

Choosing a Protagonist

In the middle of a pure white void, a feminine figure was seated at a desk covered in papers, agonizing over something. Though not technically female, the figure does tend to use feminine pronouns when dealing with those who use them, so her wishes will be respected.

“Arg, how am I supposed to choose?!” she says, throwing her hands up and scattering papers across the void. Most end up “stuck” in the air once they lose their momentum, but a few do float downwards and seemingly settle on a “floor” at the same level as the desk is standing on.

At this point, another figure walks through the cloud of hanging papers. This one is a masculine figure, who does tend to use masculine pronouns when dealing with those who use them.

“Still hung up on that decision?” He asks, as he gets close to the desk.

“Ugh, I just don’t know what to doooooo~” the feminine figure replies, lying her head down on a pile of papers and pouting.

“Well, how about we simply start fresh from the top, then?” The masculine figure sits down on a chair that materializes under him as if it was always there.

“Fiiiiiiiiine.” She lifts her head, with a sour look on her face. “I got a task from the boss to sort out the conditions for an outsider to take the lead in developing a small community into a national power using something akin to alchemy.”

“Seems straightforward enough. What are you hung up on, then?”

“Basically right from the start!” She throws her hands up again, scattering even more papers.

“What kind of outsider do I want? What is the setting of the community?”

“Ok, let’s start with the easier question. What kind of community setting are you thinking of?”

He leans back in his chair, interlocking his fingers on his lap, almost looking like some manner of therapist or tutor.

“Mmm. Traditional fantasy feels so played out, but semi-modern through futuristic seems hard to make this idea work. Though if we’re talking about something fantastical like alchemy, then semi-futuristic could be an interesting place to look at. A tension between technology and mysticism?” She started having a more serious look on her face, as she chews through her thoughts. “But fantasy tech feels like the most sensible setting, you know? More room for new discoveries, citizens who feel ‘poor’ without needing to be suffering, and an easier to present clash between higher and lower classes.”

“That’s fair, trying to bring up those subjects when using a modern or futuristic setting makes the analogies more obvious, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t space there either, right?”

“Mmm, you’re not wrong. There’s even the possibility of mixing settings. The outsider can also be from a modern or future society, and in fact that is kind of expected.” She started scribbling notes on a piece of paper that materialized under her pen, which also materialized in her hand as she started writing. “But that’s also where I was stuck at. Fantasy tech feels the most sensible, but it’s also nearly as played out as traditional fantasy.”

“But settings get played out because they work and are popular, right? You can’t always reinvent the wheel. It’s better to find something you feel comfortable working in.” He waves his hands around while saying this, mostly motioning towards her.

“Yeah... You’re not wrong, but I just feel iffy about it. I don’t know, I know that fantasy tech would be more comfortable for me, but it’s just eeeeeeeeeverywhere, you know?” She was absentmindedly writing more setting details down even while she was complaining, starting to flesh out the concept.

“So, your second dilemma is about the outsider, right?” Feeling good about where the two of them were, he sits back in his chair and takes up the therapist pose again. “Given some of the things we just talked about, I take it you’re getting hung up on reincarnation, aren’t you?”

“Don’t you know it. It’s such a useful and effective trope, but it’s also eeeeeeeeeverywhere. And it frustrates me to no end the number of people who dump on it because of that, too. So I just want to avoid the trouble...” She stops writing and slumps back over the desk again.

“Well, you already mentioned mixing settings. Did you already consider the outsider being a traveller from another planet?”

“Isn’t that pretty much the same idea, though? Even if I made it them arriving via spaceship, it is still ‘another world’, is it not? A lot of the same ideas get put into play, though more legwork needs to be done to sort out how our traveller is able to interact with the locals.” At this point, she had put the pen on her nose and was focusing on it balancing, while pondering.

“So, why not make the ‘outsider’ be a local, then? The outsider doesn’t need to be a foreigner, after all. It could just be an ostracized member of the community, or someone who came back or came upon special knowledge.”

“True... but you also know the kinds of outsiders I like.” She stops focusing on the pen, and stares directly at him, with a slight frown.

“You said it was to be based around alchemy, right? Why can’t that be the driving force? Developing the community is simply a side effect.” He stares right back at her, with a knowing smirk. He is well aware of what her interests are, and has been leading the whole conversation towards this conclusion.

“... That’s not a bad idea at all.” She takes the pen off of her nose and starts scribbling on the same paper as before, having poked a hole through her writer’s block.

“Excellent!” He claps his hands together and stands up, causing the chair to vanish back to wherever it came from. “With that settled, how about I treat you to supper. You’ll have more energy to think on a full stomach, after all.”

“Yeah, yeah, just let me at least empty my thoughts here first before I lose them.” She was so focused on her writing that she barely even recognized that he was even still there. After what could have been described as a few minutes, but it was impossible to tell how time even passed in this void, she finally puts down her pen which blinks out of existence, before standing up.

“You’re not planning on taking me to that cheap place again, are you?” she says, walking away from the desk which also faded away into nothingness behind her.

“Oh, perish the thought. You are much classier than that dive. Besides, I found out later that I’m allergic to the spices they use.” He puts his hand out for her to hold, but she walks on past without a notice. Shrugging, he catches up and the two of them fade out of sight, leaving a perfectly empty white void which slowly fades to dark.