

DOROTHY'S FORBIDDEN GRIMOIRE

Chapter 6: Art of Deception

On the bustling morning streets of Vulcan, Dorothy stood by the roadside, her gaze fixed on the sign of a nearby shop. She appeared deeply engrossed in thought.

"A photography studio? Oh, right... In a world resembling the late modern era of my previous life, this era would still rely on dedicated studios for photography."

Dorothy mused to herself. In her original world, taking a photo was a casual act, but here, it was still a luxury. Dorothy had never had her picture taken in her entire life.

Now, as she looked at the studio before her, recalling the contents of the two letters she had seen, an idea began to take shape in her mind.

With this thought, Dorothy approached a nearby stall selling black bread and asked the owner, “Excuse me, how long has the photo studio next door been in business? Are their skills any good?”

“Ah, Henry’s? It’s been here nearly ten years. His skills are top-notch. If you’ve got spare cash, it’s worth it to have a photo taken there,” the bread vendor replied.

Dorothy nodded thoughtfully. “It seems I’ll need to have one taken...” she murmured to herself before stepping into the studio.

The light inside was dim. Behind a long table sat a balding man with glasses, intently tinkering with a large camera amidst an array of scattered parts.

When Dorothy entered, a flicker of doubt crossed the man’s face. Before he could decide whether the girl was a street urchin begging for alms, Dorothy confidently placed a few coins on the table before him.

“Mr. Henry, is it? The studio is open for photos now, right?” Dorothy smiled at the man, whose eyes gleamed as he responded with equal enthusiasm.

“Of course, young lady. We’re ready anytime.”

“Good. May I ask, do you have any props for photoshoots here?” Dorothy continued.

“Certainly! We have various costumes and backdrops to choose from. With your features and bearing, dressed in our outfits, you’d look just like the daughter of a count—no, a duke!” Henry said confidently.

Dorothy waved her hand dismissively and smiled. “No need for costumes. Do you have ropes and cloth strips?”

“Ropes... and cloth strips?”

Henry’s gaze filled with confusion as he stared at the smiling girl before him.

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Unlike in Dorothy’s previous life, taking a photograph in this world was a cumbersome process. The exposure time was lengthy, and developing the photo could take days. However, thanks to Dorothy’s application of a “pay more” strategy, the timeline was significantly expedited.

After the photo session, Dorothy strolled around the town, had lunch, and bought herself a change of clothes. By afternoon, she returned to the studio. Under Henry's slightly peculiar gaze, she retrieved the photos taken that morning.

Walking along the street, Dorothy opened the envelope containing the photos and took one out. It depicted a girl tied to a chair with ropes, her mouth gagged with cloth strips. She stared at the camera with a face full of anger and frustration. The girl's long hair was an extremely pale white, a color discernible even in the black-and-white photograph.

This was the photo Dorothy had taken that morning, where she pretended to bind herself with ropes and gag her mouth before sitting in the chair for the shot. Henry had watched the entire process with a bewildered expression.

Placing the photo back in the envelope, Dorothy continued walking through the town. After asking for directions multiple times, she wandered through Vulcan until she arrived at its outskirts, in a district known as "North Street."

At a street corner by a crossroads, she silently observed a charred and dilapidated house, its blackened remains suggesting it had been damaged by fire. Based on its position in the row of houses, it was precisely number 24.

Looking around, Dorothy spotted a beggar sitting by the roadside. Smiling, she approached him and tossed two coins into his battered bowl.

“Ah... hehe... May the Holy Mother bless you, kind young lady...” the scruffy beggar said with a gap-toothed grin as he looked up at Dorothy.

Dorothy smiled faintly and then took out two more coins, waving them in front of the beggar. His eyes lit up. Dorothy then handed him the envelope containing the photo.

“Take this and put it in the mailbox in front of house number 24. These coins will be yours afterward.”

The beggar eagerly nodded, grabbed the envelope, and sprinted toward the charred house. After slipping the envelope into the mailbox, he quickly ran back, only to find that the young girl had disappeared. His battered bowl now held two additional coins.

After leaving North Street, Dorothy wandered through town again. She eventually found a general store where she purchased a bottle of ink, a pen,

several sheets of stationery, and an envelope. By the time she finished shopping, dusk had begun to fall.

Carrying her purchases, Dorothy walked through the sunset-lit streets. She entered a decent-looking restaurant, ordered a large steak dinner, and sat in a quiet corner.

As she waited for her meal, she placed the paper and pen on the table. Dipping the pen in ink, she began writing. Dissatisfied with her first attempt, she crumpled the sheet and started again, deliberately making her handwriting messier to deviate from her usual style.

After several drafts, Dorothy finally produced a version she was satisfied with. Holding the letter up to her eyes, she scrutinized it carefully.

Dear Mr. Edrick,

There has been a change in plans. However, the deal remains on. The time and location need to be adjusted.

The new meeting point is the central area of the western forest in Vulcan. The time is set for April 10th, tomorrow night at around midnight. We will bring the promised reward to you there, one that will allow you to take a significant leap into the realm of beyond.

A word of caution: it seems we are being watched. It is not the Serenity Bureau nor the Church. The origins and intentions of the party are unclear for now, but their methods are highly peculiar and extremely dangerous. This is the reason for our sudden change in plans. Therefore, please be vigilant when you come.

Lastly, may we one day sit together at the same table to enjoy the feast and share the wondrous blessings of the Great Chalice of Blood.

Dorothy read through the concise letter before her and nodded in satisfaction. She then sealed it in an envelope. At that moment, her ordered steak arrived.

After an awkward meal with a knife and fork, Dorothy left the restaurant with her belongings and headed straight for the outskirts of Vulcan.

In a secluded area, Dorothy first burned the drafts she had taken with her, using the matches she carried. She then made her way to the place where she had hidden the corpse marionette the previous night.

Looking at a cluster of overgrown weeds, Dorothy extended her hand. With the power of the Corpse Marionette Ring, a figure emerged from the weeds.

Dressed in damp, dark clothes, pale-faced, and with lifeless eyes, it was the body of one of Edrick's subordinates that Dorothy had reanimated the night before.

Standing before the corpse, Dorothy handed it the envelope. The corpse marionette reached out and took it.

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As the sun set and the moon rose, night fell over Vulcan once again. The streets grew quiet and desolate.

Due to limited lighting resources, not all houses in the town were illuminated. Only a few places remained lit throughout the night, one of them being the police station near the center of Vulcan.

The police station was located at an intersection on the eastern side of the town center. Outside its entrance, a police officer wearing a helmet, dressed in a black uniform, and armed with a baton, stood guard under an electric lamp, scanning the deserted street and occasionally yawning.

"What time is it? It's about time for a shift change," the officer muttered, rubbing his tired eyes. As he did, he noticed a figure appearing on the dimly lit street in the distance.

At first, the officer didn't think much of it, assuming it was a stray or a late-night worker heading home. But soon, he realized the figure was approaching him, faster and more deliberately.

The officer grew cautious. As the figure closed in, he gripped his baton tightly.

"Hey! Stop right there! Who are you? What do you want?"

Drawing his baton, the officer pointed it at the approaching figure, who was now close enough for him to see clearly.

It was a man—dressed in dark trousers and a shirt, robust and muscular, with tattoos on his hands. His face was pale, and his eyes were vacant.

Recognizing the man, the officer froze and blurted out in alarm.

"You—you're Wood, the enforcer for Mad Dog Ed! What are you doing here? Did that Mad Dog send you?"

Wood did not respond. His lifeless eyes stared blankly at the officer. Just as the officer began to sense something was wrong, Wood's lips twitched into a stiff, unnatural smile.

Then, like a rigid plank, Wood collapsed face-first to the ground.

"Ah!"

The bizarre sight startled the officer, making him jump back in fear. Gathering his wits, he thought the man might have passed out drunk. Swallowing hard, the officer leaned down and reached out to check for signs of life, only to recoil in horror.

"Dead... He's dead!"

The officer's legs gave out, and he fell to the ground, scrambling to distance himself from the eerie corpse. After catching his breath, he propped himself up with his baton and pushed open the door to the station behind him.