yes. It is one of my favorite pastime, or at least, was. I've got a group of friends with which I've done game sessions in a regular basis. That was some good times."

"Then something happened, isn't it?"

"Weariness, boredom, unless it was just the lack of motivation of my friends. They've slowly stopped, and then... We didn't succeed to get other activities aside of that, believe it or not. And because of that, we became distant to each other, despite all of this."

She took the figurine, handling it with care.

"As I've said, I've kept some good memories of it, and the wish to continue that hobby, but it isn't an easy task alone. My problem now is, that I do not find any group interested in it where I live now, or at least, I think so."

Tobias, smiling, watches how she actually behaves since she started talking.

"That kind of hobby has gained in popularity these last decades, so if I were you, I wouldn't worry about it. You'll surely find some group to redo some game sessions like you've done before. And by here, I mean this town, or at least, I think so."

The customer remarks the other item in the box: the seal. This one, unlike the figurine, is unknown to her...

"However, I do not understand why there's a medal here. Is that yours?"

"Well, now you've mentioned it..."

The bird tries to make a visual contact with her, keeping a gentle and relaxed face. They do not want to intimidate her, especially with what the corvid have to announce to her.

"... Will you trust me if I told you that, there's a meaning behind the store's name?"

"What do you mean? Are you... The Devil?"

She giggles a bit.

"Oh, no, that would be preposterous of me. On the other hand... I am what people may call, a demon."

It seems that the woman's curiosity awakens, once again. Tobias gets rarely the opportunity to talk about themselves so openly. They know what the lock box is able to do, and so, makes them go further about their explanation.

"My name is Tobias, progeny of the two major demons, Halphas, the city-builder, and Malphas, the fortress-maker. The seal you see there is an amalgamate of their respective ones. That thing... represents me. Or at least should be."

"You say that like it bothers you, right?"

Tobias sighs.

"You're right. I didn't choose its form nor its pattern, but I have to use it anyway. Where I come from, things are rooted in a deep and rigorous archaic administration. It is much worse than your world on that point. If I don't, the risks I take for myself are absurdly enormous for what it is, even if I do not live in Hell anymore. So, I deal with it."

"To use it? What do you mean?"

"Well, As you've probably noticed, I make my living as selling items to improve people's everyday lives. These aren't harmless though, as it's tainted with powers that mortals like you would qualify as... magic. If some comes from my past travels, some others are created by myself, and so, has the mark of my power. Thus, those items carry my seal, and this is why I am forced to use it, it's like, a brand, a way to trace us, even outside of Hell. I think you get the idea."

"Yes, I think I've understood."

The bird giggles again, yet this time, they seem a bit embarrassed.

"I didn't think I'd have to show a part of my life while demonstrating this item. Sometimes, it surprises me, I won't gonna lie."

"This box isn't one of your designs, I guess?"

"Correct. This may explain why the outcome was a bit... unexpected for me, like, finding my seal on it..."

"Tell me, could you talk a bit more about... Yourself? I don't know how to tell you that but... You're a really interesting person."

They blush suddenly. Such fluster isn't common at all for the magpie, as they try their best to keep it professional.

"If you decide to try this lock box for a week, then... I think we may arrange something like that."