The Persistence of Memory

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Summary

A Celena story, named after a Salvador Dali painting by highly appropriate accident.

Notes

Very, very, very kind thanks to btailweaver and gamlain, both of Eljay, for being willing to be pasted at and give far too much concrit far too late in the day. Much love for both of you.

Written for Plaid

Celena remembers.

Celena remembers even when she wishes she didn't, when she's trying her hardest to wear the right clothes and walk in the right manner and learn all the right words, to substitute boku with
atashi and smile only enough to look pleasant without ever showing teeth.

Celena remembers even as she tries to bury herself in the silks and velvets, to leave the past behind and be nothing but Onii-sama's beloved sister.

Celena remembers, and pretends she doesn't because she can see that nobody else wants her to.

They don't want to remember, either.

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Celena doesn't always remember--or is it that she remembers too much? She's not sure, some days.

Some days she wakes up and remembers so much that there isn't room for anything else, and lies there in bed until Nurse--she's the housekeeper now, but insists that to Celena she began as Nurse, and Nurse she will stay--comes in to open the curtains and asks her why she's staring at the ceiling again.

Celena has never bothered to explain that she has no idea what the ceiling looks like.

She'll get up obediently, though, and allow herself to be draped in lavender velvet and gently chivvied to the necessary.

It's fortunate that the water-closet is a little auxiliary of the bathing rooms, because sometimes Celena's so deeply in the skin of someone she isn't allowed to be that she forgets that she isn't supposed to pee standing up.

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Such little accidents are, sadly, generally the most exciting part of Celena's day; there don't seem to be many activities appropriate for a 'lady,' and even with those things she has difficulty.

She tries, of course. She wants so badly to please--and equally badly not to think about those things in her head, some days. Surely he will balk at sewing or dancing or singing, at reading quietly or using watercolours to draw mist across a page?

He does balk, yes, but it doesn't help her get along any better.

She tries to read, but the genteel novels she's allowed never hold her attention, and the one time she found an interesting book it was as quickly snatched away by her well-meaning Nurse as she ever sent the more unlucky ones into unguided flight. Attempts to play the harpsichord end in cacophony as she pounds the keys in frustration; dancing lessons were cancelled after she broke the insteps of three dancing-masters in succession in too-literal fights for the lead.

Cookery-lessons went well enough, at first, until she saw the pastry-master making plum pudding, which resulted in what will forever be known as The Flambé Incident--and the less said about what happened when she pricked her finger in embroidery lessons, the better.

Singing lessons aren't so bad--he doesn't seem to care about that one way or the other--but she can only sing so long without getting bored herself, and going away again.

The list of things which it is appropriate for the young mistress of Schexar to do thus exhausted, she will resort once again to her most effective tactic: drifting around the house and grounds, aimless, picking flowers and reminding herself not to eat the butterfly.

She has to be careful not to look at slugs; slugs remind her of Jajuka, and thinking of him--kind,
faithful, gentle Jajuka--always makes her want to cry.

It's odd, but she thinks it makes him want to cry too.

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Oniisama comes faithfully every day, as regular as clockwork; if he's delayed for some reason, Celena can be certain that he will be unstoppable the next, and remain twice as long as he would have otherwise. Once he was gone for three days, and stayed three times that.

Celena sometimes wonders how long he would stay if he had been gone a week.

The substance of the visits is just as predictable as their constancy. Allen appears wherever she's wandered, takes her by the elbow, and gently guides her home, talking softly about how she's doing, what she's done today and other such invasive--gentlemanly--court nothings. When they arrive, there will be tea and cakes, and then dinner and more conversation... though this she only wishes were nothing.

Celena rather enjoys the reminiscences about their father and mother, though he keeps pointing out every one of Allen's pauses and careful evasions--but she gets so tired of everything else she hears being a remonstration or some other criticism or scolding. Why does everything have to be perfect? Can't Oniisama settle for pretty good, or even a decent effort? Can't he see she's trying?

She never asks, though, no matter how the part of her that is him roils and boils inside; Oniisama doesn't mean it that way, she reminds herself. Even he knows that Allen Schezar is never cruel to a lady... even those who are very bad at being one. She bites her tongue instead, and never realizes that this very act is one of the vaunted skills many more `accomplished' ladies never master.

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They're getting better at endings.

Once every supper ended in wordless screaming punctuated with the heaving of crockery, Allen coaxing and scolding by turns until one or both of them fled the room, he to sword practice and she to scream into pillows until she nearly suffocated.

Now she smiles, and he smiles back, and they leave each other with a graceful (and only slightly wobbly) curtsay and a genteel bow, anything they might wish to say hidden behind soft goodnights.

But he still hurries away to swordwork, and she to her bed.

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Nights are always the worst.

Nighttime is his time--Dilandau's time--when he can force her (does he force her? Is he even alive, there inside her? Millerna-hime insists he is only a memory) to think his name, when he is well-rested and she weary from a long day of resisting him, of trying to fit herself into the shape expected of her without once reminding anyone of what they still hold against her.

For they do, his voice whispers in her ear. They blame you for everything and watch you for fear of me--isn't that wonderful? Such pretty toys! Think how lovely it'll be--let's get out the pitch and tallow and brandy-wine and make our own flambé, hee, hee, hee...!
He always longs for fire.

That's his weakness, though; she doesn't particularly care for fire, but it doesn't obsess her, and neither does she fear it. When he begins to think of fire is her chance to reach through those flames for the flames of memory, and one memory will chain into another and another and another until they consume him.

Celena remem ber s, and is used to it--but Dilandau has never cared to.

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Celena remembers her first such fight, when they were only just beginning this dance; she understood so little of the world--none of it, truly, not that she thinks she is much better now--and he might reach out of his cave in the back of her mind to sweep her aside at any moment.

Celena remembers that when he took her, that day, it was the first time she remembered.

Before that, she never knew anything when he was ascendant; she'd simply do something, or see something, and then she would wake up some other where--generally tucked into clean white sheets and being whispered at, though there was that time she stepped out of a Melef and into her brother's arms.

She remembered that, that time--remembered the white dragon--and he was the one who shattered.

She came with him, of course; she always has. It only works if she follows him down, if she keeps prodding him and poking him, forcing him to recall all the little details which are so much better than continuity to keep him remembering. Dilandau isn't very good at logic or time.

Allen mentioned something interesting at dinner tonight, something that made her grit her teeth to pay attention as he raged, and she gleefully spins this out into torture with which to exhaust Dilandau and shove him down, chain him back into his cave and conquer him for one more night.

The boy-king and his bride are coming to visit.

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Celena looks at Van Fanel and remembers hate.

Celena remembers gasping accounts of a white dragon, of a great dark man who wielded impossibility--

Celena remembers them.

The boys, her boys--his boys?--theirs, always their own, watchful and obedient and adoring--

--dying--

he killed (they killed) the doppelgänger for slaying Miguel (hers he was hers, one of their Dragonslayers and it was not for him to kill them)--

The white dragon, the white demon, roaring(screaming), hacking through them as she(he) hacks paper dolls--they were calling--

Dying one after another and calling him to save them, but he could not save, could never save, could only destroy--!

(What's happening?)
AAAAH!

Flank him! Flank him!

What is he!?

Dilandau-sama! DILANDAU-SAMA...!

...

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Celena wakes in her bed again, with no memory of how she got there.

"Are you awake?" someone asks softly, and Celena is across the room and brandishing a vase before she knows what's happening.

A soft giggle startles her, and she creeps forward to peer around the bedpost, trusting that the bed's sheer bulk and height should defend her from at least the first shot.

"You don't have to be scared," says Hitomi Kanzaki.

Celena holds her breath, waiting for the memories to wash over her--
--and waits--
--but--
--nothing comes, and Dilandau is silent within.

Celena slowly puts the vase down, and climbs back up into the bed, ignoring the flowers and water she spilled a moment ago.

"No," she says softly, "I don't," and Hitomi smiles.

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Hitomi is an odd girl, but a kind one, with a curious quality neither Celena nor Dilandau have ever seen before:

She listens.

Quietly, and calmly, with her wide greenly-golden eyes never leaving Celena's face.

It should be worrying--Celena hates being stared at--but from her, it's all right.

And he... Dilandau... is still quiet within.

When Celena runs out of things to say, Hitomi nods to herself and helps her out of bed, then searches through her wardrobe for 'something appropriate', which turns out to be the riding habit (modeled after Millerna-hime's, and thus the latest fashion) long relegated to the back, as Allen insisted she was too frail to be anywhere near horses.

When Celena points this out, Hitomi snorts delicately. "Allen-san thinks that he has to be perfect, so you have to be perfect, too. But he isn't, Celena-san, and I'm not, and we both know it." She smiles wryly. "He proposed to me anyway."
Celena stares, and somewhere far inside her Dilandau uncoils a little from his terrified ball (she doesn't understand why he fears her; she's so nice) to stare, too. He proposed? But--she's marrying Fanel, isn't she? How did Allen Schezar lose? They remember that kiss in the fortress--

Hitomi smiles sadly. "He was looking for the fairy tale, Celena-san. He wanted to protect 'the maiden from the Legendary Moon' ... but when I ran away, it wasn't him who brought me back. He took that as my answer."

"oh," says Celena in a very small voice. "But how did the King of Fanelia win?"

"He didn't," Hitomi says with a soft smile. "Neither did I. But our wishes are one."

Somehow while Celena is trying to make sense out of that, Hitomi helps her into the short-skirted, tight-bloomered riding habit, ties her shoes on, and leads them both out into the courtyard, the full moons lighting the marble with a brightness that cannot be called day.

"Hitomi? Why are we--" Celena turns to Hitomi in time to be shocked out of her wits; Hitomi has taken off her dress and is standing in a shift and bloomers too tiny to be anything.

Hitomi grins wryly, blushing a bit. "It's perfectly modest! ...well, for this."

"This?" Celena wonders.

The grin grows into something any cat would be proud of. "I'm going to teach you to run."

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It doesn't seem to matter that Celena already knows how to run; indeed, as the night wears on Celena comes to realize that as far as Hitomi is concerned, that isn't running. True running, as Hitomi does, is a thing far beyond 'going faster than walking'; it's a melding of mind and body into a tool for one thing alone: speed.

Celena enjoys the training, not least because she turns out to be fairly good at it (and sneaking out at night will twit her Oniisama, which is oddly appealing), but she can't shake the feeling that this isn't right, that it isn't what she was meant for.

She confesses this to Hitomi, who is not surprised. (She's not sure the young Queen-to-be of Fanelia is ever surprised, anymore.)

"You'll find your own art," Hitomi says with quiet confidence. "I'm just showing you the way."

She pats Celena's shoulder and takes her to Van.

***

Celena looks at Van and remembers ... nothing.

Well, not nothing, not quite; she could remember far too much.

But just as the flood rises, Hitomi squeezes her hand and says, "Runners ready"--

--and Celena is so absorbed in her preparatory breathing that the tsunami washes over her and away.

Hitomi gives her a proud smile, and somewhere in the back of her head, Dilandau whimpers.
Van Fanel isn't a boy, really, any more than Hitomi is a girl. He's a man, a King, and he looks at her as a King should, considering her as she is as well as who she has been... and who she will be.

"Why are you here?" he asks her, after a moment, and Celena is silent, waiting for Hitomi to answer.

Nothing comes.

She turns to Hitomi in confusion, and receives only that expectant smile that Hitomi wears when encouraging her to shave that extra quarter-second off her sprint.

She turns to Van again--and what comes out of her mouth is a complete surprise...

... and yet, she has always been waiting to be asked that question.

"Teach me the sword," Celena says softly.

Van is a stricter teacher than Hitomi, though just as certain and unwavering. Celena doesn't mind; Van was asked to be Celena's teacher, while Hitomi had to coax her along.

For the first time in her life--or is this the beginning of her life?--Celena is proud, progressing-talented. In the courtyard, in the meadows, on the rooftop, Celena is not a lady, not the young mistress; she is only Celena, student of Van Fanel, and as deserving of her bruises as any student of swordwork could be.

Celena goes to bed rubbing her aches, and gets up and bathes and dresses long before Nurse comes to fetch her, and betweentimes, she sleeps without dreams.

Celena has never been certain how Oniisama found out.

For her, everything began very suddenly: one moment, she was fencing with Van, being chided about needing to attack more aggressively--

And then her sword was dashed out of her hands, and she was on the marble, watching Van-sensei and Allen fight.

"How dare you!" Allen screams in a voice she's never heard but the ghost of Dilandau vividly remembers. "She is my sister, Fanel! How dare you touch her--"

Hitomi is shouting something, and Van, but Allen keeps swinging, mad with rage. "You'll bring him back!" Allen howls. "You'll bring him back and it'll all go back the way it was--"

Hitomi grabs his arm, but he throws her aside, which stokes Van's carefully-held temper. "Schezar! Sheathe and calm yourself this instant! You hit Hitomi!"

Allen is impervious to the accusations, and somehow, his face contorted with rage is--it's the same as--

"STOP IT, DILANDAU!" Celena finds herself screaming, and Dilandau in her head with her, as she finds her sword again and brings it up in a ringing clash between the two blades.
Both parties stop to stare at her in surprise, and for a very long moment, nothing happens--until Van smiles faintly and withdraws, turning to check on Hitomi.

Allen stares down at her. "Celena...?"

"Stop it, Dilandau," Celena says again, softly.

Allen blinks. "I don't..."

"We're Schezar, Oniisama," Celena whispers, sword never faltering. "He could have been either of us, but I was the younger and more easily changed... but we both have that temper..."

"You don't!" Allen protests, dropping his sword. "You're my kind and gentle sister, you could never be--"

Celena laughs in his face.

"Never be what, Oniisama?" she asks more softly. "Frustrated? Upset? Human? I might be a lady by rank, but you'll never make me into Marlene-hime. I don't think I could even manage Millerna."

Allen turns grey. "how... how did you hear that name?"

"I remember things," Celena says with a sad smile. "I remember things, and I hear things, and I put them together... so many people seem to think I'm deaf. But I'm not, Oniisama, and I'm not stupid, or evil, either. I'm just... me."

"But you never liked swords!" Allen protests feebly.

"As Dilandau, Oniisama?" Celena asks, watching him flinch. "Or as the sheltered little girl you barely remember?"

Allen can't answer; that's fine with Celena, as she's got a lot to say. "I'm trying very hard to be good, Oniisama," she says gently. "I love you, and I don't want to be lost again, and I don't want to be Dilandau Albatou. I just can't pretend that I wasn't."

"...I just... thought it would be easier for you...." Allen falters. "But why swords, in Heaven's name?"

"Because I'm a Schezar," Celena grins. "Because they're all mine."

"Dilandau--"

"Had a sword, yes," Celena refuses to be interrupted, "but when did you ever see him use it? I have his memories, Oniisama. They made Dilandau to be what he was, a commander and pilot. He had a sword because it was proper for him to have one--he never wielded it, and he certainly never trained... but I am, Oniisama. Van-sensei is teaching me the sword and Hitomi is teaching me to be me."

Allen is paler than Celena's hair. "...and what have I done?" he asks despairingly.

"Loved me," Celena says simply, something unknotting in her chest. "It's not your fault you didn't know what to do with me."

"...I'm forever failing my family," Allen murmurs, and they're both surprised by Hitomi's hand on his shoulder.
"No you aren't," she says firmly. "You just need a rest. Come home with us, Allen-san, Celena."

Van grins. "We were going to have to ask pretty soon, anyway. I need to go home, but I'm not giving up my student."

Allen forces himself to glower at Van. "How do you steal all my women?"

Celena startles herself by laughing merrily, and soon they all are; almost unnoticed, the sun rises.

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Celena remembers.

Remembering has been her curse, but it is also her weapon. If Dilandau is consumed by his memories, he cannot consume her and hurt those Celena loves--for she does love them, all of them, Nurse and her fussing and Allen and his scolds and Van-sensei's unwavering patience and Hitomi's all-seeing golden eyes.

Celena remembers her sword, though Allen still wishes she didn't have to.

Memories are her sword, and she will never put them down.

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