

The Fourth Note

Chapter 1: The Helper

Before every math quiz, Roiza's desk becomes a small country with a border problem.

Girls stand two deep with their review sheets. Roiza, sixteen, explains the same problem three ways, patiently, until the third way lands. She is good at it. She has the grades for it, but mostly she has the patience for it.

"How do you KNOW that?" someone asks, and Roiza shrugs, and the shrug is honest: she just sees it.

The week before the first quiz, she walks a tenth-grader through the same fraction problem four times, and on the fourth time the girl does the next one alone and shrieks so loudly the hallway turns to look. Roiza rides that shriek for days. Being the helper means you get to hand people the click - you watch their face do the thing your face does privately, and it is the best part of the week, every week.

She likes being the helper. She is aware this is a flaw, the liking, but it is also useful, so she keeps it.

Her mother once asked, over soup, whether explaining all evening counts as homework. Roiza said it counts double - you learn a thing properly when you teach it. She believed that then. She still believes it. It is just that the sentence has a second half nobody says out loud: the teacher in the pair is not allowed to be the one who is lost.

The new unit starts in October. It has letters where the numbers should be, and for the first time in her school career, Roiza does not just see it.

Chapter 2: The First Draft

She waits a week for it to click. Units usually click.

This one does not click. It sits on the board like a language from a country she has no relatives in.

On Sunday, Roiza writes a note to Morah.

"Dear Morah, I am completely lost in the new unit and I think I need - "

She crosses it out. Completely lost is too dramatic. She is the helper. Helpers do not write "completely lost."

She tries again: "Morah, a few of us were wondering if you could review - "

A few of us. She stares at it. She has just made herself into a committee to avoid saying "I."

She folds both drafts into the garbage and does the assigned problems instead, badly, copying the pattern of the example without understanding why the pattern works. Over the week she

fishes one out, smooths it flat on the desk, reads it twice, and crumples it again. It still says the wrong thing. The bin keeps both of them, two paper balls of almost.

Chapter 3: The Quiz

The quiz is on Wednesday, and it goes the way copying patterns goes.

Seventy-two.

Roiza has never brought home a seventy-two in math. She stares at it, and the seventy-two stares back, and around her, girls are comparing grades, and someone says "Roiza, what did you get, tell me you can explain number four" - and she says "not my best" and explains number four, because the old unit is in number four and the old unit is still hers.

She slides the quiz into her bag between two folders, flat, so it will not crease - as if the problem were the creasing. At home she puts it under the math book instead of on the fridge, where the good ones go. Her mother asks how the quiz was and Roiza says "fine," and the word tastes like the copied patterns: the right shape, no understanding.

That night, she drafts the note a third time.

"Morah, I've been meaning to ask since the unit started, and now there's also the quiz, and I realize I should have - "

Too much confession. A confession is a different note for a different person. She throws it out.

And here is the thing she notices, crumpling it: the note is getting HARDER to write, not easier. Last week it needed one sentence. Now it needs the sentence plus an explanation of the week plus the quiz. Delay is not free. Delay charges.

Chapter 4: The Compound

The next week is worse, the way debts are worse.

The unit builds on itself - units do that - and every new page assumes the page she did not understand. She starts doing the homework last, at night, when there is no one to see her copy patterns.

A classmate asks her to explain the new unit's sheet, and Roiza says, "I'm not the best person for this one," and the classmate laughs, because obviously that is a joke, Roiza is the best person for everything.

It is not a joke. The laugh follows her home.

That night she does something she has never done: she copies without caring that she is copying. It is faster. That is the worst part - it is faster, and it feels like walking downstairs in the dark, missing a step every time.

Her brother notices she is doing math at the kitchen table at ten at night and says, "Since when do you do homework at night?" and she says, "Since this unit," and he shrugs and takes an apple and goes. He is right to shrug. It is her unit, her hole.

She does the math she is good at, which is arithmetic: two more weeks until the unit test. If she asks now, the fix is small. If she asks after the test, the fix is the test grade plus the silence plus the same two weeks of lost ground.

Every version of later costs more than now. Now is the cheapest it will ever be again.

Chapter 5: Being Asked

On Thursday, Peppy stops her in the hallway.

Peppy is in tenth grade, cheerful, and not at all embarrassed.

"You're Roiza, right? The math Roiza? I have a quiz tomorrow on the old unit - the one you did last year. Can you show me the trick for the word problems? I'm asking today and not tomorrow morning, because tomorrow morning is too late to learn anything, my sister says."

They sit on the hallway bench for ten minutes, and Roiza teaches her the trick, and Peppy gets it, and thanks her like Roiza has handed her something valuable.

Peppy packs up her pencil case and says, as she goes, "Asking early leaves less to catch up on." She says it the way you quote a family proverb, not the way you teach a lesson, and then she is gone, off to learn the rest of the old unit before tomorrow, like a person who plans.

Watching Peppy walk off with the trick in her pocket, Roiza feels the small warm thing she always feels after teaching - the reason she keeps the helper job, flaw and all.

And Roiza sits there afterward, holding her books, doing the other arithmetic.

Peppy asked for help. Early, before the quiz, plainly, like a person ordering lunch. Roiza does not think less of her. Roiza thinks MORE of her - the "today and not tomorrow" was smart, Peppy called it smart herself, and she was right.

When they ask me, it's planning, Roiza thinks. When I ask, it's failure. That math does not work. That math has never worked.

Chapter 6: The Fourth Note

The fourth note is short.

"Morah - I'm lost in the new unit. Could I come during office hours? And is there a sheet I should redo before then? - Roiza"

No "completely." No committee. No confession. It is the same note she could have written in week one, and it costs more now - the quiz, the silence - but it costs less than next week, and next week costs less than the test.

She does not fold it into the garbage.

She walks it to the teacher's room during lunch, and her heart is going fast, and Morah reads it in three seconds, because it is three sentences.

"Good," Morah says. "Tuesday and Thursday. Bring the quiz - we'll see where it went. And Roiza? This note is exactly the right move. The earlier it comes, the smaller the fix."

Chapter 7: Office Hours

She almost does not go. Lunch is loud and friendly, and the teacher's room is a hallway away, and she stands at the corner for one full minute arguing with herself. Then she goes, because the argument is the same arithmetic as always, and she is tired of paying interest on a note she could have handed in weeks ago.

Tuesday's office hours are twenty minutes and not dramatic, which is the surprise.

Morah finds the break in two minutes - it is the third lesson, the one Roiza copied patterns through - and rebuilds it with blocks, on paper, until Roiza sees it. Actually sees it, the old feeling, the "how do you KNOW that" feeling, except now she knows how you know that: someone shows you, after you ask.

She works it through once more on the scrap paper, out loud, and hears herself say "so the letter just STANDS for the gap" - and Morah nods like that is the whole lesson, because it is.

"The quiz stays as it is," Morah says, "but the unit test is what counts. Two more sessions, and redo sheets four and five - that covers the base the test builds on." She says it like a plan, not a promise.

Three sessions, counting today. That is the price, asked in week four.

Roiza thinks about the price asked in week one: one session, probably. Maybe just the blocks.

Delay charges, she writes in her notebook that night, next to the redo sheets. Asking is planning. The helpers are allowed to ask.

Chapter 8: Tuesday Again

The unit test is not perfect and it is not a disaster; it is an 89, which is a number with a history, and Roiza knows the history better than anyone.

She keeps helping before quizzes. The desk still becomes a small country.

The difference is Tuesdays. On Tuesdays, at lunch, the math helper walks to the teacher's room with her sheet and her questions, and once, when a classmate asks where she's going, Roiza says, "Office hours. I'm lost in the new section - it's cheaper to ask early."

The classmate looks at her like she has said something wise.

It is not wise. It is just arithmetic, and arithmetic only counts when you do it. Roiza has started keeping a small tally in the corner of her sheet - one mark per Tuesday - not because anyone asked her to, but because the marks are the difference between a plan and a mood. Four marks so far. The new section is not small yet, but it is smaller every week, and smaller has a direction.

So she does it. On Tuesday, Roiza picks up her sheet at the end of lunch, walks the hallway that used to take her a full minute of arguing, and knocks on the teacher's room door.

Word travels the way it does. By the next unit, two other girls have office-hours sheets of their own, and one of them tells Roiza, "I heard it's cheaper on Tuesdays," like it is a saying already.

Roiza does not correct her. Some things are allowed to become sayings.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The price curve

From the story, what does asking cost in week one, week four, and after the unit test? What makes the note HARDER to write each time, not easier?

Activity 2: Planning or failure?

Roiza believes: when others ask, it's planning; when she asks, it's failure. From the story, list the evidence that this math "does not work." Why does being asked by Peppy unlock what three drafts could not?

Activity 3: The three drafts

Read the three failed drafts in Chapters 2 and 3. What is wrong with each one - what is each draft protecting? Why does the fourth note work, at three sentences?

Activity 4: Delay arithmetic (all numbers made up for practice)

Asking in week 1 costs 1 help session. Each week of waiting adds a session and drops the quiz average 5 points. If a girl waits 4 weeks, how many sessions does the fix cost? If she waits 8 weeks? What does the arithmetic NOT capture? Show your steps.

Activity 5: "What the good students do"

Morah calls the note "exactly the right move" and says the earlier it comes, the smaller the fix. Why does she praise the action instead of ranking students? What is the difference between asking and giving up?

Activity 6: Draw the border problem

Draw Roiza's desk before a quiz: the girls two deep, the review sheets, Roiza mid-explanation. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Ayelet's kitchen - planning for a fictional case

A teen named Ayelet is the family's best cook, and for three weeks she has been ruining the same complicated recipe and hiding the failures, too embarrassed to ask her aunt - the one who taught her - for help. Write the sentence her delay keeps making more expensive, the plain three-sentence ask she could make, and what the mirror moment might look like in her kitchen. One sentence each, with names.

Activity 8: Word grid

Find eight words left to right. Row/column numbering begins at 1.

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A S K J K V W B F Y
H E L P L M N O R S
E A R L Y I Q Z X J
C O S T F Y G H U P
N O T E R S T C D E
L O S T X J K V W B
P L A N U P L M N O
Q U I Z D E A I Q Z
X J K V W B F Y G H
U P L M N O R S T C

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ASK, HELP, EARLY, COST, NOTE, LOST, PLAN, QUIZ. Which word names what delay charges, and which word names what asking actually is?