

Prologue:

A world bleached in faded white,
With haughty spires in sight.
Is this the life that we desire,
Or the salvation that we require?

Perverted by honeysuckled words,
Usurious rates charging in herds.
Feeding us poisoned rhetoric,
Harming our youth and future epic.

Resources drained by their scourge,
Appearing as a biased utopian surge.
Paying never-ending dues,
What can we do but just refuse?

Their ominous answer, a demand for
The most precious commodity in our store.
So we hired gatherers, provided them tools,
But the crops screamed, full of hidden truths.

Bountiful harvest withered, causing disdain,
"We need more," they proclaim in vain.
Forced gatherers to decide, continue or retire,
Retired ones found themselves in the empire's dire.

Those who stayed used backup crops,
Driving them mad, unable to stop.
One gatherer continued, plowing endlessly,
Praised by the fed people, doing it selflessly.

Even he fell, asking people to retire,
But they pleaded for him to not expire.
He continued, plowing and slashing,
Till he was enervated, tired and thrashing.

One last plea, he asked the people,
"Can someone take my place?" in this steeple.
Eventually, his plea was heard and answered,
He finally rested his weary bones, his duty prospered.

As he took off his glasses of a false reality,
The world turned crimson, a harsh brutality.

What has he done, what has he sown?
All the white spires now drenched in crimson, all alone.

Chapter 1:

```
[ Scanning — ##### ]  
[ User is not registered ]  
[ Registering User ]  
[ Registration complete ]  
[ Additional Program #771-DKR is requesting to be installed ]  
[ Authorization forcefully accepted ]  
[ Installing 1/71 — #----- ]  
[ Translation package installed ]  
[ Installing 70/71 — #####- ]  
[ Error applying personality alteration ]  
[ Attempting to reapply personality alteration ]  
[ Partially applied ]
```

A blinding light penetrated my eyelids, fiercely unlatching them. I tried to move but I felt like a doll whose strings were cut. A dense yet sparse pain assaulted my mind with a constant stream of overwhelming information.

“Why... how? I should have died” I muttered feebly.

As I looked around against my psyche’s best wishes, it felt as if every fiber of my being was ripped apart. Yet, even with that pain, I struggled to comprehend the sight before me.

“Where are the walls?”

The room is a paradox: no ground, no ceiling, no walls. Yet, I feel anchored to a fixed point on a plane. The endless darkness of what I presume are the walls and the brilliant and blinding light of the floor and the sky crash over me in suffocating waves, an existential dread as palpable as a weighted shroud.

I couldn’t tell if I was lying or standing; all I knew was movement was impossible.

Just having the sensation of vision drives me closer to a state of insanity.

Grasping at straws I attempted to count within my mind, yet the effort was as dry and fruitless as growing crops in a harsh winter. A helpless feeling washed over me, thick and suffocating like tar. Yet even without results, I persevered. As time passed like a gentle river, I counted with no hint of finality.

Yet, eventually while counting:

“#\$SD&(%@^(“

Such a guttural sound, a cacophony of distorted syllables, shattered the eerie silence. Even without basis, my mind comprehended it as language. I couldn't imagine what else it could be, yet it wasn't one definable by humanity's paltry comprehension. It defiled all linguistic norms, yet even my frantic mind agreed it gave off the impression of a coherent term. The noise would drown all with a terror so grand that the word 'fear' couldn't describe it. It was primal, yet alien. I could not help but question such meaning.

A sudden jolt punched my mind as hard as a boxer, and as if I'd flipped through a dictionary, I understood what was said.

“Testing”

Chapter 2:

“Magic and Mana, what is the Difference?”

Magic is a general term of manipulating Mana, while Mana is a powersource from nature.

Within this class we will be going over general knowledge, terminology and the history of Mana.

Please remember that this class is a required course for almost all classes within this academy.

Are there any questions before we start going into the material?”

The class, while packed, was in utter silence, as if everyone had agreed that talk was meaningless. However, one student, unable to read the room, said while having his full focus on clearing his nostrils:

“Could I go to the bathroom?”

All eyes fall on the student, most dumbfounded yet a few start laughing.

“Let me see ..., you are student No. 09-4093 correct ... Why were you not able to restroom before class started? I believe I gave everyone around 30 minutes before starting the lecture, you should have been able to go during the allotted time.”

“I felt the need to go now, so may I please leave to use the bathroom? If you don't allow me to go, I hope you and the classroom are ready to bear the consequence of denying me.”

“Oh do tell, what can a first year student do?”

“I had a large dinner yesterday with garlic snails, do you truly want this enormous classroom to be infested with such a pungent odor?”

After stating such a statement only a few students could hold back their hysteria.

“Fine, you may go to the bathroom as even I don't want to deal with that. However before you return could you please bring student No. 09-4081, he seems to have gotten lost. I doubt he is intentionally skipping as he didn't seem to be the sort to do such a thing.”

“Blatantly showing favoritism huh professor? How unprofessional, however I shall heed your request. I shall return with haste.”

As soon as he finished speaking he performed a bow full of mockery and disrespect and left the classroom.

The scent of dry ink and the crisp pages of countless books wafts the nose.

The endless maze-like hallways full of endless texts, devoid of life due to the lessons in session.

The ticking sound of an outdated pendulum clock rings within the ears, drawing one back to reality.

Such an intricate hallway to keep one barely sane allows one to peer into the sickened principal's mind, painting his twisted devotion to enforcing rules to manufacture such a pressuring atmosphere for a place of learning.

To leave a classroom during a session, one must prepare themselves mentally for the trial of the hallway. It's very easy to get lost or take a wrong direction but you'll always reach your classroom if you decide to head back.

If one follows the voice, they'll lose their hearing until they go back to their classroom

If one runs, tripping is inevitable.

If one loiters, it will bring you to class no matter what.

If one yells, they'll lose the ability to speak for the rest of their session.

If one looks up, they'll lose their sight until they return to their session

If one attempts to escape, they'll find themselves within the infirmary.

If one attempts to take a book without permission, they'll lose their sense of touch until the following day.

These are the general rules of using the hallway during class time and one of the first rules you will learn within this academy.

While a design like this could be considered cruel, as long as one follows the rules safety is guaranteed.

Slowly walking to the bathroom, I hear the sound of a whimpering dog.

The closer I get the louder it gets.

GRRRRRRR

It starts growling in a piercing tone.

Once I touch the bathroom door, silence creeps back up as the oversized doors slowly open.

From its size, one would assume it would make a noise, yet it didn't even make a peep.

"Not even the prior knowledge of the hallways prepared me for such dread."

Entering a stall, I ducked down and let it loose. I felt as if a weight had lifted from my body, making me feel like I'd lost seven pounds.

"Well" I scrunch my nose, "The next guy might think a skunk died here. I can't blame him though—even though I did this I never expected it to smell this bad."

Slosh.

The running water flows as I open the faucet, letting out its frigidness.

"Man," I grumbled, "he couldn't even allow us to use hot water from the tap."

"Now I need to find a student? Where could he have gone? He probably didn't go far as I don't think anyone could stay in that environment for long anyway."

I put my hand on the door. Just as before, it opened with no noise.

"I really don't want to go searching for him. Should I just give up?"

I fervently debated the idea.

"Nah," I decided.

"I said I'd bring him back, so I will."

Remembering the rules, I make sure to walk with a walking pace.

Simply walking, I feel as if gravity were increasing the farther I walked from the classroom.

Pushing through, time crawled at snail's pace.

Eventually I saw him, or at least what I thought was him. From what I remember he had a below-average build, average height, and a skinny frame, with somber eyes magnified by his eyewear.

Getting closer I noticed him drawing symbols on the ground, though from my current distance, I couldn't make out the details.

I was about to yell towards him but a phrase pops into my mind.

"If one yells, they'll lose the ability to speak for the rest of their session."

I started panting from the indescribable weight pressing down on me as I got closer. The pattern slowly revealed itself: a pentagram drawn with blood.

As I'm just a few breaths away, he halts. The smell of blood enters my nostrils. Even I, unfamiliar with summoning, could realize it was complete.

"Oh demon from the beyond," he intoned as if he were in a trance. "As according to the ancient pact, I will provide you a crack to enter this universe. However, as a price you must fulfill my deepest desire."

He paused, creating a sharp tone. While the atmosphere of the hallways was dreadful, it paled in comparison to the feeling I was getting from the student in front of me.

The circle slowly started glowing black, masking the blood along with its scent.

"Oh greater being, I am the pact master Louis while you are the contracted. Heed my call with haste!" he exclaims ignoring the rules.

How has he not been punished? Is he somehow exempt from the rules?

After completing that thought, a rift opens as a boy exits.

As I take a glance, I try to view it.

A boy would be the best way to describe it, at least by human standards. However, his imposing presence cannot mask such a dignified appearance.

His hair was black, tinted with white specks all over his head.

His eyes were black, devoid of any possible emotion.

He adorned a suit with a striking two-tone design, white and black on one side, black and white on the other, separated by the button-split.

His pants appeared to be grey dress pants, and his shoes, like his hair, were dress shoes with the same black and white specks.

Finally my point of view falls to the ground as it snaps its fingers, my head no longer attached to my body.

I died.

Click

Chapter 3:

"Oh, someone from the 9th batch, you're a newbie aren't ya?" A senior with slit eyes attempted to gain my attention.

Thinking logically, it's best to ignore such people, yet for some reason, I felt an inexplicable pull toward his suspicious demeanor.

"Oh, I didn't expect you to listen. Most of the kids around here don't really like me," he says with a slowly raising grin.

"As a reward for not ignoring me like those other ignorant fools, I will offer you some priceless information. Information so valuable it will give you an edge against your competition. Information so grand it will guarantee your survival in this twisted academy."

After finishing his speech, his sharp grin faded, twisting into one of solemnity.

"Do you wish to gain such knowledge? While knowledge is power, it can equally be as deadly as a curse. Before you accept my offer, I implore you to think it over. If you believe you can handle the burden of weight," he abruptly stops his sentence and outstretched his hand toward me.

There were no words to describe my current feelings, however, as if I was entranced by the forbidden knowledge... No words were spoken.

I grasped the hand as if he was a savior, forming a handshake, no, a contract.

"A fool, I guess I could have guessed that anyway after you started to listen." His face instantly twisted into one resembling disappointment

"Very well, as you just got out of that sad excuse for orientation, you should already have a solid understanding of the rules of this place."

I nod, he wasn't wrong in saying such things. Rather than an orientation it felt more as if it was made to reinforce the principal's authority.

It was an intense experience, the principal spoke as if he was a madman. While explaining the rules, he casually said our lives may be forfeit if one breaks his rules.

He especially seemed touchy about bribery, as he spoke for almost 20 minutes about his hatred for those using money to enroll within his academy. He exclaimed he would brutally "remove" anyone who used such a method to free up the spots for those with seeding with potential. While extreme, it showed his belief in equality.

"Are you done monologuing to yourself?" putting his hands on his waist. "You do know time stops for no one, classes will soon start."

Snapping back to the situation, I stare with a gaze of anticipation for the senior's next words.

"Finally, I got your attention again. Anyway ... this academy as you might have already assumed is a competition, one you need to put your life on the line for. As such, a merciful senior like myself should help my underclassman."

His face changed back into a grin, yet his eyes haven't changed since the start of the conversation.

His hand touched my forehead, information rushed into my mind.

"Phew, doing that is always tiring." His brows furrowed while sweat raced down his wincing face.

"I would highly recommend for you to perform the ritual as soon as possible, the first day's security is a little laxer during classes today."

Finally after sorting out my thought's, I replied, "Isn't doing something like that impossible? The hallway's trials start after the third bell."

"Oh yea, I almost forgot."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a glass fragment which shines a beautiful shade of teal and aquamarine.

"As long as you have this on your person, you should be able to use the hallways with no consequences. Just be careful, don't let any professor know you have a fragment."

Ding Dong

The first bell has rung.

"Wow, I spent most of my free time speaking to you. Anyway, take it."

He passes me the fragment.

"Well, I will now leave, take care." He turns around.

"Wait, could you please tell me your name?" I ask.

Ding Dong

The second echoes.

"You want my name? Due to the rules, I can't share my true name, but my number is 02-0003."

As he walked away, I continued to stare at him. As I was about to turn my head, a small blue flame shimmered into existence before his face, vanishing faster than I could blink. Even if I couldn't see his face from this angle, the alien feeling undeniably told me I had been tricked.

Ding Dong

As the third bell cries, my surroundings shift, dropping countless students in front of their assigned classrooms.

While walking through, sorting out my thoughts...

"Excuse me, I'm coming through."

Even with the enormous doors, students shove each other to enter.

The fresh air hits my face as I sit in a seat. Looking around, I see:

This classroom gives off a feeling of a grand space, keeping its color scheme to a minimalist style. The chairs have metal weights on their feet, just light enough to move around but heavy enough for the average student to not lift or lean on them. The desks are separated per chair and are height adjustable by clicking a button. A chalkboard so massive I can see it as clear as a crystal all the way from the 20th row.

And then, I see words written with a perfect cursive on the chalkboard:

"You'll have 30 minutes to find your seat and get comfortable before the lecture starts. If you need to use the restroom or need to do something that you can't do in the classroom, please do so before we start.

Professor Elisia"

Even though Saloma Academy has a reputation for fostering the best of the best, so far all I saw was a lunatic and controlling principal and enough rules to make one's head spin if they had to recite them from memory. However, in terms of architecture, it's top-notch. I may not have architectural knowledge, but one must be blind not to see the craft of a master in creating such a building.

The room, full of students, was as still as water, with occasional ripples. Many students are currently sitting at their desks, either reading or sleeping.

"Something changed," said a boy in the third row.

Looking around even more shows a student raising his feet on his desk while holding his arms to his stomach, snoring quite loudly. Occasionally, it seems as if he picks his nose as well.

It's probably best for me to leave now.

Leaving my desk, I head towards the intricate doors furnished with what is most likely gold, appearing quite gaudy compared to the rest of the classroom.

Unlike before, the doors are now closed. I reach my hand towards the door. The door felt ornate and cold, but that sensation lasted a moment. The warm, populous classroom vanished from view as just like earlier with the third bell, my view is that of the empty and cold hallways.

mmmm

A monotone hum enters my ears as I start walking.

Slowly, I walked to the location my senior recommended. The more I walked, the more my mind emptied; all I could do now was focus on the ritual.

Eventually, I reached the end of the rightmost hallway and halted.

My hand reached into my pocket, grabbing the glass shard. The shard pulsed and throbbed as if it were alive, the calming blue hue was nowhere to be found, all that was left was a dim crimson and darkness. Simply holding it, my mind was drenched in thoughts of malice and utter hatred. These feelings felt unnatural, yet the sudden influx of emotions put a pause to such skepticism. I was impure.

No longer did I have control of my body; I felt as if I was being puppeteered. It clenched my hand, and blood began to flow. My sensation of pain was gone. As if not to waste the blood, it used my body to draw symbols.

First, it drew an X on the left wall. Next, it drew an O on the right. In front, it drew half of an upside-down cross entering what looked like a circle. There was no point in resisting, if I fail I'll be punished harshly. It clenched the shard in my hand once more, drawing more blood. Slowly, it started to draw the final symbol: the summoning circle on the floor. While there was no pain, a feeling similar to being weightless started to invade my body.

A large circle formed first, its crimson line stark against the hallway floor. From its perimeter, five smaller circles branched out, positioned precisely at what would be the tips of a star. Within the closest of these sub-circles, my hand moved, outlining an X, an O, and the familiar half of an upside-down cross entering a circle, mirroring the symbols on the walls. Next, a knife took shape within the bottom-left sub-circle, followed by a pitchfork in the bottom-right. An even smaller circle was then drawn within the very center of the main circle. Finally, an inverted star

materialized inside the central area, its points carefully avoiding contact with the five peripheral circles.

As soon as it was complete, I felt compelled to speak.

“Oh demon from the beyond, As according to the ancient pact, I will provide you a crack to enter this universe. However, as a price you must fulfill my deepest desire.”

The circle slowly gets tainted by darkness.

“Oh greater being, I am the pact master Louis while you are the contracted. Heed my call with haste!”

For a moment, time slows to a standstill. The controlling feeling relinquishes itself.

My perception of time slowly fixes itself, and a black rift appears. Its occupant, a being resembling a human, emerged. Yet, describing it would be a disservice. How could I describe such a being with my paltry knowledge; it may take it as an insult.

I kneel down on my knees, forehead pressed on the cold, uneven, uncaring floor in a deep yet clumsy attempt of a respectful bow.

Above me, it attempts to do something.

Bzzzt

My heart starts pounding as fast as it physically could. In the corner of my eye a minuscule pink spark glistened.

“Tch,” it says with no emotion, “You summoned me here and you have a witness behind you? Are you an amateur?” Even if his voice didn’t change, it felt as if he was genuinely asking a question. “Normally, I would have disposed of him, yet something more powerful than I interfered.”

A concussive wave of pressure assaulted my ears, powerful enough to knock one out yet there was no audible noise. It was a clap.

“Get up, we need to finalize the deal of the contract.” he says while pointing up.

As I got up slowly, a furtive glance behind me confirmed my dread: the same student who picked his nose while sleeping in class. My blood froze. Him? The nose picker from class—how did I not hear his footsteps? Was he searching for me? Even in this treacherous hallway, I couldn't escape the fact that his life was cut short due to my selfish actions. The hands felt scalded, tainted, and weighted by the price of his blood mixing with mine.

“Do not worry, the person behind you is still alive. As I can’t dispose of him, I had to put him to sleep temporarily.”

My heart felt as if it stopped, my mouth slowly got dryer, my eyes closed with as much force as I could muster. What have I done, why did I accept his offer. Breathe. You chose this. My sense of touch, smell, and hearing returned. A coppery smell, hands drenched in something sticky and fluid. Even sightless, the crimson’s depth couldn’t be ignored. I shouldn’t have grabbed his hand, I unleashed such a monster. Could this mistake be undone? I’m now a sinner, I must take responsibility.

Opening my eyes I saw it. It sat perfectly still in a high-backed chair of polished, impossibly dark wood that hadn’t been there before.

“Have you composed yourself yet? As you are the contract holder I will not harm you, please take a seat.” His tone is still as flat as before, gesturing at a chair that hadn’t been there moments before.

“There we go, was that so hard? So what do you desire that you need to summon a being such as I?”

I attempted to open my mouth, yet no words escaped.

“Why must my contractor be such a pansy, go on with it.”

Finally steeling my resolve, “I want to become stronger, strong enough to survive this academy and life afterwards.”

It stares, as if it’s looking through layers of bone and fear into the raw core of my soul.

Chapter 4 (Beta Versions:  Shape of the soul previous versions:)

(Drafting in progress)