

Fanfiction

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Adventure Time

You Didn't Even Say Goodbye

Simon lifted the glass he held in his hands to his lips and took a sip of his wine, hoping it would grease his strained vocal cords. For what felt like hours by now, he had been recounting the adventures with Fionna and Cake and Scarab and Betty, the very same adventures he had returned from only the day before. Princess Bubblegum wouldn't let him spare any detail, however minute, and he had a lot more story yet to tell. But his throat was getting sore, and he felt his voice beginning to rasp. The dinner with PeeBee and Marceline he'd been invited to, having consisted of candy, candy, and candy with a side of candy, wasn't of much help in that regard either.

"So," Simon braved on, "Prismo put a wall between us and the Scarab. But we knew that it wouldn't hold him off for long. He kept hammering at it with incredible strength. The entire place was shaking, I tell you. And then Fionna used Prismo's remote control and zapped us away into Farmworld, smack in the middle of a cornfield. Lucky for me, I guess, because there was a scarecrow right there, so I exchanged the muumuu Prismo magicked onto me with its clothes. It was nice to slip into a wearable set of clothes again. The muumuu is so... breezy. And itchy."

"What's Farmworld?" Peebs asked flatly without looking up from the notebook on the dinner table in front of her, which she vigorously kept scribbling into.

"One of the alternate universes we zapped through. Everyone there was either a farmer or a scavenger."

"Interesting. Please continue."

"Speaking of interesting," Simon perked up, "Farmworld Finn was a farmer. Can you believe that? I would've thought he'd be more into the adventurous lifestyle of

the scavengers of Farmworld. The boy is all about adventure, after all! Instead, he had a farm and a barn and a bunch of cute little kids! He sure is full of surprises.”

“He’s always been all about righteousness and justice,” PB said monotonously while still scribbling her notes, “I don’t think the lawless life of scavengers would suit him.”

A puzzled Simon looked at PB’s undeterred, speedy writing. Surely he hadn’t said enough in the past few seconds to warrant such vigorous, uninterrupted note-taking?

“So, what happened next, Simon?” Marceline asked chirpily as she sank her fangs into her wine glass and sucked the red out of it. Then she propped her head on her fists, resting her elbows on the table, and looked at Simon with those same expectant big eyes she used to direct at him when he’d tell her goodnight stories way back when she was a little girl.

“Next? Well,” Simon hesitated for a moment, “We began to look for the Crown in that world.”

Marceline straightened up. “What? Why?”

“It seemed like the best course of action. The only course of action, actually. Prismo warned us that Scarab would be hunting us down. So we needed firepower to defend ourselves. As the Ice King, I could fight an army of Scarabs on my own, easy-peasy. And me being the Ice King again would return the magic to Fionna and Cake’s world, of course. That would’ve solved all of their problems. And it would’ve kept them safe. As long as Ice King was around, they could keep living and being happy.”

Marcy stared at him, tight-lipped, as fury filled her gaze with daggers.

“Please don’t be mad, Marcy. They really needed my help. I couldn’t just leave them to be erased from existence. And, to be perfectly honest, after all these years of failing to find Betty, let alone saving her from Golb, having some purpose in life felt nice for a change.”

“Did you find the Crown in the Farmworld?” PeeBee asked clinically. She turned a page in her notebook and kept scribbling, all while keeping her gaze fixed on Simon.

“No. As it turns out, the Cro-”

BAM.

Marceline had slammed her hands onto the table and bolted up with tear-filled eyes, nearly tipping her chair over in the process.

“I can’t believe you, Simon,” she growled between gritted teeth and floated out of the dining room, disappearing into the darkness of the Candy Palace corridors.

It took Simon a few moments to gather his wits. As he quickly regained his senses, he stood up to go after her.

“Simon, wait,” PB said calmly. He turned towards her to see her closing her notebook and putting her pen aside.

“What?”

“I found that, in these kinds of situations, it’s usually best to give Marcy a bit of time to cool off and sort her thoughts first. Specifically, around four minutes and fifty-two seconds.”

Simon stared at her as if she had been speaking a foreign language. “What?”

“In my experience, it helps to give her some time first,” Peebs said.

Simon blinked. Twice. “I’m gonna go now,” he said flatly and left for the door.

The corridors were dimly lit. To the right, an alley of colourful doors extended deeper into the palace. To the left, an open balcony door was a short distance ahead, from which a fresh night breeze crept indoors. Simon decided that this was the safer bet and headed into the quiet night that greeted him outside.

“Marcy?” he called out softly, only to be met with silence.

“Marcy, are you here?”

"Yes," a stifled voice under the balcony replied.

"Can we talk?"

There was no reply.

"It's okay. We don't have to talk right now. I'll wait here until you're ready and feel like it. Or, let me know if you prefer me to leave."

Simon leaned over the balustrade and waited patiently, sorting out his thoughts and placing his feelings into words just in case that may come in handy. A few minutes later, Marcy reappeared with a sigh. Her eyes were puffy.

"Hey, Marcy," Simon exhaled.

"Hey, Simon."

"Are you okay?"

"Dunno. Kinda."

"Do you... Want to talk about it?"

"I guess." She floated above and around him like a bubble.

Simon decided it would probably be for the best to not have his eyes chase after her and instead directed his gaze over the Candy Kingdom's distant, gentle contours in the moonlight.

"Do... Do you want me to start? Or would you like to start?" Simon tried.

"You start," Marcy replied.

"Alright. So, I guess what I was trying to-"

"I changed my mind," Marcy interrupted as she rapidly dropped into his sight. "Can I start?"

"Uhm... Sure, sure you can, Marcy."

Marcy flew closer, now facing him directly. "How could you, Simon? Just... How

could you? What were you thinking?"

Simon loosened his bow tie. "Well, as I was saying," he stammered, "I thought it was pretty much our best course of action, and-"

"It took me a thousand years to get Simon back. It took *Golb* to show up and mess up entire Ooo, Simon. Logarithmic *Golb*, Simon. Why? Why would you do that? Why are you so eager to leave again?"

"It wasn't about leaving, Marcy, at least not like that. It was-"

"Who knows how long it would've taken you to turn back into Simon again. Or whether that would happen at all. I *just* got you back!"

"I know, Marcy, but-" but she sank away from him and underneath the balcony again.

"..ou.. eent..ey..ood..eye," she mumbled from below.

Simon leaned as far over the balusters as his hips would permit. "Marcy, honey, I didn't quite catch that. Could you repeat that for me, please?"

"I said: you didn't even think to say goodbye, Simon."

A bolt along his spine froze Simon. Fear and guilt rose up from his toes and consumed him as he realised that, simply put, all things considered, summa summarum, that was nothing but true. There was no two ways about it. He hadn't thought about Marcy at all back there. At all.

Monkeyfeathers. He had done it again. Oh no. Oh no no no. Monkeyfeathers. Monkeyfeathers monkeyfeathers monkeyfeathers.

"You would've up and gone and become the Ice King again. You nearly *did*, didn't you? And just to save this... This Fionna and this Cake! And *their* world! And you didn't even think to say goodbye to me, Simon! Not even a *goodbye*! I would've found out that you're gone by watching Ice King raise his kingdom of ice and snow again and steal penguins from the zoos. That's how I'd have found out Simon is gone again. If at all. Or by watching the Ice King doing some other silly thing.

Flapping his beard, flying through the skies to watch leaves or something.”

“Marcy...”

“Couldn’t you get me and Peebs to help? You were zapping between worlds, right? You could’ve zapped into Ooo, or zapped us into yours? At least give us a call? You *know* we would’ve helped you, no questions asked!”

“I... Uh... I don’t know,” Simon admitted. “I don’t think I would’ve known how. We were sort of winging the entire thing.”

Marcy remained hidden from sight under the balcony and said nothing.

“I’m sorry, Marcy. I’m so sorry. I... I have no excuse for that. I’m really sorry.”

An unbearable silence followed. Marcy’s shaky voice finally broke it.

“Is it my fault?”

“What?”

She reappeared in front of him so rapidly that he nearly fell over backwards.

“I said: Is it my fault, Simon?”

“What? No? Is what your fault? What do you mean?”

“Tell me. You need to tell me if it is. I need to know.”

“Is what your fault? I-”

“I promise I’ll do better. I’ll call you every day! Every *day*, Simon. I promise! And I’ll come to visit you every week! No, twice a week. Monday and Friday. I can probably do Wednesdays as well. I’ll cancel band practice. Then can go to the pub and have dinner and go see the movies and-,”

“Marcy, honey, I’m still not following. What are you talking about?”

“Please, Simon,” she sobbed, “I promise. I *promise* promise. I’ll do better. Just, please, don’t leave again. Please.”

Simon felt his own tears making their way from his stinging eyes down his cheeks. He opened his arms, inviting Marceline into a hug.

“Goodness gracious, Marcy, come here.”

She flew into his arms, and he held her tightly as she sobbed into his neck.

“I’m so sorry, Marcy. None of this is your fault. None of it. You hear me? *None. Of. It.* What even makes you think something like that?”

“I don’t know,” Marcy whimpered into his neck. “It just keeps happening. Like it’s a pattern,” Marcy stammered through tears. “My dad was always a dillweed, he kept coming and going and doing and wrecking as he pleased. I thought my mom may have abandoned me for about a thousand years until I found that message she left. But she *did* send me away before she died, and she *did* lie to me, and she *did* die without saying goodbye. And you left once already to become the Ice King. Back when you were looking after me. And now you were about to leave again. To become Ice King. Again. And, this time, you didn’t even think to say goodbye. What am I supposed to think, Simon? The only common denominator is me, Marceline. That’s the one thing all of you have in common.”

Simon held her gently but determinedly, waiting for Marceline’s shaking to subside. He wanted to give the poor girl the time she needed to cry her heart out. She deserved that much, at least. And so much more.

Once she calmed, Simon said softly, “Marcy, honey, I’m so sorry. Look at me.” He leaned back so he could see her, cradling her face and wiping the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs.

“Listen to me, Marcy. This is very, *very* important. None of that was your fault. *None of it.*”

Tears welled up underneath Marcy’s puffy eyes again.

“You were an amazing, the most wonderful child, Marceline. You were a *blessing*. Nothing but a blessing. You cannot imagine how happy I was to have you back then. You were my only ray of sunshine in a decaying, splintering world. And now,

look at you! You've grown into an incredible woman! Slayer of vampires. Shredder of sick basslines. Is that how you say it? Sick basslines? In any case, having you around made my life infinitely better, Marcy. *Infinitely*. And it still does, both now and back when you were just a little girl."

Simon sighed.

"Us abandoning you was never any of your fault, Marcy. *Never*. It was always *us* blingblongs being stupid blobheads. We kept glubbing up, at your expense. I am so sorry things turned out this way in the past. So sorry, Marcy. You deserved so much better. I am so sorry I wasn't."

Marceline hugged him tightly again.

"Just... Please don't go. Or at least not like that. At least say goodbye, Simon."

"I'm not going anywhere, sweetie. I promise. I *promise* promise."

Marcy tightened her hug.

"It took me this entire wretched adventure to finally understand. I got a second chance, Marcy. But I didn't only get a second chance at being Simon. I got a second chance at doing *life*. And, this time around, I'm doing it *right*. No more running from obsession to obsession, no more neglecting how my actions affect those around me. No more. Things will be different. *I* will be different. I want to be happy and live life. And that includes spending time with you. And watching you play bass and sing at your concerts and having dinner with you and Bubblegum and watching you two be happy together and get married someday and raise your kids."

Marcy chuckled and separated from him. She stared at the floor, her cheeks graced by a modest blush.

"Some of those might take a while."

Simon took her hands into his.

"That's okay. I've got all the time in the world, kiddo. All that matters is that you're

happy.”

“I am. Just... Don’t scare me like that again. Ever.”

“I won’t. I promise. I’m here to stay.”

“Thank you, Simon.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for, Marcy.” He gave her forehead a kiss.

A loud crash in the inner court made them jerk to see LSP having slammed open a door and fleeing with her arms full of dozens of cakes in a humongous pile reaching far above her head lumps. Every couple of what would’ve been steps if LSP weren’t floating, a cake fell out of her grasp as she was making for the front gate, pursued by several Banana Guards and screaming like a cat that stubbed its toe.

“And while I’m waiting for those wedding invitations,” Simon thought, “I’m sure Ooo won’t fail to provide ample entertainment on its own.”

Arcane

Beneath the Fabrics

Vi looks around. She still cannot fathom why anybody would need a bathroom this big just for a single person. There's enough room for somebody to live in here. There's certainly more empty space than her entire prison cell used to have.

And it's so... warmly colourful. Vi knows white-tiled bathrooms and metal faucets with filth, mould, and chalk as the only decor. She knows bathrooms as a place to spend as little time as possible. But the Kiramman's bathroom is different. Their tiles are a light, creamy brown. Like beach sands. Vi wonders whether they make these them with actual sand. Some of the tiles are painted with lively dark green patterns. Perhaps "painted" isn't the right word here, Vi thinks, they look like the colour has been baked into them. There is a continuous line of these adornments across all four walls just below the height of Vi's shoulders. Other tiles, placed in regular patterns, have small pictures of animals on them. There are birds, there are rabbits, and there are kittens and puppies. The cabinets, hanging above the sink and the wall opposing it, are made of dark, warm-looking wood. The mirrors on them, the faucets, as well as the glass wall encapsulating the shower, all of them are finely ornamented and engraved. They sparkle and shine like stars. They look like something belonging in a museum, not like something to be touched and used daily. To clean yourself, nonetheless.

One by one, Vi lets her clothes drop onto the floor. The tiles under her soles are comfortably cool. A fresh flowery fragrance disperses from a small green bottle by the sink with a handful of wooden sticks in it. As Vi slips out of her trousers, she's interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Vi?" Caitlyn chirps from the other side. "It's me, I forgot to give you a fresh towel."

Vi praises herself for her foresight and for keeping her habit of leaving her bandages

for last. She opens the dark green door with a wide swing to find Caitlyn coiling back in surprise at the swift motion with a quiet “Oh!”.

Cait regains her composure in an instant, but then her eyes wander up and down and she turns visibly flustered at the unexpected sight of Vi facing her in her underwear. Her gaze quickly settles on Vi’s eyes with a hint of stiffness in her neck betraying her intention of keeping her look there. Vi smiles cheekily, pleased to have that effect on her.

“Thanks,” she grabs the towel from Cait’s hands.

“You’re welcome,” Cait mumbles and keeps staring sheepishly into her eyes.

“Anything else?” Vi leans against the wall in a deliberately slow motion.

“No, just the towel.”

“Cool. Then, if you don’t mind...” Vi reaches to close the door.

“Erm, Vi?”

“Yes?”

“Do you... Do you even shower with those on?” Cait points at her bandages, her lips drawn into a half-smirk.

Vi tilts her head and gives her an incredulous look befitting such a stupid question. “Of course not. I was about to take them off.”

“Right, right. Of course. It’s just... I’ve never seen you without them.”

“So?”

“Nothing. I was just curious. And a tad ridiculous, I suppose.”

“A tad?” Vi amusedly stares Caitlyn down. But the anxious tension that had stung her as soon as Cait had mentioned her bandages now creeps from underneath her lungs towards her throat. Vi notices her own hand holding the towel sliding behind her back as she shifts her weight.

“For a second, I thought you were planning on fighting the water.” Cait throws playful punches through the air and makes swooshing sounds as she does it.

Vi blinks at her. “Have you completely lost your marbles now?”

“No, I was just kidding.” Cait lets her head hang and rubs her eyes. “Not very well, apparently.” A mere moment later, she perks up again. “Oh! I’ve got it! You’re hiding something underneath, aren’t you?”

Fuck. Vi’s gut crunches into a pulp as a cold shiver runs down her spine. “Like what?”

“Oh, you are! You are so busted. What is it? A tattoo of the name of your past lover?” Her voice has a chirpy teasing tone, there is no malice in it.

“Yes, all ninety-seven of them,” Vi hisses at her. She feels the poison mix in with the words as she speaks. It was intended to come out sarcastic and over-the-top, but the venom oozes out of her before she can help it.

Caitlyn lets her head sink. *Fuck.*

“I’m sorry,” Cait stammers. “I didn’t mean anything by it. And I shouldn’t pry. Sorry. I’ll leave you to it now.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Vi calls after her, but she doubts it’ll undo any damage done. Cait waves back without turning around and disappears into her room.

Vi sighs behind the closed door and then continues undressing, leaving the bandages for last. She unties them underneath her elbow and unrolls them. The texture of the fabric tightly wrapped around her arms is etched on her skin. Released from its textile prison, it yearns for scratches.

With the bandages rolled a little further down, the first scar appears. It’s faint, it’s healed up nicely. Now it’s just a light thin streak across her forearm. As she unwraps the bandages further, more and more follow suit. A dozen, two dozen, three, four. Vi had never bothered to keep count. Most are across her arms, and only a few are lengthwise strokes. Some of them are fleshy red, scarred into hills, thick as rain worms. After she frees her hands and fingers from the fabrics, she lets

the bandages drop onto the floor and rubs her wrists. The hardened tissue there gets the most itchy. It feels rubbery under her touch. Vi steps into the shower.

Vi fidgeted with the glass shard in her fingers. Earlier that day, following a bursty noise of glass shattering, it had slid under the prison's kitchen doors and glided in front of her feet. It was small, about the size of her thumbnail, so it was easy to hide. She had picked it up out of boredom and curiosity, wondering whether she could get away with possessing contraband when a chance presented itself. But it could also prove to be a plaything, she figured, something to pass the long nights alone in her cell. Like she was doing now.

Only a single edge was sharp, ending in a pointy tip. She ran her fingers along it. It wasn't sharp enough to cut her with what little pressure she applied. She pushed the tip into her thumb until it hurt. It sent a fiery sting through her arm.

Vi looked at the skin on her thumb. The shard had left a small crease in it, but that wasn't the interesting bit. This pain was *different*. Her fists and knuckles were long desensitised from her daily wall-punching. The vibrations which hitting a brick sent through her bones dissipated quickly into a well-known numbness. This, however, first stung, then lingered on. It was a sharp, clear sensation that kept echoing through her flesh. She pushed her thumb in harder until a piercing sting made her flinch and drop the shard.

Vi looked with piqued curiosity at the single red drop of blood trailing down her hand. She had come to expect herself to have gone completely numb a long time ago. And yet there was a pulsating ache throbbing in her thumb. She had flinched. She had *flinched*! Her heart raced.

She picked the shard back up and carefully poked her palm, then her forearm with it. The sharp edge felt different than it did on her thumb, less pronounced and blunter, but the sting it sent through her skin and flesh was very similar. She pressed it harder against her forearm, tentatively at first, then bolder, until the pain spread all the way into her shoulder. She stared at it intently. Her heart was

beating in her ears. It was the middle of the night, but she was wide awake and focused. Her mind was clear. Crystal clear. She felt alive and present, breathing heavily. Her pulse was drumming in her neck.

She cut. A single brief, swift motion, and she could see drops of red running down her skin. The pain raged, flaring up like an oil fire blaze, and then it soothed as it dissipated.

Vi looked at the cut and saw herself. It oozed her innards outside, where they shouldn't be, where no one should see them. Vi smiled.

Vi *smiled*. The numbness leaked from her with her blood. A trade, she learned that night, a cut, a bit of pain and blood in exchange for taking the dull fog in her heart away from her, if only for a little while. A cut in exchange for a sensation. A fair trade, she felt.

She watched the blood run down her arm and felt a profound relief take hold of her. Her entire body slumped down, relaxed. She saw more than just herself in the red on her skin. It was just. It was right. A failure like her deserved to hurt and to bleed. She was a failure who let her family die and abandoned her sister and did nothing about it. She remained locked up on her own, idle and useless. The least she could do was to bleed for them. She deserved to suffer. She owed them that. This burning ache and crimson streams, dripping on the floor, were a just reward for her sins and failings. It felt right. It felt honest.

A sting of guilt ran through her when she realised how much better the pain had made her feel. She frowned. It wasn't a punishment if you enjoyed it. This won't do. A single cut wasn't enough. A bit of pain wasn't enough. She deserved more. She owed more. It's the least a failure like her could do. A quiet voice in her head prayed that the same relief would find her a second time as well, but she shushed it. It wasn't a punishment if you enjoyed it. Vi wiped her tears and placed the glass shard on her other arm, preparing for the next cut.

Vi turns around so the shower doesn't splash her face any longer. She wipes strands

of wet pink hair from her eyes and looks down on her left arm, where she knows her first scar to be. She can't remember which one it is. There are way too many of them now.

The stripes on her arms stand out as much as her pink hair. Even the thin faint ones. They are marks of her past, cursing her to carry it on her body into every new day. They're different from the battle scars she proudly displays. Fighting scars are badges of honour. They're a warning and a threat. But these are monuments to her weaknesses and failures. She doesn't like looking at them. She doesn't like remembering. She doesn't like other people knowing.

Vi runs her fingers over the ragged lines. The wraps can even manage to hide them from touch. But without them, the hardened tissue may as well be as big as mountains. She rubs her wrists again and sighs.

Vi lay motionlessly on her mattress until the outside noises had died down. It could've been minutes or hours she had spent this way, staring at the grey ceiling whose every nook and crack were already carved into her mind. She didn't know, nor did she care. The dull grey surrounded her incessantly in her cell. Sometimes she felt that she even breathed grey.

It didn't matter.

Once the other prisoners had quieted down for night rest, she slowly lifted herself up with a groan. Quiet hours meant more time between patrols. Vi didn't want to be interrupted.

Just standing up was enough to make her swollen eye throb. She shifted her weight onto her left leg. The fucker had gotten her good with his fucking iron bar on her right thigh and knee the other day. Or was that today? She couldn't even remember how many hits she had taken. Three? Four? Five, maybe?

It didn't matter.

She unwrapped her bandages and threw them onto the mattress, trying not to turn her torso too much to spare her cracked ribs. Old grey scars and fresh dark ones were strewn across her arms.

Vi limped a few steps to the wall. Reaching up, her fingers sought for the small hole in the mortar between two bricks close to the ceiling. They found it quickly. She pulled out what she came for with her nails and let herself slide down the wall onto the ground. As her knee touched the floor, she lost her balance and fell the rest of the way. Her bruised ribs sent waves of dull throbs through her core. The grey cell floor was aggressively cold and hard.

It didn't matter.

She squirmed onto her back and firmly gripped her contraband, lifting it up so she could see it. It was a finger-long, thin piece of grey plastic from a shattered lunch tray. In and of itself, it was unremarkable. But it fit in the tiny hole in the mortar, and the fuckers never managed to stumble upon it during their inspections. And, more importantly, Vi had discovered that she could sharpen it on the brick walls. It never got as sharp as a knife or her first glass shard, but it did the trick. The fuckers had taken her shard in a matter of days.

She ran her finger along the makeshift blade. It felt sharp enough. Vi positioned it on her arm and pressed it firmly into her skin. Then she cut. A quick jerking motion and it was done. The ragged blade tore more than it sliced. It didn't matter. A well-known stinging fire spread through her arm. Vi looked at the dark blood leaving her. It felt wrongly warm on her skin. Failures don't deserve to be warmed.

She had gotten herself beaten for no reason. For getting into a fight with an inmate for no reason. There was no point in beating up that girl. There was no point in beating up annoying little shits. There were plenty of Silco's thugs around who still had too many teeth in their mouths and the audacity to breathe. And yet she was wasting days of recovery on an annoying little shit with her actions. It was a moronic thing to do. She should've known better. She shouldn't have lost control. She shouldn't have been so useless.

The ache of the cut subsided and gave in to the grey throbbing before the drops of

blood had even reached her shoulder. The twisted sense of relief a timid part of her was hoping for never appeared. Good. It wasn't a punishment if you enjoyed it. She deserved to suffer, and nothing else.

She placed the grey blade on her other arm, about a hand's width from her elbow, but then reconsidered the position. There was too much scar tissue there already. Scar tissue was harder to cut through. Sometimes the plastic struggled against it. Vi moved it upwards to her wrist. Looking at the blade clawing into her skin, she hesitated. She remembered somebody telling her that slitting your wrist open could kill you. But she had done it before. Several scars already rose above the skin on her wrists, they were proof of that. And she had been fine. So she cut.

There. Nothing happened. She was still there. Alive. Breathing in the grey. Disgustingly warm blood oozed out of her wrist. The burning tingling in her flesh dissipated into the dull throbbing again. Vi looked at her bleeding wrist disappointedly. She had hoped for something else to happen. She had hoped to feel differently this time, somehow. Something, anything, as long as it was different. Even a little bit. This cut supposedly was able to kill you. But it felt just as dull and familiar as the previous one. Vi didn't know what exactly she had hoped for, but it wasn't this, more of the same numb nothingness all over again. It filled her with dull anger. How dare even her body let her down like that? Couldn't she have *anything*? She picked up the grey blade and slit across her other wrist with more force.

Dark blood dripped down her arms and onto the cold floor. Nothing, again, save for the same old dull sensations. Nothing. The air was still grey. Her flesh was still grey. Her bones were still grey. She let her arms slump down. A tired tear of disappointment welled up in the eye which wasn't swollen shut. She couldn't even have this. She couldn't even get this right. Useless.

This cut supposedly was able to kill you. And now she had two of them. Maybe this time they would kill her. They probably wouldn't. She was quite certain they wouldn't. The cuts were shallow. And they hadn't killed her in the past. But maybe this time, they would, somehow. Maybe this time, she wouldn't wake up again. And if she didn't wake up again, then maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing in the

world. Maybe it would be something that wasn't grey and dull. Maybe it would be different, somehow. Maybe something would change. Even a little bit. Maybe it would even be something where being useless and tired was okay, if only for a minute. And Vi was tired. So tired.

It didn't matter.

Vi lay motionlessly on the aggressively cold cell floor for ages, bleeding silently into the grey.

When footsteps of the fucker on night duty resounded through the corridors, Vi was still awake. She recognized his gait and the sound of his heavy leather boots on the stone floor. This fucker sometimes whistled while making the rounds. Fucking *whistled*. Like he was having a nice, sunny day at the zoo, watching animals sleep in their cages.

She crawled back quietly onto her mattress with heavy limbs, the achings in her right leg and her ribs reminding her of her failings again without a trace of mercy. Cursing them wordlessly for their weakness, she pretended to be asleep, trying to avoid attracting any attention. Most of the blood on her arms had dried already or was on the floor. Only small dark patches seeped into the grey linens.

She was too exhausted to deal with any fuckers at the moment. Her limbs were too heavy. And it was her own damn fault. That's what you got for being a useless failure. She had to resort to hiding, fleeing, pretending to be asleep because she had been so useless. A quiet rage welled up inside of her as she lay on her mattress. She wished she had her grey makeshift blade in her fingers to tear into her flesh again.

The fucker strolled past her cell without making a halt. The sound of his boots on the grey stones echoed through the corridor as he passed her cage.

After his steps disappeared in the distance, Vi slowly lifted herself up with a groan, silently cursing her throbbing ribs and leg again. And herself. Embers of rage simmered in her stomach, but she was tired. She looked down at her arms. They were covered with crusty patches where her blood had dried. She scratched the stains off with her nails like dirt, leaving her fresh wounds alone to heal in peace. The gashes in her skin hadn't wronged her. They deserved to be left alone. Deeming her skin

clean enough, she rubbed some warmth into her arms and began bandaging them up again.

Each loop she drew with the fabric around her shivering arm felt like a small, undeserved kindness. The wraps hugged her firmly. They concealed what never should see the light of day – the weak her, the marks of her failures. They held her. They reassured her. Yes, she had been useless, she knew, but she wouldn't stay that way for long. She'll do better. She'll be better. She'll be someone deserving of the warmth in which the fabrics enveloped her forearms. She promised. She swore. Vi nodded and a single tear dropped onto her scarred and tortured skin, where it got buried under the carefully wrapped bandages moments later.

She'll do better. She'll be better. She promised.

Annealing embers of rage simmered on quietly in her stomach. She stoked the fire with each breath of ashen grey and nurtured the flames back into a blaze. Oh yes, she'll do better. So much better. After all, there were plenty of fuckers around who needed their teeth bashed in. Vi let the flames consume her. Her knuckles were itching.

Vi turns the temperature up and lets the hot water run over her head. Her eyes are closed, her arms hang loosely beside her. If only the water could get hot enough, it could wash away the memory of the aggressively cold cell floor on her back, splattered in her blood. The water isn't hot enough. It never is. The memories are there to stay, just like the scars. The scars are marks of the past, just like the memories.

It's been years since she had given herself the last ones.

She turns around and opens her eyes. The green bathroom door is in her field of vision, surrounded by sandy brown tiles with green motifs painted on. She'll have to open that door and step outside eventually. She'll have to open that door and face Cait eventually.

Cait. She's already aware that Vi's covering something with the wraps, that much is obvious. She's polite and will likely not ask again, but keeping the secret will erect a wall between them. Vi doesn't want that. She doesn't like other people knowing. She doesn't even like looking or remembering herself. But she doesn't want to keep Cait at a distance either. No, in fact, she *wants* her to know. She wants *her* to know. And she wants her to stay once she knows. Or at least to not run away. At least not that. Please. Not that.

Staying is not what usually happens, though. Usually, once they know, they raise a wall. A different wall. A wall that separates the disgusting and pitiful from the normal and the slightly and the pretty. A wall pretending not to see what's before their eyes. A wall of silence and blindness. And usually, Vi is just fine with that.

But Vi wants to be seen. By *her*.

Vi enters Cait's brightly lit room and closes the door behind her. She is fully dressed, including her red jacket and heavy boots. There's a chance she'll be asked to leave any minute now, she figures, through words or otherwise. Her fists clench tightly around the loose bandages in her pockets. She is fully dressed but feels naked. Better sooner than later, she keeps telling herself. Might as well get it over with.

Caitlyn is in her big blue chair by her desk. The pen in her hand hastily scribbles a stream of words into a black notebook. "Are you done?" she asks softly without looking up from the pages in front of her, still writing.

Vi approaches her, forcing her own feet to take steps forward on the gold-green patterned carpet. Both her hands are in her pockets, her arms pressed closely into herself. It barely conceals it. Caitlyn isn't looking at her right now anyway. But she will see. Any second now. Better sooner than later. Might as well get it over with.

"Yes." Vi is two steps away from her. This should be close enough. Closer is weird. And awkward. A step back is fleeing. We don't do that. Vi still thinks about what

words to choose to break this barrel open. She had been thinking about that ever since she turned off the water in the shower. She had come up with nothing.

Caitlyn twirls around in her chair to face Vi. “Great, then I’ll-”

Her gaze immediately finds Vi’s bare arms. Cait’s still sitting, they are at her eye level. They are impossible to miss. Vi pressing her forearms into herself can’t hide it. It isn’t supposed to, but it also is. The hesitant part of her is now loudly screaming to keep it buried and hidden, but the whole point of the exercise is to get it over with. Vi can feel Cait’s stare sticking to the scars. It’s all or nothing now, let’s get it over with. She pulls her hands from her pockets and turns her palms towards Cait.

“Yeah. That’s me without the bandages.”

She sees the shock on her face as plain as day, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, ringing for words that would be appropriate. Vi knows exactly how this spectacle goes. She’s had the pleasure of this dance before. In the prison showers, in the yearly medical check-ups, whenever her bandages slipped up. She knows this dance intimately. First comes the horror, when the realisation sets in. Then a split second of disgust, only to be clumsily masked by feigned worry. Then the empty words and, finally, the change of subject, inflating an elephant into the room and erecting the wall of silence over the matter. The dancefloor is open, the music is playing.

“Oh, Vi...” Caitlyn reaches for her hands. She gently places her palms on the torn and bruised skin on Vi’s knuckles and carefully lifts them, bringing them mere inches away from her face. Her gaze wanders across the dozens of fleshy mounds on Vi’s forearms, from mark to mark.

Here it comes, Vi rolls her eyes.

Caitlyn stays quiet.

Looming above the seated Cait, Vi studies the subtle contortions in her expression. She’s masking it well, Vi thinks.

But the horror Vi is waiting for doesn’t make an appearance on Caitlyn. Nor the disgust, to her surprise. Yet they soon find their way into Vi’s heart instead. About

as soon as she realises that all she sees on Cait is hurt.

It's not supposed to go that way. It's not supposed to hurt *her*. It's supposed to tear a rift between them. To erect an invisible stone wall in a single breath, followed by a twinge of shame, disappointment, and anger that lingers in Vi for hours and makes her want to pick a fistfight the first chance she gets. Not making *her* eyes well up with tears.

Caitlyn guides her hand towards the barrage of strokes on Vi's wrists. She halts just before her fingertips reach her and looks up to Vi.

Vi notices her clenched jaw. She's trying to keep herself composed. They both are. Vi nods, and Cait runs her fingers across her tortured skin. Her touch is feather-light. Vi only feels light pressure when they cross the hardened marks, none of the tenderness in the exploring caress.

Vi swallows and clears her throat.

"That's all from a long time ago," she mumbles with a cracking voice. "From Still-water." She watches Cait's fingers slowly trail upwards along her arm.

"I'm so sorry," Cait whispers and places her hand on Vi's palm. She envelops Vi's hand with both of hers.

"It's not your fault."

Caitlyn looks up at her. She draws Vi closer by her hand and leans forward, resting her head on Vi's stomach.

"I'm glad you're still here," she whispers into Vi. "I'm glad I got to meet you." Her thumb strokes over the scars on Vi's wrist.

"Me too," Vi wraps her arm around Cait's shoulders. "Me too."

Lonely Day

The lantern dangles in Viktor's hand, its dim light barely illuminating the gravelly path a step or two ahead. He has no need for much light, he knows the way. Pebbles crunch under his soles as he strains one foot in front of the other, leaning heavily on his crutch. The chilled air weighs heavy with smells of cut grass and freshly unearthed dirt. Somewhere in the distance, seagulls screech. Their screams carry far in the quiet of the moonless night.

Viktor's eyes are fixed on the ground he's treading. His foothold is sure enough, he's not worried about that. But he doesn't dare look up to see it approaching. His lungs rattle and heave with every breath. They don't fill with air as they used to. It had progressed. But he's not permitting the cursed frailty to take this from him. Not today.

His thoughts are preoccupied in search for words. They find many, but none.

Viktor finally arrives, wheezing and aching. The cool night air chills the sweat drops running down his neck and temples. The dark unpolished granite in front of him doesn't reflect the lantern's light, but the golden engravings glimmer painfully bright.

Councilman Jayce Talis

The Man of Progress

A proud-looking profile is etched into the stone. It's hardly visible in the dim light his lamp gives off. The image shares the cocky, lordly features they imbued him with for those darned Progress Day posters. The overworked man that Viktor knows, the unshaved man with bags under his eyes, hunched over mountains of papers and labouring away on the other side of the table deep into the night hours,

is nowhere to be seen.

Knew. The man he *knew*.

Viktor sets the lantern down on the ground.

"Hello there, old friend," he groans, short of breath. "I'm sorry I'm late. You wouldn't believe the busy day I've had. Actually, you of all people might believe it."

He slowly and achingly lowers himself onto the grass before the grave, gingerly placing his crutch next to him.

"To be perfectly honest," Viktor sighs, "I'm not entirely sure why I'm here. I thought I should come and talk to you since I didn't get a moment to do so properly yesterday. There were just too many people around all the blasted time."

He shrugs. "And yet, the entire way here I couldn't think of a single thing I wanted to talk to you about. But I came nevertheless. Isn't that strange?" Viktor lifts his palms into the air.

He waits, even though he knows very well that no answer will come.

"Stranger things have happened, I suppose," Viktor nods to himself.

He lifts the lantern, bringing it closer to the cold stone looming in front of him.

"They built you a nice one," Viktor nods and lets out a long quiet whistle. "Really nice. The engraving is beautiful. They even gilded the hammer of House Talis."

When the sight of the golden letterings begins to carve into his chest, Viktor looks away. "I must admit, I am a little jealous," he adds. "I don't think I will be remembered as you are."

He shines his lamp on the heaps of flowers and forests of burnt candles surrounding them. "You were a very popular man, after all. Just look at all these. So many people came to say goodbye. Which, by the way, reminds me," he reaches into his vest pocket, "I brought you a little something too."

He places a candle between them.

"I'm sure you would have preferred some strong spirit, but I'm afraid they were quite adamant not to bring any foodstuff onto the cemetery. Due to the animals and some such."

Viktor fishes out a lighter from his pocket. "So since I brought you flowers yesterday, I thought a candle would be appropriate today."

He lights the candle and watches it burn, the flame dancing in the imperceptible breath of wind. The extinguished candles around it flicker enviously in the faint light it gives off.

"Just one of many," Viktor notes. "And like the others, it'll go out eventually."

He looks up to Jayce's image in the cold stone.

"But you weren't just one of many, were you?"

Viktor waits for the answer that won't come.

"No, you certainly weren't."

He hugs his knees.

"You should've seen your funeral yesterday. You would've hated it," Viktor laughs. "Yes, you would've hated it. So many formalities. I could hear you rolling your eyes. Let me tell you, they wouldn't stop giving speeches. One after the other, all of them had something *so* important to say. About how great and amazing you were, about how grateful they were for you, how you're the pride of Piltover, how you'll be sorely missed, how both you and us were robbed."

He runs his hands through his hair. "Most of them had hardly spent ten minutes talking to you while you were alive. But that didn't stop them from giving grand talks. It was the social event of the day, you know? Not to be missed by anyone of higher standing."

Viktor smiles somberly. "You were always better at that, you know? I'm sure you know. All the speeches and politics and showmanship, that was your thing. Saying all the words that need to be said and that don't mean what they mean. I never got

the hang of it.”

He looks at his feet. His smile vanishes.

“So I hope you can forgive me for keeping my eulogy short. The appropriate words eluded me,” he sighs. “I could find none as weighty as they ought to be. There is something there,” he gestures at his chin, “something that is oddly tying my tongue to my jaw. Whatever word I try to enunciate, it’s as light as hot air and just as worthless. Just... hollow. Do you know what I mean? None of the words I thought of were right. At all.”

Viktor covers his eyes. “And even though I kept it short and to the point, I thought myself a liar and a charlatan while I spoke. Don’t get me wrong,” he adds hastily, “nothing I said was a lie – I will miss you. Your absence pains me greatly. You *were* a great man. An inspiration, a leader, a friend. And yet...”

Viktor hesitates.

“And yet, yesterday was but a hollow performance for an audience of mourners and socialites.”

He leans back to look at Jayce’s image again.

“As a matter of fact, I’m still not sure what to say. Or what to tell you. So I suppose apologising for it is a start, even though I still don’t know how to do better. So please, forgive me.”

He looks up into Jayce’s stony gaze until the silence gnaws at him. A bitter chuckle escapes him.

“This is all a bit ridiculous, isn’t it. I’m apologising to a stone as if it were you as if you could hear me. Did you know that I don’t even know whether you’re truly buried here? Did you know that? They didn’t even let me see your body. Imagine that. They called on your poor mother to identify you, that poor woman. But they wouldn’t let me see you. So I haven’t seen you with my own eyes. All I’ve seen is a casket, carried by six men and lowered into the ground,” he hisses.

“So is it really you who is lying buried here? Perhaps it was all a mistake, an er-

ror? Perhaps this is all just an elaborate joke? Will you leap from the shadows any moment now, yelling ‘Surprise, now let’s get back to work, we have much to do?’”

His wild gesturing extinguishes the candle between them. Viktor rubs his temple and tiredly lights it again.

“Forgive me, friend. That was the grief talking, I believe. It’s been a long, long day. And a very lonely day.”

He leans back again.

“You know, it wasn’t supposed to be like this. I wasn’t supposed to be the one giving speeches. I wasn’t supposed to be the one above ground. And you weren’t supposed to be the first one to go, I was.” He picks his crutch up and prods the gravestone. “I only have a few months left, couldn’t you have waited?”

The stone keeps silent.

“Or taken me with you. That would’ve been preferable to you going ahead.”

The stone keeps silent.

So Viktor raises his voice.

“Now I’m left here in a body that is finally falling apart and with way too much work on my hands. I was running out the clock before already, I’ll have you know, so what am I supposed to do now?”

He throws his crutch in the grass beside him, toppling over extinguished candles. “How am I supposed to finish all that on my own while I’m falling apart, Jayce? How am I supposed to die now, Jayce?”

The stone keeps silent.

Viktor clears his throat. “Yes. I don’t know either.”

He shrinks into himself.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this, Jayce”, he whispers. “You were in good health. You were beloved. You had plans and ambitions. You had an incredible future

ahead of you. The things you would've done. It wasn't supposed to be like this. It wasn't." His voice trembles.

The stone keeps silent.

"It's not right," he whimpers. "It's not fair."

The stone keeps silent.

"I'm sorry." The first tear drops off his cheek. "I'm so sorry."

Tear after tear follows. They bring quiet sobs with them. They bring burning agony with them. They flow freely under the cover of the moonless dark. Clutching his own arms, his shoulders tremble in the suffocating silence of the night, disturbed only by quiet sounds of loss.

The stone keeps silent.

When Viktor's shaking subsides, he wipes his eyes.

"You must think me laughable," he smiles bitterly. "I was so preoccupied with my own woes that I forgot life was cruel to *everyone*."

He grabs his crutch and laboriously lifts himself onto his feet. The strain leaves his lungs devoid of air.

"Perhaps 'cruel' is the wrong word here," he muses, breathing heavily. "'Heartless' would be a more apt description. Yes, life is heartless," he nods tiredly. "And so is time. It keeps marching inexorably. Perpetually turning like a well-oiled gear, crushing everything daring to approach its teeth. And so it goes on."

Somewhere in the distance, seagulls screech, likely fighting over food. Viktor places a hand on the cold stone. "And so I go on, whether I like it or not."

Viktor takes a moment to look at Jayce once more. He taps the stone twice.

"Be well, friend. And save a seat for me. I won't be long."

He picks up his lantern and slowly makes his way back.

The candle he leaves behind extinguishes shortly after he leaves, abandoning the grave of Councilman Jayce Thalís, Man of Progress, to the greedy veil of darkness.

Blue Eye Samurai

Noodles And Impurities

Mizu trod lightly on barely visible yet well-known paths through the woods. On this pleasant summer afternoon, neither too hot nor too humid as it would doubtlessly come to be in the next few weeks, the thickets were bursting with life in hiding. Concealed among leaves proudly showing off the brightest, lushest greens they could muster, unseen birds chirped and sang their tunes close by and in the distance. Occasionally, some small creature scuttled and rustled in the bushes as Mizu stepped past them.

Mizu walked slowly but with purpose. She was in no particular hurry and had no particular aim save for to walk, in the hopes to clear her mind. Her steel wouldn't melt, no matter how hard she tried. Perhaps because of how hard she tried. There had been a feverish frenzy shivering in her hands in her failed attempts, she had to admit. There had been a lack of calm focus and intent. An artist was supposed to give their everything into their art, Swordfather had said. With her thoughts all over the place, how could she do that? So she hoped the walk would clear her head and let her come to the answers she sought.

But there was also the matter of impurity weighing down her thoughts. An impurity in the right place is a strength, Swordfather had said. So, clearly, her restless mind was misplaced. Needless, useless, worthless attachments she had so carelessly picked up on the road haunted her. Ringo's infatuation with her as some great samurai was of his own making. He wouldn't listen. She couldn't be blamed for that. Taigen had thought her a demon ever since they had been children in Kohama village. He had thought her a demon when they first crossed blades too. Now he thought her a demon again. And he had ridden off to Edo. Good riddance.

Attachments lead to suffering, the monks in the market squares and in the streets

and in their temples had preached. Impurities of the spirit, they called them. And they were right, Mizu understood. They were shackles on her wrists and ankles and mind and spirit, pulling and holding back what she needed free and light as a feather and strong as an ox. These pointless attachments had brought her nothing but guilt, shame, rejection, and loneliness. She was well-off alone and on her own. But loneliness pained her. Loneliness only ever found her with others.

These needless attachments brought her nothing but suffering. One more problem to deal with, one more hurdle to strain over on her path. One more, one more, one more. She thought she had learned her lesson a long time ago. Hadn't she learned enough from her mother and husband? Apparently not. Given where she found herself now, it was clear she had learned nothing.

Mizu halted. Her anger was misplaced, she noticed. Blaming others was the wrong path to take. It wasn't their fault.

It was *hers*.

She had grown attached. *She* had let herself become distracted. *She* was the architect of the brewing and bubbling storm that was her mind.

She shook her head, permitting herself a knowing, grim smile in the absence of eyes to witness it.

Oh well, no matter. That was nothing she hadn't dealt with in the past. She's done it before, she could do it again. It was nothing a few days of meditation and exercise couldn't purge from her heart.

And yet a knot at the base of her skull gave her pause. It didn't fit. It didn't make sense.

She *had* picked up these attachments carelessly. Without even trying. Without even desiring.

Stop. That's not true. Searching herself thoroughly, she knew a glimmer of desire shone somewhere in her depths no matter how deep she had buried it or how meticulously she had meditated it away. It was undeniably there.

Was this not also a part of her, then? One she was unable to rid herself of? Was an artist not to give their everything to their art? Was this not part of her everything? Why did giving this lead her to failure? Why was this an impurity of the wrong sort?

Mizu frowned. It didn't fit. It didn't make sense.

Maybe one needn't give everything to their art, then, she pondered. Maybe Sword-father was wrong?

Mizu doubted that.

Maybe she just wasn't an artist, after all. Maybe all she was was a demon, after all. Maybe all that people saw in her *was* the truth, after all.

She clenched her fists. Her shoulder stiffening shot a piercing stroke of pain from the wound the bullet had left on her.

There it was, yet another imperfection causing weakness.

She sighed and released her tension. The rough callouses on her palms shifted into her attention as they turned from being tightly pressed disturbances between the skin inside her fist to grating patches on her palms scratching her loosened fingers. Mizu looked at her hands.

Swinging hammers and shovels had produced callouses in different places than swinging swords did. Little impurities on her palms' skin, marks of her labour. Different callouses for different arts, for different purposes, she reckoned.

Different arts needed different tools.

Different arts needed different artists.

Perhaps they also needed a different Mizu, too.

Perhaps a new Mizu.

Or perhaps an old one. Past Mizu had succeeded where today's Mizu kept failing. But past Mizu was one she thought long dead and buried. Past Mizu had died the

very moment she had watched Mikio ride away, leaving her to fend on her own with the bounty hunters.

“Nothing is born, nothing broken.”

She looked at her hands again. Which was the impurity, she wondered. Was it the callouses, or was it the lack thereof?

Drawn in by the sounds of flowing water, Mizu had made for the riverbed. To her surprise, she found that she wasn't the first one there. A stone's throw downriver, Ringo stood knee-deep in the calm waters. Two shallow hooks tucked into his wristbands, he painstakingly gathered a fishnet and carefully folded it in preparation for the toss to follow.

Mizu recognized the net. It was the gnarly old one Swordfather had stashed away in the shed. He had never made use of it himself but had sometimes let Mizu try her luck with it when the smithing work permitted for some hours of her absence. She used to spend long nights by the fire trying to mend the holes she had torn into it by catching on branches and rocks.

Ringo slowly collected the threads with elaborate twists and turns of his arms and elbows, as if he was crocheting the net with his hooks. Once folded, he threw the net over his shoulder and clumsily waded further downriver, dragging his feet through the mud under his soles and wobbling like a duck on dry land. Mizu followed with silent steps, remaining out of sight. She was curious to see how well Ringo'd fare.

The river was shallow but wide. At its deepest point, it would've just about reached Mizu's waist. The waters, coming together from several springs in the nearby mountains, flowed calmly towards the sea. The mountain streams were ice cold even in summer and usually crystal clear, save for rainy days when mud and dirt the rain washed away would mix into them. That afternoon, however, Ringo replaced the rain's work with his feet, dragging up the muck and silt with each step

he took. The dirt rose like a cloud around his feet and followed him downriver as the water carried it away.

Having waded a few dozen paces, Ringo halted and carefully observed the waters in front of him, absent-mindedly humming some tune Mizu wasn't familiar with. He stood like that for some minutes. Without any shade to cover him from the sun, sweat drops formed on his forehead and temples despite the cold of the stream he stood in, but he didn't look away. He hummed and observed. And then, in one swift motion, he skillfully tossed the net and hurried after it, soon pulling it out with two fish flipping and thrashing violently in it. Ringo made a noise of delight and turned around giddily to stomp back towards the riverbank, where he had left a bucket waiting for him. His hum had turned into a song which ended abruptly once he noticed Mizu standing close by.

"Oh, you're here," he muttered sheepishly. But then he lit up to his usual self. "I'm just catching us some dinner!" He proudly raised his fidgeting catch and grinned.

Mizu nodded slowly. She watched him drop the net onto the floor and kneel down next to it, pulling the hook he had tucked into his right wristband out to replace it with a knife.

"What brings you here?" he asked, keeping busy with getting the knife's handle into his strap.

Mizu approached him so as to not raise her voice. "Nothing in particular," she said coldly.

"Going somewhere?" Ringo looked up at her.

"No."

"Staying, then?"

"No."

"Ah, I see. Being mysterious. And reserved. And alone. As you wish."

Having succeeded in attaching the knife, Ringo turned towards the net and slowly

unfolded it. The fish thrashed and flopped, preventing Ringo from holding them down securely with the hook on his left arm so he could deliver a clean cut. Mizu watched him struggle with it for a while and took pity on the gasping, panicking fish. Their fate was sealed, it was only cruel to prolong it needlessly.

“Can I help with that?” She offered squatting down next to him.

“That’s alright. I can do this alone.”

“I know.”

“Buuuuuuut?” Ringo turned to her.

“I pity the fish. Suffocation is not a pleasant end.”

“That’s true,” he nodded. “But if you hold them, you’ll get the smell all over you. It can be hard to get rid of. A samu-”

Ringo stopped abruptly and looked at her.

“Never mind,” he shook his head. “Can you hold them down for me?”

Mizu grabbed the flailing slippery creatures firmly so Ringo could drive his knife behind their gills with a quick, precise motion. The flailing stopped and Mizu dropped their lifeless bodies into the bucket with the several other fish Ringo had already caught.

“Thanks,” said Ringo, already affixing his other hook back onto his right arm. Once it was stuck firmly to his forearm, he gathered and folded the net again and went back into the river, wobbling as he dragged his feet through the ground.

Having nowhere to go and having arrived nowhere, Mizu decided to stay, at least for a bit. Besides, her ankle had started aching again. It hadn’t fully healed yet either. So she sat down in the nearest tree’s shade and leaned against its bark.

“Who taught you to fish?” she asked.

“My father. He thought it might be useful for his inn. Sometimes, he makes a fish broth, you know.”

Mizu stared at the clouds of dirt arising around Ringo's feet with every step he took.

"Did he also tell you to rile up the ground?"

"He did, yes! He said it digs up all the critters from the ground into the water and the fish eat them. So they get lured towards you and when they're distracted looking for more food and the dust settles, they're mine to catch."

And there it was again. An impurity in the clean waters that lead to results. Mizu had rarely had as much success as Ringo did with the net. Nobody had taught her how to fish, she had to figure it out on her own. So eventually she abandoned the net and replaced it with a knife from the smithy tied to a stick. That method suited her much better.

Yet a properly placed impurity and a bit of guidance lead Ringo to strength and success.

But it also led to death, Mizu noticed. The same impurity that fed the fish with critters and humans with fish meant death to the fish and critters.

So which was it? Boon or doom?

Mizu sighed quietly, while Ringo hummed his tune and observed the waters.

"Say," he spoke up, "if you're not going anywhere, nor staying, are you perhaps lost? It's the only other option I can think of. Because if you are, I can show you the way back if you want."

"I know where we are," said Mizu. "But I may very well be lost."

"Well that doesn't make much sense, does it?" Ringo looked at her. "Are you sure you don't want me to show you the way?"

"I know the way, Ringo."

"Then why do you say you are lost?"

"Why indeed," Mizu wondered.

"Are you being mysterious again? Because from where I'm standing, you just look lost and tired."

"I came to the woods looking for answers," said Mizu. "But instead, I found you."

"How lucky! Company is always good!"

It isn't, Mizu thought to herself and shifted her back into a more comfortable position.

"So, what answers were you looking for? Maybe I can help."

"I don't know. All I found was more questions."

"You don't know which answers you're looking for? That's a tricky one," Ringo nodded, donning an overly serious expression. "You know, my father used to say that sometimes, it's better not to ask and to just do," he added lightheartedly.

Ringo stared into the distance. "But he also used to say to always ask before I do something stupid or break something. So there's that, too. Did you break something?"

"My sword, Ringo."

"Oh, yes, right, I forgot about that." Ringo lit up as an idea entered his head. "Did you talk to Master Eiji about it? Surely he must know how to mend it. Sometimes," he rattled on not giving Mizu any time to reply, "it helps to ask for help, you know. I can do a lot with these," he waved the hooks attached to his forearms, "but there are some things I cannot do alone. But that's okay. Nobody can do everything by themselves. If everybody could do everything, then nobody would ever buy my noodles! And that would be a shame. Because they *do* like my soba!"

Mizu smiled imperceptibly. "I did talk to Swordfather."

"And it didn't help?"

"Not thus far. It only left me with more answers to seek."

"Bummer."

Mizu kept silent.

“Well, it doesn’t always work, asking for help that is.” Ringo waded closer to Mizu, watching the waters. “Like how Master Eiji couldn’t tell you how to solve your sword problem. Or how you didn’t want to make me your apprentice. Or how my father refuses to add an egg to his broth. I kept telling him that it’s good, but he kept refusing,” Ringo shook his head.

“Never egg. I never understood that. I used to think he was amazing, you know,” Ringo went on. “Back when I was a kid. That he knew everything and everyone. But now, I’m not so sure anymore. No egg, never egg. But it’s so good!” he shook his head again. “So, maybe he didn’t know everything and everyone. Maybe he wasn’t that much unlike me. Unlike I am now, I mean. Not when I was a kid. He knew so much more than me back then. I had no idea.”

Mizu silently watched Ringo shift his position in the water again.

“He’s still wrong about the egg, though. But maybe he was also always looking for answers and just didn’t show it. Figured things out one by one as they came along. You know, I used to think that about you too. That you had all the answers. That you had it all figured out. That you knew what you were doing. And yet, here you are, looking for answers in the woods. I’m not sure how you would find them in the trees and bushes, but I’m sure you had a plan. You always do. Except right now, I guess, so maybe not always. Most of the time, maybe? Or do you? Do you have a plan?”

Mizu closed her eyes. “No. Not yet.”

“See, I knew it!” he beamed. “Even you don’t have all the answers! Sometimes I wonder whether anybody does. There must be someone, right? A wise man, a monk, a priest, the Shogun? A kami, maybe? Buddha?”

“Can you imagine,” Ringo continued after a short pensive pause, “if there was nobody out there with all the answers? Nobody who’s got it all figured out? Can you imagine? Wouldn’t that be something?”

“Wouldn’t that be something,” Mizu muttered tiredly.

“Not that it would matter much,” Ringo went on. “Even if there is somebody out there with all the answers, I wouldn’t know who it is. And if I did, there’s no way they’d answer *my* questions. There must be so many more important people with much more important things to do and decisions to make that would come first. And even if I did get to ask a question, I wouldn’t know what to ask. There’s so much I’d want to ask! What would you do? If you had one question, what would you ask?”

“Who the other two white men are, and where I can find them.”

“Of course,” Ringo slapped his forehead. “Of course, you’d ask that. Was that the answer you were looking for in the woods?”

“No.”

“Good. I mean, not good. But good for me. Because that makes sense to me. Because I really can’t imagine how you’d find that answer in the forest. You’d have to tell me if you did. Would you tell me?”

Mizu stared at him until he let his shoulders drop. A moment later, his eyes narrowed.

“If that’s not the answer you were seeking, then even if you got your answer from the man who knows everything, you still wouldn’t have the answer to the one you were seeking, would you. You still wouldn’t have all the answers, would you.”

“No.”

Ringo pondered this fact. “Even you don’t have all the answers,” he mumbled again and looked at Mizu. “I thought I understood before. But I think I understand now. You’re just like everybody else, aren’t you.”

Mizu tilted her head. “They say otherwise,” she replied, pointing at her eyes.

“I know,” Ringo waved his hooks at her and grinned.

Mizu nodded.

“Do you think the differences go deeper than that? Because I’m not so sure anymore

that they do.”

“Very often, I do. There’s always been a ‘them’ and a ‘me.’”

“Never an ‘us?’”

“The ‘us’ leads to suffering, or so the monks say. The ‘us’ is attachment.”

“I like my attachments. I’d be helpless without my attachments,” Ringo waved his hooks again. “I don’t want to be helpless. I want to be useful. Besides, don’t these monks tell you to fast and deny yourself food and nourishment because those are attachments too? Surely that can’t be right. Isn’t that suspicious? How can you live without food? Without noodles?!” he gasped.

It was suspicious, Mizu had to agree. Weren’t attachments impurities of the spirit, after all? The challenge must be to place them properly, then.

“I did like your soba,” she smiled imperceptibly.

“See, just like everybody else!” He stared into the distance again. “If food and noodles are attachments, then I like attachments. Can you imagine? A life without attachments? No food, no drink, no nothing? That must be a very boring and empty life. What if everybody lived like that?”

“Then nobody’d buy your noodles, Ringo.”

Covered by the darkness of a moonless night, Mizu trodded through the woods towards the faint candlelight flickering like a beacon. Sutras marked every inch of her skin she could reach by herself. Kneeling by the candle, Ringo was scrubbing one of his cooking utensils. He was too absorbed in his work to hear her approach. Stepping into the light, Mizu spoke up softly.

“Ringo.”

He jolted and turned around in surprise, a gasp escaping him once he spied Mizu covered in writings and merely her coat. It took him just a moment to understand.

He did not know, he did not comprehend, but he understood.

“Do you know the Heart Sutra?” Mizu asked wearily. Her labour and her mind had exhausted her. She had no strength for more to be said than what little sufficed and was necessary. And maybe no more was needed.

Ringo understood. “The body is emptiness, and emptiness is body,” he recited faithfully. “All things are only empty. Nothing is born. Nothing broken.”

“Nothing is born, nothing broken,” Mizu joined in. She took a step closer towards him, raising the brush in her hand. Ringo offered his arm and she tucked the writing tool carefully into his wristband before turning around to reveal her unmarked back.

“There are some things I cannot do alone,” Mizu said.

Ringo knew. Ringo understood. As much as it pained him to let his previous master go for good with words left unspoken, the Mizu before him would buy his soba. So the apprentice swallowed his pride and pain and wrote:

Nothing is born. Nothing broken.

Kill Six Billion Demons

Snowfall

Allison lifted her arm from the windowsill and leisurely reached outside into the freezing air. The snowflakes landing on her limb melted nearly instantly, just as they were melting all over Throne. The ground was still too warm for the snowfall to cover the graveyard of the gods with its white blanket. The snowflakes, dancing across the dark starless skies, brought a rare quiet and serenity into the restless rotten city, as if all of Thone had wordlessly agreed to halt for a moment and witness winter's arrival.

Allison, watching the snow fall on her arm, got lost in thought and forgot about the burning cigarette in her mouth. The thin glowing ring of fire that separated paper from ash on the cigarette steadily crept upwards. The ash broke apart and fell to the floor as Cio nudged Allison to the side.

"Make some space for me, lankylegs," Cio teased, squeezing next to Allison and lighting up a smoke on her own.

"What's tha staring at so intentsome? Does tha humans not have snow on tha home?" Cio asked between drawing deep breaths of blue smoke into her lungs and exhaling it outwards.

"We do," Allison smiled, gaze still fixed on the snow falling around her arm.

"Then what's tha watching that is more watchable than a neigh naked devil in tha bedroom?"

Cio teasingly wrapped her tail around Allison's thigh. Allison couldn't help but draw a slight grin in the corner of her mouth, though it quickly faded as she turned pensive again. She observed the snowflakes shifting away from her extended arm, being pushed by the moving air as with her arm's motion.

"I wonder," mused Allison, putting out her cigarette in the ashtray on the windowsill, "do you think snow is Royalty? Or is it Servant?"

"I think," Cio replied, drawing a deep puff, "tha may have hit tha head too hard today."

"I'm serious, though," Allison chuckled. "Look at it. It does one thing, and one thing only. It falls, and it melts."

Allison thought about what she just said for a moment. "Ok, those are two things," she added, while Cio stifled a snort.

"But still," Allison continued, "that's all it does. It falls from the sky, and wherever it falls, it melts. Now I can move it around by pushing the air," Allison demonstrated by waving her arm around, "yet all it does is either make it fall on my arm or continue falling to the ground, displaced by a little. Nothing I do changes the essence of what it is, nor what it does."

"Tha thinks that is what makes Royalty?"

"Isn't it? It can't be stopped. Its nature is unchangeable. It has one purpose, and does exactly that - it falls, and then it melts. No matter what I do. It does not care for my existence, nor will it ever."

"Nay," Cio shook her head.

"Nay?"

"Nay. Mayhaps tha sees freedoms in its dance through the skies, or strengths in its indomitable paths of falling and melting." Cio extended an arm outside as well, letting the snowflakes drop in her palm. "But it is not free. It is not strong. It is shackled to its purpose - to fall, and then to melt. That's all it does. That's all it can do."

Allison pondered this. "Shame," she sighed. "I was just beginning to think I should be more like the snow."

"Cold and wet?" teased Cio, moving her tail upwards along Allison's thigh.

Allison smiled softly, still looking outwards. "Less... pushable, even when pushed. More at peace with your own existence."

"Is this because tha hair's gone whitey? Got whitey hair and thinks thaself a relative of weather?" Cio quipped.

Allison chuckled and put her arm around Cio, still leaning against the windowsill.

"So then," Allison continued, "snow must be Servant, doesn't it?"

"Also nay," Cio sighed.

"Why?"

"It has no will. Tha cannot serve if tha has no will to serve with."

Allison pondered this. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but closed it again.

"Tha thinks too much," added Cio, noticing Allison's struggle with thoughts. "Snow is, but snow is also not. It is there, but it is not willing." She flicked the cigarette butt out of the window. "Snow does, but snow also does not. It does fall and melt, but it does not choose its path, it follows it."

Allison took what she thought was wisdom in, but ended up scratching her head. "Yeah... I don't get it."

Cio flashed her a brazen grin. "Of course tha don't. Tha don't even know who tha should be nor what tha should be doing now instead of freezing tha limbs off."

"And what would that be?" Allison asked amused.

Cio's devilish grin widened even further as she leaned towards Allison's cheeks, slipping her hand underneath her shirt and carefully scratching her back with her claws. "Tha should be a good little girl and bed me until daylight arises," she whispered into her ear and nibbled playfully on her earlobe.

With a swift motion, Allison lifted her up, holding her up underneath her thighs and bringing their heads to an even level. She looked at the diabolically grinning

Cio with half-closed eyes. “That can be arranged,” Allison said as she leaned in to kiss her, carrying her over to the bed, where they fell into an avalanche of kisses and giggles.

Broken, Beat & Scarred

Allison woke up to a vaguely familiar sight. A greenish grey plaster, curving and bending away towards her feet, full of dents. The refurbished inside of a former god's skull. The refurbished inside of *her* god's skull - her bedroom.

Ah shit. I fucked up again.

Her head was ringing, and as Allison's vision cleared, she noticed the swelling in her left eye; It wouldn't open all the way. One by one signals from her broken, beaten, and scarred body made it into the registers of her consciousness. Her shoulders were stiff and rigid. Her left elbow was hot. Her fingers were swollen, and her knuckles radiated pain periodically. Her intestines felt like somebody had put them through a blender. A throb pulsed in her thigh. And her knees. She was only twenty-three - not an age where you should feel your knees. Her ankles felt swollen and watery. She also felt the familiar sensation of broken toes aching all the way through her shins and thighs. The sharp stab on her left side made her groan as she attempted to take a deep breath, letting her know that her ribs were cracked at least, if not broken. Her lungs didn't feel full though, and she had no urge to cough, so at least the ribs didn't perforate them. *It's the little things that count, right?*

She heard some rustling to her right.

"Allison? Tha's awake?" Cio asked timidly.

Allison strained to turn her head towards the voice. There she was, kneeling on the floor and leaning against the bed frame; A concerned Cio was looking at her, frowning.

"Hey, Cio," Allison muttered with a forced smile.

" 'Hey Cio yourself', blubberbrains. How's tha feel?"

"Like I got hit by a truck," Allison gasped as a stabbing pain spread through her ribcage.

"Whassa truck? Arts tha inventing words? Did tha damage thy brain?" There was no trace of malice or jest in Cio's voice.

A genuine soft smile formed on Allison's lips. "It's an Earth thing. A big vehicle."

Cio stood up and scanned her head to toe. "Tha got smashed bad again, Allison. Arts tha hurting?"

"Yes, everything hurts," Allison replied with a brave smile.

Cio frowned harder.

"Serves tha right, lackawit." She sat down on the bed frame. "Going searching for brawls on tha own. What was tha thinking, rattlebrains?"

She gently pulled the covers down from Allison and inspected her bandages.

"That I need practice. And that I could handle it," Allison sighed and winced at the subsequent sting of her ribs.

"Pah. Now look where that's got tha."

Allison smiled again. "I can't. Can't raise my head right now," she chuckled, only to wince in pain again.

Cio shot her a look oozing with rage. *The look of a woman who wants to slap the shit out of you, but can't*, Allison knew.

Cio carefully detached a bandage soaked with blood from her thigh, threw it in the bin, and began preparing a fresh one. Allison hated the feeling of sticky bandages, intertwined with her healing skin, being torn from the wound, no matter how gently and carefully done.

"Tha was lucky the heateater found tha in time." If Cio's tone of voice were actual *liquid* poison, it would've melted through the glass underneath it.

"I know. I fucked up." Allison sank deeper into the sheets, prompted by her desire to hide.

Cio concentrated on carefully applying the new bandages.

"So White Chain picked me up again?" Allison asked awkwardly.

"Aye," Cio muttered.

Allison impatiently let the silence that followed grow unbearable for her.

"Look, Cio, I'm sorry, I-"

"Nay, tha isn't." Cio's words cut like whips through the air.

"Yes, I am?"

"Nay, tha isn't. 'tis the third time this month, Allison. Third time Stoneyarse carries thy broken flesh into thy bed. I'm sick of it."

Cio turned to look Allison in the eyes.

"I'm sick of tending to thy wounds. I'm sick of staring at thy broken and battered body every week. I'm sick of smelling thy blood all over the house, Allison. I'm sick of hearing tha squirm and growl in pains while you sleep. I'm sick of it. Na more."

"I'm sorry, Cio. I really am," Allison squirmed.

"Nay, tha ain't. Tha's going to do it again, ain't tha? Ain't tha?" The frost in Cio's voice spread through the room.

"Cio..."

"Just admit it, tha scallop!"

"I need to get stronger, Cio," Allison whined.

Cio jumped on her feet, fuming. "By getting thaself battered to a pulp, hollowhead? Tha's got nothing but draft between thy ears, have tha?" she barked, stomping her feet into the floor.

Seeing Cio upset this deeply stung Allison deeper than any cracked rib she might be nursing.

"I thought I could handle it," she mumbled. "And I totally would've gotten them all if that one bitch didn't sneak up on me and sank her dagger into my knee."

Shaking her head, Cio muttered, "Tha has learned nothing. No-thing." She sat back down on the bed next to Allison again.

"How much more, wollopwit?" she asked with a tired voice. "When's it end?"

"I... I just gotta get strong enough," Allison sighed.

"And when is that, Allison? When? There'll be always a bigger fish to fry. Demi-urges got slaughtered like cattle. Gods' throats were slit. Even the king of kings got himself butchered. So when? When's tha strong enough, Allison? When's tha become unbutcherable? How many more times need I watch tha get battered until then? How many more times must I stitch tha back together again?"

"I don't know," Allison stammered.

"Of course tha don't, sponge-for-brains," Cio hissed. "Tha only thinks of violence and how to inflict it. Tha don't think of the violence tha inflicts when tha fist's not swinging." Cio hastily wiped the tears from her eyes, her anger still etched across her face.

"Cio..."

"Pah. Save thy breath for someone who cares." Cio put the blanket back over Allison and turned towards the door.

"Cio, wait. Please."

Cio's hand was on the door handle already.

"Please," Allison begged with a trembling voice.

Cio paused, her hand lingering on the door handle.

"Please don't leave me alone. Please. I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't mean to hurt

you. I really didn't. But I'm fucking miserable right now, and everything hurts. And I know it's my fault, ok? I know. But I feel like shit, and I'm miserable. And scared. There's some scary shit out there that I'll probably have to face someday. And I'm terrified. I'm no more than an ant to them. Like swatting a fly. And they might come after me. After us. If they find me. When they find us. Meanwhile, I can't even fight a handful of street thugs on my own. So I need to get stronger and better before that happens. Before they come for me. I know I'm still a useless piece of shit, I know. But I'm trying. And I fucked it up, again. I'm sorry. I really am. But please, *please*, stay. Please, Cio. Don't leave me now."

Cio shot her an icy stare. "Tha's lucky tha's got a pretty face," she said, approaching the bed again. Allison visibly unclenched and sank into the mattress as she sat back down on the bedside.

"Thank you," Allison whispered.

Cio took her hand into hers.

"But tha gotta stop acting like a reckless ribbonrat, Allison. I can't do this no longer."

"I'm sorry, Cio. I'll do better."

"Tha better," Cio frowned.

Allison looked at Cio and felt like pushing her luck.

"Lie with me?", she asked timidly.

"Shush. Tha needs rest," Cio said firmly as she eyed whether there'd be enough space for her to lay down next to her. There might be if she let a leg dangle off the bed. She laid down, careful to shake the mattress as little as possible in the process.

"Thank you," Allison repeated.

"Shush, globberbrains," Cio whispered gently. "And rest. Tha needs to sleep, tha fragile human."

Cio let go of Allison's hand so she could caress her palm and fingers instead, gently tracing her nails across her worn calloused skin.

“I’ll be here when tha wakes up,” Cio whispered, kissing her cheek. “Now sleep.”

Like a Fiddle

Knock knock.

“Cio, are you in there?” Allison asked, staring at Cio’s bedroom door.

“What?” Cio’s annoyed voice replied.

“Can I come in?”

“If tha has to.”

Allison opened the door, popped her head in, and peeked inside to discover Cio on her bed. She was reading, holding the book with one hand above her and with one leg swinging over the bed’s edge.

“Cio, wanna come to the market with me?”

“Nay, I’m reading.”

“Please?”

“Nay, I don’t feel like it. Can’t tha do it on tha own?”

Allison came prepared. She knew she’d have to pull out the big guns.

“Please, Cio. You’re so much better at haggling than me. You always get the merchants to lower their prices. Help me out here?”

She watched Cio attempt to suppress a smile. “Maybe if tha asks *real* nicesome...”

Allison smirked knowingly. “Oh please, master, teach me thy superior techniques of barter and trade. Thy humble student begs thee,” she appealed with a bow.

Cio closed her book with a smack and rose from the bed, smirking as well. “Fine,

since tha asked so pitysome, I suppose I can teach tha a thing or two.”

“Great! Let’s go?” Allison chirped.

“Wait, Allison. What’s tha wearing?” Cio looked her up and down, as the full view of Allison’s sky blue dress with a bright fiery flower pattern emerged now that the door was fully open.

“A dress? You’re wearing one yourself right now?”

“I know what a dress is, knuckleknotted, but since when is tha wearing one?”

“I felt like switching things up a little today. White Chain doesn’t give me many rest days.”

Allison lowered her head towards the floor as she increasingly grew beet red. “And I thought it was cute,” she mumbled, staring at her toes.

Cio looked her up and down again, somewhat bewildered. “Yes, it’s... looksome,” she said.

“Right?” Allison beamed and twirled around, showcasing the full sight and making the hem of her dress rise with the circular motion.

Cio smiled at Allison as she approached her. In parts, it was Allison being adorable as she was now that summoned a smile on her face. But in parts, it was a tad of an uncomfortable smile. She was used to the sight and smell of the filth of Throne. She was used to the blood and the gore, the thievery, the treachery, and the violence that was a devil’s birthright. Allison sprinkling in an adorable sight for her sore eyes? Cute. Refreshing. Welcome. Excellent. But also unfamiliar. And hence a smidge uncomfortable. What does tha say when the human tha’s sleeping with is being cutesome on purpose in front of you? Does tha even say something?

“Aye, I like it. Very pretty,” Cio added, trying to sound confident while inconspicuously gauging Allison’s expression. Allison beamed. Cio fist-bumped herself internally for having guessed the right thing to say.

The market was bustling with life. It was strewn through the alleys like a nasty infection, pulsating and out of place. There wasn't much room on the streets to begin with, and so the spread-out stalls and canvases congealed the foot traffic into a crawl.

Allison and Cio bought some groceries to cover necessities for the next few days, which mainly consisted of vegetables and meat. Allison intently watched Cio passionately haggle with the merchants. She was quite impressed with the little devil's ferocity. It's not that Allison didn't understand how haggling was supposed to work, nor that all goods on display were overpriced on purpose, nor that she was particularly bad at it - but she just couldn't get herself to argue for *minutes* over pennies as Cio did nearly every time. It seemed to her as if the smaller the difference in price Cio was arguing about was, the more ferocious she became about it. Her being so driven over what Allison felt were small wins was sort of adorable in its own way. *Perhaps a remnant of Cio's time as a bookkeeper?* she wondered.

Nyave had asked Allison to keep a lookout for a spice named "red harrowwort". But only after arriving at the market did both Allison and Cio realize that neither of them actually knew what that was, nor how it looked or smelled or tasted like. They both agreed that they were "such babbling hollowhens" and chuckled along in search of bandages. The ones Allison used to wrap her hands in for her daily training were wearing out and slowly turning to tatters.

Turning left into a broader street, they were met with a wall of noise arising from merchants praising their wares and arguing with customers over quality and price. A permeating smell of spices, smoke, and grilled meat filled the air. A dense crowd of walkers and shoppers clogged the entire length of the street. One couldn't get past without some pushing or shoving at least. Allison extended her hand towards Cio.

"So we don't get separated in the crowd," she said.

Cio nodded and took her hand. They slowly made their way through the mob and exited taking a right turn three side alleys later. Away from the busy lane, a more comfortable stroll shoulder to shoulder was possible again. Neither of them seemed to take note of still holding each other's hands, though.

As Allison was about to turn into the alley where her usual supplier of bandages was located, she felt a tug on her hand. Cio was standing frozen in the street, staring straight ahead into the distance.

"Hmm?" Allison inquired.

"Them are new," Cio said, pointing along her line of sight with her free hand. Allison followed her finger to see several unfamiliar merchants displaying all sorts of curious wares on canvases spread over the cobbles.

"Oh yeah. Wanna go have a look?"

"Aye. One of them in the back peddles books."

"Do you wanna go ahead? I'll just go get the bandages real quick and will join you in a minute."

"Suresome."

Cio beelined for the book vendor's wares. He had a lot of junk on display. Many of the books were in unfamiliar languages, and dozens were boring religious scriptures. Some history of long-fallen kingdoms here and there. Several cookbooks. Finally, she spied a pile of what she was searching for - fiction. She feverishly began looking through the tomes.

Moments later, Allison found her with a book in each hand, reading through their back cover summaries.

"Found something you like?"

"Nay, not yet. These are all base tales. The same stories told a million times over."

"Hm."

"The problem is," Cio continued without looking up, "that the good stuff looks just like the tedious stuff from the outsides. Tha gotsa look close to find the good treasures."

Allison leaned over her shoulder, their cheeks nearly touching. "This close?" she

asked.

"I didn't mean literally, chucklebags," Cio said without looking up.

Allison smiled as she straightened up again. She knew that getting the devil's attention away from her loot was an uphill battle at the best of times. So she didn't mind Cio digging through tomes. Instead, she chose to pass the time by browsing the other wares on display. There was plenty to see - jewellery and necklaces, figurines of characters she had never seen before, strange-looking tools and trinkets, gems and stones, plates, dishes, and vases. A particular wooden object however caught her attention, and she went to pick it up. It had a flat, pleasingly curved, and hollow body, from which a neck protruded outwards, ending in artful swirls. Strings were attached from the instrument's swirly head down to its body along its neck. It looked remarkably like a violin. As Allison picked it up, she heard Cio screeching.

"I can't believe it." Cio had jumped to her feet, clasping onto a book. "Tha, merchant, I want this book. How much?"

"That one's twenty-five," he replied with the professional disinterest of an experienced haggler.

"Here's thy coin," Cio paid him.

"Wow, not even going to try to haggle? Must be a real treasure then?" Allison asked.

"Aye, Allison, this is *Nora Multiverse*. *Nora Multiverse*. I'd thought I'd never see it again!"

"You've read it before?"

"Tha hasn't?"

"No?"

"Allison. Allison." Cio took a sharp breath. "Tha has to read this. Tha *needs* to read this. This," Cio tapped the cover (and her feet on the ground), "is the book that got me into writing fan fiction. A longsome time ago. But this is what began Cio the

Fan Fiction Writer.”

Only now Cio noticed Allison holding the violin in her hands. “Hast tha found something interestsome too?” she asked, barely containing her excitement over her new loot.

“Oh, this? Not really, it just really looked like an instrument we had back home on Earth. We called it a violin. Or a fiddle.”

“Can tha play?”

“No. Even if I could, the bow is missing.” She squeezed the violin between her left shoulder and cheek, gesturing how the instrument would’ve been played with the bow.

“Tha looks ridiculous.”

“I know, right? I never had much of a posture. But the sounds skilled players could get out of these were beautiful,” Allison said as she put it back in its original place on the ground.

“You know, we used to have an expression, back on earth,” she added. ” “To play someone like a fiddle’. It means to manipulate someone easily.”

Cio raised an eyebrow.

“I never understood it,” Allison continued. “Fiddles were famously very hard to learn to play. You had to start as a kid to get good.”

“Tha humans are a strange bunch.”

“We are, aren’t we?” Allison chuckled and noticed Cio holding her newly acquired book tightly in her arms. “So this Nora Universe, was it? What’s it about?” she asked.

“It’s *Multiverse*,” Cio replied emphatically. “And it’s about this girlie who is being hunted down by an empire for her mother’s crimes. They think she is her mother. So she’s hiding in this remote world with her mother’s friends and her father, and she’s uncovering her own powers slowsome and the truth behind what happened.

I forgot to tell tha, her mother had died in childbirth, and ...”

Cio rattled on as they made their way back through the market. Allison led them the long way around, not being in the mood to squeeze through the crowd again. She much preferred to be able to listen to Cio breathlessly tell her all about this Nora’s adventures, who apparently routinely made friends out of enemies who initially intended to kill her.

They went up a flight of stairs and continued along a minor inner wall of Throne’s district rings. Allison looked over the sea of roofs stretching between the stony remains of past gods and pillars of smoke rising to the heavens. A fresh breeze carried Throne’s foul stench away with it, and Allison felt that she didn’t want to head home just yet.

“How about we take a break here?” she suggested. “And maybe have a drink?” she added, spotting a vendor with a cart close by.

“Suresome,” replied Cio. “Anyway, so turns out what happened was she disguised herself all this time and led the entire rebellion against her sisters and herself. Imagine that, she literally waged war on herself. And none was wise to it. Not even her closest circle. Except for that one closest servant of hers, of course.”

“Uh-uh,” Allison uttered, signalling she was paying attention as she took the two cans of beer she bought off the vendor’s hands. They went to sit on the ledge of the wall, letting their feet dangle. Allison handed Cio the other can.

“Just please don’t tell White Chain about this, okay?”

“Tha wants me to keep Nora Multiverse secret from stoneyarse?” Cio was indignant.

“No, the beer. She’s not allowing me any booze. Says it’s unwise. And makes restraint hard. And that drunk is the opposite of emptiness.”

“Pah. The heateater knows none of the pleasures of the flesh. With it, tha flesh rots. Without it, tha mind rots. She doesn’t know what that’s like. She doesn’t know what this is like,” Cio said as she put her can aside, laying her head on Allison’s lap

with a smug grin.

"I guess," Allison agreed, caressing through Cio's hair.

"So then," Cio continued, "Nora's mother gets her servant to disguise herself as the rebel, and pretends to murder her in her palanquin, in front of the entire court. Fakes her death, brilliant some, and they escape..."

Cio continued recounting her favourite story until the dusk set in.

Nyave was sitting on the porch, relaxing and drinking a cup of tea, when the two returned home.

"Hi there. Back from your date?" she greeted.

"We weren't on a date, strawhead, we went to the market," Cio replied, while Allison was testing whether the power of the Key of Kings also came with the ability to kill with a single look. Unfortunately, it didn't. But the message got across nevertheless.

"Oh, right. My mistake," Nyave said sheepishly and slurped her tea.

Upon observing Nyave's reaction and Allison relaxing her expression just a bit too slowly, it began to dawn on Cio.

"Wait, did tha take me on a date?"

"I would *never*," replied Allison as she climbed the stairs and entered through the front door.

"Tha did! This was a date, wasn't it?"

"No, Cio. I know you don't date," Allison said as she was setting down the shopping bags in the main room. "You made that abundantly clear. We went grocery shopping to the market, and then we took a break and had a can of beer. That's hardly a date, is it?" Allison smirked.

"Tha vixen, tha-"

“And now, I’m going to take a bath,” Allison added calmly, ignoring Cio’s rants. She strutted towards the bathroom, making sure to slowly unzip the back of her dress while still outside. Before disappearing through the door, she shot the riled Cio a sharp side look, ascertaining that her bare shoulders and back had indeed captured her attention.

As the hot water began filling up the tub, Allison observed her reflection’s smirk widening into a victorious grin. She wiped it off her face as she popped her head through the doorframe again, pressing her dress onto her chest so it wouldn’t fall off completely, yet barely covering herself. A fuming Cio was standing in the same place where she had left her.

“Are you not coming?” Allison asked innocently.

Cio stared at her. Allison could hear the gears in her head turning.

“Pah!” Cio exclaimed in defeat, dropping the bags she was carrying to the floor. She stamped towards Allison, unbuttoning her shirt. “I’ll pay thee back for this tenfold! Nay, twentyfold!”

Cio entered the bathroom as Allison dropped her dress to the floor behind the cover of the door. She bowed down towards Cio, who was still undressing and facing away from her and wrapped her hands around the petite devil’s waist.

“If you want to pay me back so badly, you could do that thing with your tongue that drives me crazy,” she whispered into her long ear and placed a long, soft kiss on her cheek.

Cio turned around in Allison’s hands to face her, putting her hands on her waist and sliding them down. “If tha wants me to do that, tha has to earn it first, hotarse,” Cio whispered, carefully digging her nails into the warm skin of Allison’s butt.

Allison cupped Cio’s cheeks, sporting another victorious smirk. *Like a fiddle*, she thought, as she leaned in to kiss her.

In Death - Is Life

*Extradited to the gods of chance, the deities of all things random
Alive, multicolored
Twitching in their dead monochrome world*

Allison wakes up to the all too familiar beeping of the machines that keep her barely alive. The grey that haunts her existence every day permeates the room, mixed with the smell of molten wax from the candles above her head.

She tries to kill every single thought forming in her head. She doesn't feel like thinking, like feeling. She desires to become one with the grey; to dissolve, disappear into it. Given enough time, it oughta happen. Sooner or later, it doesn't matter. Time is inconsequential. She drifts along its currents like a leaf on a river. Directionless. Decaying. Dissolving.

Allison feels the mattress by her feet tilt under a shifting weight. She lazily lifts her head to look past her feet. A small figure sits there, smoking, frowning. The figure's tail whips softly onto Allison's soles. Allison leaps up.

"Cio?" she gasps. "Cio, is that you?"

"Aye," the figure replies. "It's me, lankylegs."

The candles behind her flicker as Allison leaps onto her. She embraces her tightly, clutches onto her back, her shoulders, her arms, she inspects her.

"But, how?" she cries. "I thought you died. I saw you die."

She looks at the devil's pained expression.

"I watched you die, Cio," she sobs.

"Tha did," Cio whispers.

Allison leans back, studies her. Touches her hands again.

"You're not real, are you?" Her voice drops, saturated with exasperation.

"Nay," Cio shakes her head. "Thy mind has conjured me."

"Of course," Allison sighs. "One more torture my own brain throws at me." She drops back onto her pillow. "Be gone, now." Allison's tired voice cracks.

Cio lies down beside her, propping her head up on her arm. "I don't think so," she says, looking at Allison. Staring at the ceiling, Allison closes her eyes.

"Allison, what are tha doing?"

"Trying to make you disappear."

Cio's fingers slowly trail from Allison's palm over her arm, settling on her left forearm.

"Tha has grown so thin. Tha's barewise skin and bones."

As Allison says nothing, Cio places her hand on her cheek and guides her head to turn to face her.

"Allison. What are tha doing."

"Still trying to make you disappear," Allison replies coldly.

"I mean this," Cio swipes her hand through the air, "all of this."

"Nothing." Allison's voice remains distant. "I'm doing nothing."

"To live is to do. If tha does nothing, tha will die."

"So be it."

"Thickenskull. Tha thinks death will release tha from thy suffering?" Cio probes calmly.

Allison hides her face underneath her hands. "No... Maybe. I don't know. I don't care. I don't care if I live or die, Cio. It doesn't matter anyway."

"So, what do tha want? If not to die?"

"Nothing. Just... nothing."

Cio nuzzles into her neck.

"Tha lies, Allison," Cio speaks softly. "Tha want not nothing. Tha want many things. But tha's scared. And hurt. And paining. So much that tha don't even permit thaself to think of it."

"Leave me," Allison says but doesn't let go of her.

" 'tis alright to be scared. 'tis alright to be hurt," Cio whispers, stroking through her long white hair. " 'tis alright to take thy time to lick thy wounds and heal. But Allison, tha has never been a coward."

"So what do you want me to do?" Allison yells, getting up. "Get out there again? Fight and slay the demiurges? To take a good long look at all the destruction and death they've sown while I was out?" Pained tears follow her screaming.

"Nay," Cio calmly shakes her head. "That fight was never thine to begin with."

"Of course it was! I was given the key of kings. It was my fight. It was given to me."

"Nay," Cio shakes her head again. "Tha has *chosen* that fight. Tha has *chosen* to enter it. To stay in it. To chase after thy boyfriend. To enter the tournament. That was tha own working, Allison."

"So you're saying it's my fault?" Allison shouts with full lungs. "Is this why you're here? To tell me it's all my own goddamn fault? That you died because of me?"

"Nay," Cio whispers.

Allison slumps together as sobs escape her. "Do you think I don't know that? I

know I got you killed. I know," she wails.

Cio moves closer and takes her cheeks into her hands, wiping her tears with her thumbs.

"I'm so sorry, Cio," Allison's voice breaks, laden with sorrow. "I'm so fucking sorry." She can't get herself to look her in the eyes.

"I know," Cio kisses her forehead.

"I can't do it again, Cio," Allison says. "I just can't. I've got no fight left in me. I'm done."

"Tha don't has to," Cio replies. "Tha don't have to wield swords and slay and conquer. Tha don't need to be what tha is not."

Allison, exhausted, lets herself fall back onto the mattress. "So what am I, then?"

"Tha's Allison, wobblebrains," Cio smiles, laying back next to her and stroking through her white hair. "Tha's always been Allison."

"Am I not still Allison?"

"Nay. Tha's trying to be someone else. Tha's trying to become nothing. Tha's doing it wrongwise."

Allison rolls her eyes. "You sound like Jadis now."

"Tha cannot *be* nothing, Allison. For nothing cannot be. If nothing were, then nothing would be something and not nothing."

"Spare me the philosophizing," Allison groans.

"Jadis wants tha to give in. I want tha to be tha."

"So who is 'I', then? Who should I be?" Allison's tone gains an aggressive note.

"Tha should be who tha is. Which is not nothing."

Allison rolls her eyes again.

"The Allison I knew was a human I loved," Cio says, caressing Allison's cheek. "She was kind and gentle. She asked me about the tales I'd read and write. She'd cook meals with barely any spices whatsoever. She'd share my bed and make love to me. The Allison I knew made me happy," Cio smiles and kisses her.

"But the Allison I knew would also work hardsome. Train day and night. She was the Heir of the Conquering King. She would fight and maim and kill, returning homewise in the eve in tatters, bruised and bloody. The footprints of a king are drawn in blood. The Allison I knew followed those footsteps. And I loved that Allison too.

"When I met tha, tha was a witless girl scared out of her mind, shaking and clobbering pitysomely. Tha needed time to get to being Allison." Cio smiles and plays with Allison's earlobe. "Tha reminds me now of the witless scared girl tha used to be."

"Cio, I -" Allison gasps for breath.

"The wheel keeps turning, Allison," Cio continues with a serious tone, the smile vanishing from her lips. "Whether tha wants it or not. Tha don't want to admit it, but tha's fighting the wheel again. Before, tha wanted to smash it. Now, tha's trying to keep it from turning. Tha's trying to hold it still. 'tis a fool's errand, Allison."

Cio leans in close to her face. "Let the wheel go, Allison," she pleads in whispers. "Let it turn, and turn with it. Cry. Grieve. Mourn. Lick tha wounds. Kill the 'I' that wallows in its pain and suffering. And then, let Allison be."

"I... I can't," Allison's voice trembles. "It's too hard. It hurts too much. Sometimes I can't even breathe."

"Tha can and tha will," Cio replies sternly. "Tha was Allison. Tha is Allison. And tha will be Allison." She looks deep into her eyes. "Whoever tha wants Allison to be. Be it the Allison I loved, or someone entirely new.

"But maybe this Allison will realize that not every breath need be drawn to battle. Maybe this Allison will understand that not all strings of fate need be cut and severed. Fate can be fought, but fate can also be drifted with, as a leaf is carried by the

river's streams into the sea."

Cio holds Allison's cheeks. "But tha need permit it to flow, Allison. Tha cannot hold back the river endlessly. Tha cannot hold the wheel in place. It will drown tha eventually. For no reason aside for thy clobberish stubbornness, voidskull."

The concern written all over her face weighs heavy on Allison.

"The Allison I loved was kind and gentle," Cio continues, leaning against Allison's forehead. "Do me a favor and be kind and gentle to thaself for once, gobmonkey," Cio shoots her a gentle smile. "Tha deserves thy own kindness too."

Allison hugs her tightly.

"I miss you so much, Cio," she whimpers through tears.

"I know."

Clonk.

The clang of the servant setting down a new metal platter with fresh food on the bedside table echoes through the chamber.

Allison wakes up, recognizing the incessant beeping of the machines that keep her barely alive and the smell of molten wax. She notices her hands are claspig tightly onto the bedsheets. She relaxes them and wipes the tears in her eyes, taking deep breaths. Allison feels the wheel turning underneath her with a nauseating speed. She doesn't fight it; She lets it go. She lets it turn.

With every breath, the suffocating grey fades into depressing greens and blues.

Kindness, eh?

For the first time in months, Allison reaches for the food.

Two Lost Souls Swimming In A Fish Bowl

White.

No, grey.

No, wood. Wooden planks.

Dark wood?

Cio conjured a flame from her fingertip and lit the cigarette hanging from her lips. She drew a long puff and let the smoke seep right back out between her pointy teeth while she observed the small fire atop her fingers.

No. Not dark wood. Light wood. Something the candlelight will paint in dancing shades of red and yellow.

The plants would probably radiate their liveliness more clearly on a darker background. But the same is true for a very bright background, Cio supposed. The walls could be light and bright. A nice white. Classic. White with a ceiling of light wood.

Yes, that could work.

And the plants. Everywhere. She meant it. *Everywhere*. Even more than she has now. In every corner. On the kitchen table, in the bathroom, in the bedroom. Luscious greenery everywhere, too many to count. Maybe she can get some climbing plants, too. Or vines. Something to cover an entire wall with, several walls even. Maybe a ceiling too. She can look after all of them while Allison sleeps, water them, re-pot them, and snip off the wilting leaves and blossoms periodically.

Allison slept. Yes, Allison needed sleep. The soft weight of her head on Cio's torso

was a pleasant reminder of what that could mean. Knocked out, unconscious, but so tranquil and peaceful. Cuddled and nuzzled into her without a care in the world, donning that inexplicably soft expression like she wasn't sought after like a criminal by the rulers of the universe. *That's* what she wanted. For her, for herself, for both of them. Until the end of times.

Sometimes she envied Allison for her sleep. She never looked like that awake. She wished she could. It was so sweet. She wished both of them could. But then again, if she had to sleep too, she wouldn't get to see her like this, drool running from the corner of her mouth and all. And was this ever a sight worth seeing. Cio drew on her smoke and took in the quaint image presenting itself on her chest. Not sleeping wasn't too bad a thing, indeed.

But Allison needed sleep. Therefore, she needed a nice bed. A nice big comfy bed, so big it would barely leave any room to walk beside it in the modest room it would be placed in. With some nice fluffy pillows and cosy blankets so her smoothskin doesn't catch a cold. Her tough but fragile smoothskin, Cio smiled softly. Will take becoming a demiurge's pincushion, but a night without a blanket leaves her shivering and snivelling snot. Her sweet soft and fragile but tough smoothskin. Cio ran her fingers through Allison's hair.

Her eyes wandered across the numerous scars on Allison's skin. She wished Allison wouldn't do this to herself. There were even worse fates out there than becoming a pincushion. But the windbrain's mind was on a single track. Cio sighed. Stubborn crackawit. She had to walk her path, and that was fair enough. But did it need to be the path of spilt blood? Why not choose blue skies over pain? Trees over hot ashes?

Cio knew it wasn't her decision to make. But it was her decision to not partake. And yet, it left her feeling so alone. Allison, resting her head on her chest, was so far away. Cio wished she was here.

But it wasn't her decision to make. So at least Cio could ensure their future bed she was daydreaming about was nice and and big and comfy and cosy so her smoothskin could get a good rest. Besides, sleep wasn't the only thing beds were good for, Cio smirked and let her knowing look wander over the wet patch beside them.

"Mmmghlap?" Allison lifted her head and looked at Cio with closed eyes.

"Sleep, tha wobblebrains," Cio guided her head gently back onto her chest and stroked through her hair. " 'tis still too early for tha."

Allison nuzzled into her and dozed off again.

"Fucking say *something*!" Allison barked. "I'm so sick of you just pulling away from me all the time. What is *wrong* with you?"

Cio's shaking shoulders stiffened as she turned abruptly to face her.

"I'm *happy*, ok?" she screamed at Allison. Cio's salty tears reached her tongue.

Allison froze in her tracks, leaving Cio's panting to amplify the paining silence in the room. As Cio's breath quieted, her ears sank low. She pulled her tinted glasses off to wipe her tears off them, but her fingers got stuck awkwardly fidgeting with the spectacles instead.

"For once in my blasted life, I'm not *hurting* someone," Cio whimpered. "I'm safe. I'm happy."

"Cio..." Allison approached her. "I have to go," she spoke calmly but firmly. "... I get it. But I don't think I can *be* happy right now. Not until it's all finished."

Cio's head slumped down further. She knew. She had known before Allison had even opened her mouth. The stubborn stockmonkey just *had* to walk her path of destruction. Why did it need to be that? Why did it need to be the path of spilt blood? Did it need to be the one thing she didn't want? Did she *have* to take this away from her? Now, of all times? When things were finally working? To go die trying to save some man? Throw away everything they had built to go die for *nothing*? Why was the path of violence and death so much better than staying safe and happy with her? Why was she not enough? What did pain and hurt have that she didn't? Why did they *always* win over her? Why couldn't she get it right at least this once? *Once*, by Aesma's cunt!

“Can we just talk about it?” Allison reached for Cio’s shoulder.

“Nae touch me!” Cio recoiled violently, rage flickering in her eyes and hoarsening her voice. Staring Allison down with tears running freely, she straightened her back and put on her glasses, facing her brazenly and coldly. But she couldn’t suppress a faint tremble in her voice as she spoke.

“Go on then. Go right back into it. Get hurt. Tha’ll have to do it without me. ‘cause this time, I’m not coming.”

In the days to come, Cio would often wonder whether she should have instilled more or less poison into those words.

Big snowflakes. Really big snowflakes everywhere you look, hindering sight with its curtains of ever-moving white. Her breath rises in front of her like smoke.

The snow crunches underneath her feet. She leaves her footprints in the blank unspoiled canvas covering the road. The snow brings quiet and silence with it. It’s a happy and safe quiet and silence. The town, the voices, and the noises are hushed and content. Cio hears the snow crunching cheerfully under her weight, she hears her own breath. Her rattling breathing reminds her that she ought to quit smoking one of these days. There is nothing left to smoke about, after all.

The door is unlocked. She enters. The warm inside air makes her shiver and her glasses fog up. She shakes the snowflakes off her coat and takes it off to hang it on the hook by the door.

“Cio, is that you?” Allison appears behind the corner in front of her. She wears a big fluffy woollen pullover underneath an apron. Carried by Allison, a waft of heated oil and spices mixes into the warm air. They tickle Cio’s cold nose and the rumbling of an empty stomach about to be fed with delicious, delicious dinner vibrates through her.

“Aye, ’tis me, honeyears,” Cio calls back. Before she can lower them onto the ground

to take off her boots, Allison takes the bags off her hands and plants a resounding kiss on her forehead.

“Did you manage to find it?”

“Aye, ’tis all there, plenty some,” Cio wheezes as she forces her boot off her foot.

“Great! You’re amazing, love!” Allison beams and waddles back into the kitchen with the groceries in her arms.

Cio follows her. The smell of fried vegetables and meat gets stronger with every step. They sizzle in their pans on the stove while Allison stirs them vigorously. Cio approaches her by the stove and looks at their dinner to be. The stirring makes Allison’s butt shake, and Cio observes hungrily. Standing next to her, Cio places her hand on her back.

“How’ta things?” Cio’s hand glides downwards along Allison’s back. Her butt has become softer and squishier, as they both finally have.

“It’s almost done. Can you chop the harrowwort you brought? And put on the kettle?”

“Suresome,” Cio raises herself on her tiptoes to give Allison a quick kiss and then scuttles off towards the bags on the kitchen table. As she reaches for them, a sharp pain stung between her fingers.

“Gobbering gubberwash!” Cio yelled, adding further profanities and shaking her hand violently. Her cigarette, slowly burning down to the filter in her absence of mind, had singed her fingers. She looked at them and hesitantly put them in her mouth. There was no one here to witness it and judge her for it, after all.

Yes, there was no one here. The looming quiet was proof enough of that.

There was no soft music playing from a devil box somewhere. There was no dinner being made to sizzle in the pans and pots. The fires in the stove were extinguished. There was naught but silence and whatever street light made it through the windows.

Cio, with her neck on one armrest of the cushioned armchair and her knees on the other, raised slowly, still sucking on her burned fingers.

There was no chatter, no footsteps, no creaking floorboards. No cards being played, no water boiling in the kettle. The bed was empty, the kitchen was empty. She could hear the dust gather.

They had all gone with her. Allison just *had* to walk her path, and they went with her.

And that was fair enough.

And here she was, Ciocie Cioelle Estrella von Maximus the Third, with all she had asked for - a quiet peaceful house full of plants. The death and violence had walked themselves right out that damn door. All she had asked for. Right here, just as she had wanted it. Right here, steeped in misery and agony nevertheless.

Cio let out an exasperated groan, which turned into a growl. Why did it have to turn out like this? Why can't it ever be a path of green fields, blue skies, and a cool breeze? Why is it always the same hell, the same old fears?

She tiredly slid onto her feet and shook her head. This wasn't it. This was so far removed from what she had desired so feverishly it may as well have been a cruel parody, a wish granted by a diabolical djinn meant to torture, not please. She stared at her feet. Maybe there wasn't a path ahead of her that got her to that small house with light wood ceilings and white walls and plants as far as the eye could see without walking amidst more and more death and destruction first. Maybe there wasn't a path taking her there at all. Maybe all she'd ever find would be a house full of emptiness.

But she had found this house already, she reminded herself. This house hadn't been dead until they left a few days ago to seek out death. So maybe that small house with light wood ceilings and white walls and plants as far as the eye could see was in there somewhere in that path of hers. Right behind a corner Cio couldn't see just yet.

Or maybe it wasn't. Either way, she'd have to walk all the way there to find out.

Cio dragged herself to her quarters. Fuck walking the path. She begrudgingly sought together a change of clothes and some trinkets and shoved them forcefully into a backpack. Once filled, she threw it onto the mattress. Fuck walking the path of blood and blades just to get to that small house.

The thump of the backpack hitting the bed rang through the empty house into nothingness and gave way to silent suffocation again.

Who are we flabgobbering, there wasn't a path. There never had been. That small house with light wood ceilings and white walls and plants as far as the eye could see and Allison in cosy woollen pullovers would never be. Probably. Maybe. Most probably not. Fuck that. Fuck the path.

But this empty house, devoid of life despite the hundreds of plants Cio had nurtured on every free surface she could find, was already here. And it was here to stay. To stay dead.

Cio looked at her singed fingers. She didn't have to stay amidst this death. But she didn't have to go seek out death and violence either. Do as tha wilt.

She didn't want to stay. She didn't want to go. "Then what?" Cio yelled at herself. "What does tha even want?"

The backpack lay motionlessly on the bed they used to share. Cio's ears slumped down. She wished she was here.

But she wasn't. She had walked out that damn door.

Cio looked at the desolation around her once again. The dark silence licked her and Cio cursed in seven languages. What use was that small house with light wood ceilings and white walls and plants as far as the eye could see if there was no Allison in cosy woollen pullovers to share it with, to come home to? Even if the alternative was the accursed death and violence. Even if the alternative was a path of spilt blood. Even if the alternative was a path Cio was tired of treading on. What use was any of it.

Cio cursed in eight languages this time and threw on her backpack. She stomped

out the front door, slamming it shut behind her, and hurried towards the nearest King's Door mumbling curse after curse. Who knows, she thought upon seeing the portal's mountainous arch, maybe that small house with light wood ceilings and white walls and plants as far as the eye could see would be in there somewhere, past that damn door between worlds. Right behind a corner she couldn't see just yet.

Devil Hooch Blues

“Ciiiiiiio, I’m bored,” Allison whined. Spread on her back on the covers on Cio’s bed, she idly stretched her arms into the air and yawned. Cio occupied the other side of the bed. on her stomach with her with her feet up and her palms digging into her cheeks, unfazedly turned a page in her book.

“Hush, I’m at a most crucial development.”

“Oh, what’s happening?” Allison rolled over and propped her chin up on her knuckles.

“Margarite is finding out Rhodon had kept secrets even from her.”

“Which one’s Margarite again?”

“To begin with, Rhodon’s servant, then her soldier, confidant, and lover,” Cio said without looking up from her book.

“Oooh, that sounds like some juicy gossip.”

” ’tis nae idle gossip, featherfeet, ’tis tragedy. Margarite’s world is shattered, she’s breaking apart. She thought herself special in Rhodon’s life and is finding out she weren’t, at the least not in the way she saw it.”

“Oh.”

Cio turned another page. Allison watched her in silence for a while, but with Cio paying her no further heed, she ultimately let her head sink. Finally, she lazily rolled towards and into her.

“Ciiiiiooooo...” she groaned.

“What? I’m reading,” she hissed.

“Can you read aloud to me?”

“Nay.”

“Pleeeeeease?” she nudged her again.

“Nay, I don’t feels like it.”

Sensing Allison’s stare burning on her, she added, “wae don’t tha read a book on tha own? There ought be plenty under my bed.”

“Ugh, fine...” Allison rolled off the side and fell on the floor with a pitiful thump. “Anything you’d recommend?” she called from below.

Before Cio could finish the sentence she was reading to muster an annoyed answer, Allison let slip a joyfully intrigued “Ooooooooooh, what’s this?”

Cio slammed her book shut and jerked up, feverishly examining her memories for objects stashed under there not meant for Allison’s eyes to spy. What had she found? Allison’s resurfacing beyond the bedframe grinning ear to ear did not alleviate matters whatsoever. But when Allison raised with merely a bottle in her hand, Cio let her feet drop onto the mattress, her ears slumping with relief.

“Is this what I think it is?” Allison waved the bottle left and right.

“What does tha imagine it?”

“Booze.”

“Aye, ’tis booze,” Cio sighed.

“The mighty Cio hiding hooch under her bed like a teenager? Well I never,” Allison raised her eyebrow. “Is it any good?” She unscrewed the top to have a whiff and instantly pulled the bottle away from her face to hold her nose with a pained grimace. “Man, zath shtingsh.” She eyed her loot with suspicion.

“Aye, ’tis potent.”

“So how come you’re hiding it under your bed?”

“I sometimes enjoy a partake when I read. ’tis more closewise here than elsewhere.”

“I bet.”

“And thissa’s tricksome to find in Throne. If I wanted to share it, I’d put it in the kitchen with the others.”

“Oh, right,” Allison sheepishly set to put the bottle back where she found it.

“Tha can have some though, if tha likens,” Cio said, opening her book again in search of the page where she had left off.

“Really?” Allison beamed at her.

“Aye,” Cio flicked her hand. “Just don’t burn tha tongue. It’d be a pitysome waste.”

“I wasn’t aware you cared so much about my tongue.”

” ’td be a waste of good hooch, I meant.” Cio’s tail whipped along the linens.

Despite Cio’s gaze being fixed on the words on the opened pages before her, Allison’s watery puppy eyes stung her sides.

“Likesomewise, tha tongue’s adequate,” Cio rolled her eyes.

Allison smiled mischievously and got up. “I’ll fetch us some glasses.”

“Us?” Cio turned towards her, but Allison had already disappeared through the door.

“Yes, us,” she called from the kitchen. “You won’t let me drink your special stash without you, will you?”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Cio howled, but Allison reappeared shortly with two glasses in her hand and sat back on the mattress.

“We can make a game of it,” Allison said, handing Cio a half-filled glass.

Cio shot her a long, silent look. “Drinking’s nae a game.”

"It could be if you wanted to."

"I've had nae intentions of getting shitfaced tonight, squigglebutts."

"We could play something light and easy that doesn't get us plastered, how about that? Something like Truth or Dare?"

"Do I 'ave ta?"

"Pleeeease?"

Cio sighed reluctantly and placed her book away on the nightstand beside the bed. "How does tha play?" she grumbled.

"It's easy. One player gets the choice of a truth or a dare. If you choose truth, you need to answer a question truthfully. If you choose dare, you need to perform a daring deed the other player assigns you. If you can't or won't, you have to take a sip of your drink. But if you do, your opponent takes one. Then we switch who does the asking."

"That sounds boresome."

"It's a lot better than drinking in silence."

"Is it, though?" Cio side-eyed her closed book.

"Come on, at least give it a try. I'll even let you go first."

"Fine," Cio growled. "So I let tha choose a truth or a dare?"

"Yes."

"Then choose."

"Let's start easy. Truth." Allison crossed her legs.

"Alright then. What is the main currency of Alataloth?"

Allison tilted her head. "What's Alataloth?"

"One of the worlds owned by Mottom. I take it tha doesn't know, then?"

“No, I don’t.”

“Then drink thy penalty.”

“Cio, that’s...” Allison covered her lips, stifling a laugh. “That’s not how you’re supposed to play the game.”

“Why, because tha’s losing already?”

“No, you’re supposed to ask me questions about myself. Stuff I wouldn’t normally answer. Private, embarrassing stuff. Like who your first kiss was or who you have a crush on or something like that.”

“Why? Does tha harbour a fancy for another?”

“No, but-”

“So then there’s nae point in asking what I already know the answer to?”

“Yes, but-”

“And tha didn’t know the truth to the one I asked. Thus you lose. So drink.”

“But-”

“Or does tha yield to me already?”

“Ugh, fine,” Allison took a swig from her glass, which made her face wrinkle in all sorts of places. “And you said this was good booze?” she winced.

“Aye. Some fine herbs in there.”

“Fine,” Allison’s lips smacked as she tasted her own tongue. “My turn then. Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” Cio raised her drink to her nose so she could enjoy a long appreciative smell.

Allison gave it a quick thought, noticing Cio’s book on her nightstand. “I know. What’s your favourite romance story?”

“Romance?” Cio searched her memories. “That ought be the tale of Labros and Dynnemar.”

“I don’t know that one. What’s that about?”

“Dynnemar was said to be a most beautifulsome boy, but in truth, he was devilkind in disguise, in hiding. King Labros found him chancewise in a forest, while on a hunt. They fell in love most deepishly in an instant. But Queen Amira, a wilesome sorceress of unparalleled prowess, snatched Dynnemar away, for she had secret-some found a way to bind the devils and make them do her biddings. So when Labros heard, he raised an army and burned her lands and cities and castles to the grounds and slayed the witch with a dagger to her throat to find and free his prettysome Dynnemar. ’twas all very grand and heroic and all that. A tale as old as time.”

“Definitely sounds like an old tale,” Allison took another sip. This time around, the booze hurt her far less. She could even make out some taste to it. “Doesn’t sound very romantic, though.”

“To thy untrained ears, maybe. ’tis a classic.”

“I mean, it sounds like a love story all right. But where’s the romance? They instantly fall in love, and then the twink needs to be saved, and then there’s tons of slaughtering and killing.”

“Dynnemar’s nae a twink!”

“Sure, whatever. Still, where’s the romance? There’s just no juice to it.”

“It has some fiercesome beautiful dialogue. ’tis well-known for that.”

“But you gotta admit, it’s kinda weak in the romance department. At least the way you tell it. You gotta have a better one than that.”

“Let me think, then,” Cio tasted her drink. “What about the tale of Hydra and Perida?”

“Tell me.”

“They first meet as captor and captive on a ship. Hydra’s imprisoned and brought for her knowledges of some distant lands Perida is missioned to explore. But their ship crashes to ground and they’re the only two to make it to lands.”

“A shipwreck? Enemies alone on an island? Now *that’s* a classic.”

“They’re nae alone. The islands are inhabited. And they start in separation, nae together. Which is why Perida firstwise learns a newsome way of life from the natives. She must examine all her rulers taught her, from her language to her way of thought, to her thoughts of self and others to be welcomed by the islanders. And once she does, she ventures to seek out Hydra, wanting to make amends and befriend her. She struggles to gain her trust at all but succeeds eventualwise, and Hydra joins her and the natives. From then on their love for each other slowwise begins to bloom. But ’tis mere slowwise, for Hydra has deep scars from her past in her spirit, yet to cease bleeding.”

“Definitely a better setting than the other one.”

“Aye. They both need overcome their past lives to find to each other. ’tis a very sweetsome tale of friendship and love and growing.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Tha should see how they try to share a barn to live in, bickering and backering throughout. Perida’s such a sweetsome girl, she tried so hardsome to be a good friend, despite Hydra rejecting her over and over again. Or when they fall asleep side by side in the fields, talking deepsome into the nights. How Perida reaches for Hydra’s hand, all timidwise, and—” Cio halted abruptly, noticing Allison’s bemused look. “But I digress. I answered twice now. If tha’s content, then choose thy turn. Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“As tha wishes. What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?”

“What?”

“The airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow. What is it?”

“Oh, come on, Cio!”

“Tha doesn’t know, does tha?”

“No, I don’t. But you’re still missing the point of the game! It’s not about answering trivia.”

“And yet, tha has lost again. The score is two-zero for me.”

Allison burst out laughing. “Cio, there is no score!”

“There ain’t?”

“No!”

“What sort of gobwise game is this then?!”

“The kind where you’re supposed to talk to each other and socialize and have a drink or two. It’s not meant to be a competition, Cio. Just a fun little game.”

” ’tis truly a boresome game then.”

“Ah come on, don’t be like that. At least give it a real chance?”

Cio swallowed half the contents of her glass in one go and sighed. “Why are we playing this game?”

“You’re really gonna keep being a spoilsport all night, huh.”

“Nay, I meant that. That’s my next truth from thee. Why are we playing this game.”

“Because I thought it could be fun?”

“How surprisesome. But ’tis nae the full truth, is it.”

“No,” Allison averted her eyes.

“Then answer fullwise.”

“I was bored. Then I found the bottle and thought a drink could be nice and wanted you to join in. I thought the game may convince you to put that book down for a minute and spend some time with me.”

“Mhm,” Cio nodded, observing her carefully for a moment. “But tha’s still keeping truth from me, aren’t tha.”

“Damn, you’re really going for my jugular now,” Allison blushed, her eyes still lowered. “Fine. I also wanted to spend some quality time with you. Something which wasn’t you teaching me magic or us having sex. Some real quality time, you know? Just the two of us? Without White Chain or Princess or Nyave. And maybe get to know you a little better? Sometimes I feel like I don’t know you very well, Cio, you know? We’re like this thing, but still not really a thing, but still live together and sleep together, I don’t know. And somehow, I still feel like I don’t know you very well at all, you know? I thought this might change that a little.”

Cio nodded.

“So, was that good enough?” Allison eyed her timidly.

“Has tha more to tell?”

“No, I don’t think so. That was pretty much all I’ve got.”

“Then I am satisfied enoughsome. So now I drink?”

“Yes. And it’s my turn now,” Allison added as Cio emptied her glass, “truth or dare?”

“Tha clears some wants to ask. So ask.”

“Okay,” Allison swayed and tapped her knees. “What was your first kiss like?”

“Fuck if I know.” Cio unceremoniously pulled the cork from the bottle with her teeth and filled her glass to the brim.

“What?”

“Allison, that was aeons and lifetimes ago. I don’t remember any of that nae more.”

“But... It’s your first kiss,” Allison deflated. “How can you not remember that?”

Cio shrugged. “I’ve lived for a longsome time, silkyhairs. Tha forgets things that cease to matter.”

“Even your lovers?” Allison asked with big eyes.

“That’s thy second question. Tha’s already gotten thy answer. Save that for the next round. Now drink up and choose – truth, or dare?”

“Truth, I guess,” Allison said somberly, her mind still lingering someplace else.

“As tha wishes. What does tha fear mostsome?”

“Oh wow. No mercy for poor little me tonight, huh. At least you’re getting into the spirit of the game, so there’s that.” Allison took another sip as she pondered the question. “I guess it’d have to be dying right now? I don’t wanna die either way, but I really don’t want to bite the dust right now. I’ve only just started figuring things out. Myself, all this many-worlds-and-magic business. I still feel kinda incomplete, you know? Like I haven’t stepped into my shoes yet, and I’m only figuring out how to get there. I haven’t really done anything in my life. All I’ve done is be an anxious mess all the time. I don’t want it to end before I get to the other side of that. I wanna see what’s on the other side first. It’s like I’m still in the test run, and my life hasn’t even started properly yet.”

“Sensible,” Cio nodded. “To fear tha death before tha has even lived.” She took a big gulp of the herbal liquor. “Is tha still plagued with anxieties these days?”

“Sometimes, yeah. But it’s getting better. I feel less and less lost as time goes on, that helps. And being able to beat up guys three times my size also helps.”

“Good.”

“Yeah,” Allison stared absentmindedly into her glass for a while. Then she perked up and slammed its contents down in a single big gulp. “My turn. Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“Since you’ve been tough on me, I’m not gonna pull any punches either. So tell me, Cio, what do you want me to *not* ask you about?”

“Tha wants to know all my secrets?”

“You have secrets?”

"Of course. Tha doesn't?"

"Like what you're hiding under the bed?"

Cio stiffened.

"I've noticed you getting jumpy when I was looking under there earlier."

"Is that thy question? What lies underneath my mattress?"

"No," Allison shook her head. "Tell me what you really don't want me asking about."

"Thassa good question," Cio smirked and drank. "So goodsome, a devil might've thought it up. Tha's learning quickwise."

"I promise I won't actually ask. But I am curious. And this," Allison swirled the empty glass in her hand, "is going straight to my head. Which reminds me," she clumsily reached over for the bottle. "So answer, Cio," Allison said as she poured herself more, "what shan't I be asking about?"

"This game lost its attraction rapidwise."

Allison drank, looking quietly at Cio.

"Fine. Yabalchoath. Don't ask me about Yabalchoath. I don't want to talk about her."

"And why is that?"

Cio shot her an angry look.

"You don't have to tell me the specifics. Just why you don't want to talk to me about it."

"I thought tha knew already," Cio growled. "I don't like who I was back then. Nor the things I did back then. I don't want to be known for that. I don't likens remembering that muchwise. I don't want to get close to that anymore. Ever."

"I get that. But it also feels like there's more to it. Is there?"

"Aye."

Allison hugged her knees, giving Cio a gentle look until she was ready to continue.

"I don't want tha to know. I want tha to know only Cio for Cio. Not Cio for having been Yabalchoath too. There, happy now?"

"Yeah, kinda," Allison slurped on her drink. "Thanks for sharing, Cio," she added gently. "I know this wasn't easy for you."

"Truth or dare, then?" Cio hurried to move on.

"Truth."

"Thy angsts who plague thee. What are they?"

"You sure you want to open that Pandora's box?"

"Whassat?"

"Just some human expression. Supposedly a box that contained all the evils."

"Aye. Open it."

"Alright, then," Allison leaned back. "What anxieties plague me. Oh, you know, just the usual ones. Fucking *everything*. You know, like how the most powerful beings in the fucking Universe want the key in my head out of there. At some point, they'll come for it. Either that, or when I go to get Zaid out of here. Either way, we'll cross paths and they'll probably smite me or whatever it is gods do. Oh, and Zaid may be dead already. So that might all be for fuck all. All the training and exercising. And it's not like I'm particularly good at it. Every time I fuck up something according to Madam White Chain's ridiculously high standards, she keeps giving me this dissatisfied, disappointed, stony look, like I'm wasting both our times with every fucking breath I take."

Allison took another sip, noticing Cio's slumped ears and stiff gaze. "Buckle up, buttercup, I'm only getting started. Then there's all these insecurities haunting my fucking brain all day long. Am I training hard enough. Am I training too hard. Am I progressing fast enough. Am I progressing at all. Which fuckup of mine is going to be the final one that'll break the camel's back and get me dead or disabled or

abandoned. Am I even good enough for all of this shit. Am I even good enough for any of it?"

Cio's tail flicked over the linens as Allison took another hearty gulp. "Oh, and all my messed up body image issues. They've been around for fucking *ages*. And they pop up, all day long. Just like that. Am I pretty enough. Am I strong enough. Am I tall enough. Cute enough. Muscular enough. Am I too fat. Not fat enough. Am I too skinny. Not skinny enough. Is my skin weird. Is my hair weird. I mean, who the fuck has white hair in their twenties?! I look like a fucked up grandma. A buff, fucked up grandma with a hole in her forehead. And with great hair. But white. And a bunch of scars. I mean, just look at this!" She lifted her shirt, revealing her belly. "What the fuck is this even? It's fat, it's muscular, it's full of weird scars and stretchmarks. What the fuck am I supposed to do with this? Ugh."

Looking down at her midriff and poking it with her finger, Allison caught Cio's tail slither nervously from the corner of her eye. She raised her head to find Cio looking at her intently, her expression hidden behind a rigid coolness, betrayed only by a tiny shift in her gaze away from her eyes.

"If you're worried about these," Allison pointed at the scars on her face, "then don't. Those I don't mind. Actually, I kinda like them. They're one of the few things that actually feel like *me*. Speaking of me," she perked up. "Your turn. You choose truth."

Cio gave her a questioning look and then shrugged. "Fine."

"Is my tongue really only adequate?"

"Th-

"You know, you have to tell me otherwise. I need to know if you need me to do something different."

"Nay, tha does great," Cio shook her head. "Tha tongue is lovesome. 'twas mere teasin' on my end."

"Okay. Good." Allison drank.

Cio eyed her head to toe. "Let us switch things up littlewise. Tha chooses dare."

"Fine. But be nice."

"Nay, I shan't. I dare thee to go slap Nyave across her wee smug face."

"What? Cio, no! I'm not gonna slap Nyave!"

" 'tis the game, tha has to!"

"Come on Cio, be reasonable. Where is this even coming from? Did you two get into a fight or something?"

"Nay."

"Cio...?" Allison shot her a stern look until Cio folded, tucking her tail around her feet.

"She called my cookings unseasoned this morning. *My* cookings! Pilfering po-drumple!"

"Well, be that as it may, I'm not slapping her. You'll have to deal with that some other way. Pick something else."

"Pah." Cio lit a cigarette. "Fine. Then drink," she pointed at Allison. "Tha full glass. In one go. I dare thee."

"This?" Allison raised her drink.

"Aye."

"Sure. That's not much of a challenge. You've seen me outdrink an ebony devil, right? A single glass ain't much in comparison."

"Then do it."

Allison emptied the contents into herself and wiped her mouth. "See? No big deal." She let out a hearty burp. "This thing's growing on me," she said, smacking her lips. "Warms me up nicely."

Allison looked at Cio. "My turn again. You," she pointed at her, "drink. Two full glasses. In one go. I dare thee."

“Are tha trying to get me completewise drunken?”

“Little old me? I would never.”

“Tha would though, tha would, cacksome spratling. And then, then what has tha thought?” Cio’s grin widened from ear to ear. “To take advantages of a poorsome drunken old woman?”

“I resenteth the sentimenth, I’ll have thee know! I’m simply betting that tha cannot doeth. It. Doeth it.”

“Are tha- Are tha mimicking me?”

“Suresomewisely not-eth, as tha can clearsomewise see-eth,” Allison sneered.

“Tha little shitwomble!”

“Tha little shitwomble,” Allison shook her head with every syllable departing her lips.

“Stop it this instant!”

“Nay.”

“Tha scorelamp racknuggin!”

“Tha scorelamp racknuggin!”

Cio set her glass and smoke aside and leapt onto Allison.

“Careful, I’ll spill my drink!” Allison cackled.

Cio tried to push her down by her shoulders, but Allison didn’t budge, looking her dead in the eye as she slurped her drink overly loudly. So she clumsily climbed over Allison and clamped onto her from the back, straddling her like a little devil backpack, and tried to shake her as best she could with her entire body.

“Stop it, stop it, stop it!” Cio yelled.

“Make me,” Allison grinned.

“Fine, I’ll make thee,” Cio grabbed Allison’s chin, pulling her head to turn back towards her, and kissed her. “Now drop it.”

“I will, but you still owe me two full glasses downed. Now drinketh up.”

“Nay.”

“Does that mean you yield to me?”

“Nay, but two’s too much. I invoke my rights to decline for the price of a sip.” Cio took Allison’s glass out of her hand and helped herself.

“Spoilsport.”

“So, now what?”

“Now I get another turn.”

“That’s the rules?”

“That’s the rules. Let me think,” Allison said, wrapping her arms around Cio’s holding on to her. “I know. What do you like about me?”

“Thy squishy arse.” Cio shook her hips against Allison’s backside.

“I mean, really.”

“Thy squishy tits, then.” Cio grabbed herself two handfuls.

“Cio, be serious,” Allison laughed.

“I am.”

“Or would you rather I ask you about what you’re hiding under your bed?”

Cio froze, relaxing her grip only moments later though. “My writings,” she murmured. “I think I stashed them down there.”

“I used to hide my diary under my mattress too.”

“Tha has kept a journal?”

“Ages ago, yeah. I don’t anymore. Gods, all the embarrassing stuff I’ve written in there. If anyone had found it back then, my life would’ve been over.”

“Me too. Tonswise things not meant for any eyes to spy.”

“How odd. An author writing for no one to read.”

“Aye. Odd,” Cio rested her head on Allison’s shoulder. “Odd’s what I am.”

“Well, not that odd. But you still haven’t answered my question.”

“I have.”

“Nope. You told me what’s under the bed, not what you really like about me.”

“Tha’s trying to trick me again. Asking two questions.”

“Nope. I asked the one. You answered the other. That’s on you.”

“Tha’s pushing thy luck, meadowsmell.”

“Mhm,” Allison hummed confidently.

“Fine. Thy softwise skin, then,” Cio kissed her neck and nuzzled into her.

“I’m not getting you to answer that properly tonight, am I.”

Cio blew a raspberry on Allison’s neck.

“That means I win.”

Cio’s ears jumped to attention. “Tha’s said there ain’t winning in this game.”

“There is now.”

“Snivveling torminket, tha’s changing the rules as tha please!”

“You’re just mad because you’re losing.”

“I’ll show tha losing!” Cio dropped her fingers into Allison’s sides, mercilessly tickling her. The giggling Allison toppled over to her side, but Cio’s assault remained undeterred. “Who’s losing now, ticklefish?” she huffed, sniggering viciously.

“Still you,” Allison wheezed with lungs empty from laughter.

“Then I dare thee, I dare thee—” Cio halted and froze, her grin taking a malicious hue. She took a deep breath and exhaled her atom, forming it with her nimble fingers into curved dark paper until it finally took the shape of a giant moustache.

“I dare thee to fasten this onto the statue in White Chain’s shrine!”

“Are you crazy? White Chain would kill me!”

“A-ha! Tha admits defeat!”

“I didn’t say that! It’s just...”

“All I hear is a coward’s clucking.”

“You’re insane.”

“And winning.”

“Fine! Watch me!”

Allison snatched the paper moustache from Cio’s hands and left the room quietly, or at least as quietly as a drunk losing her balance with every other step managed. Nyave would probably be in her room, Allison figured, while the tell-tale creaking of the armchair a floor above her let her know that Princess was occupying it. So the only remaining unknown was White Chain herself. But for the life of her, Allison couldn’t remember what White Chain had told her about her plans for the night. With a bit of luck, she’d still be out patrolling. With a bit of misfortune, she’d be meditating in her room. Drunks are lucky, wasn’t that the saying? Maybe she’ll luck out tonight. Or no. Drunks have their own guardian angels. That was it. So would the guardian angel make White Chain be gone, or is her guardian angel meditating in her room? Ah, fuck it. Allison braved on.

Two steps down the stairs, Allison heard the floorboards squeaking behind her. She turned around to discover Cio following her.

“What are you doing?” Allison hissed in a whisper.

“Witnessing tha fail thy daring deed,” Cio said in a hushed voice.

“You’re gonna get us caught!”

“Nay, tha will if tha doesn’t shut up! Now go!”

“Fine! Just be quiet!” Allison growled. Arguing on the stairs wouldn’t help her cause. So she shakily tiptoed further towards White Chain’s room with Cio behind her. At least Cio was as light-footed as ever.

A glimmer of hope lit up in Allison’s lungs when she discovered no lights coming through the door gap to White Chain’s chamber. She slowly opened the creaking door. As the outside lights entered, they revealed a table surrounded by unoccupied chairs, an empty tea mug and some sheets of paper placed upon it. White Chain’s shrine to Ys-Het stood to her left, the metal shining and shimmering in the infalling illumination. The incense at the statue’s feet looked unburned despite its strong smell filling the air. White Chain’s room always smelled of incense. Allison halted and listened. Not a single sound came from the room. She could hear Princess twist and turn in her armchair above and the taps of Cio’s claws on the wooden floorboards behind her. Emboldened by her luck, Allison stepped inside, readying the paper moustache in her hands, and beelined for the statue.

“Allison?” a stony voice called out, making her scream and jump and twirl and contort, cold sweat instantly finding its way onto her skin. If she had been a cat, she would’ve lost one of her lives then and there.

“What are you doing?” White Chain calmly rose from the dark corner of the room. “Do you need anything?”

Allison stared at her blue eyes, then at the moustache in her hand, then at the wide-eyed Cio in the doorframe, then back at the moustache, and finally back at White Chain again. Then she threw her arms into the air and the defacing paper ornament with them.

“Run, Cio!” she yelled, storming out of White Chain’s chamber and grabbing Cio by her hand. “Run for your life! She’ll kill us!” She pulled her further downstairs.

“Why us? ’twas thy deed to be done! I’m innocent!”

“We’re in this together, now *run!*” Allison shouted back as she leapt through the main entrance and ran through the streets.

“Slow down!” Cio wheezed. “I can’t keep up with tha pulling me like this!”

Allison halted abruptly and picked Cio up to throw her over her shoulder and sprint away into the night.

“So, now what?” Allison strolled through those busy streets of Throne which never slept. Cio sat on her shoulders with her hands firmly holding onto Allison’s head and her tail raised high into the air.

“If we can’t go back, then we go forward! And pick up where we left off. The night is youngsome, ’tis too early to die! So now, drinks! More drinks!”

“I don’t think she’ll kill us for real. I just panicked. And you know White Chain’s secretly a softie. A big, stony softie.”

“Nae matter! Drinks now, worry later!” Cio steered Allison’s head towards an illuminated sign. “There! They sell booze. Onwards, steed o’mine!”

Allison skipped into the shop.

“In retrospect, maybe I shouldn’t pick fights with thugs when I’m drunk,” Allison mused as they turned the corner into a different alleyway.

“Pah. ’t nae counts if he pulls a knife firstwise. Tha gave him a good thrashing, though. He flew into that wall like a birdie.”

“I guess. But now my shirt is soaked with beer. And I’m out of drinks. Again.”

” ’twas a fine thing to see thy strength developed. Tha’s doing well.”

“Why, thank you!” Allison curtsied clumsily.

“And about thy shirt. We can get thee out of it if tha wants.” Cio flicked her tail onto Allison’s butt and slid it along her back.

“Are you suggesting-”

“Aye,” Cio wrapped an arm around Allison’s waist.

“Here?”

“Why nae? That alley over there looks plenty dark and silentsome.”

A beet red Allison sprinted breathlessly through a street crawling with Throne’s night life. “Cio! Give them *back*!”

“Nae!” Cio squeaked and fled through the crowd with Allison’s underwear hung proudly between her horns. ” ’tis my trophy! I seduced thee, I earned it, I deserve it!”

“Cio!”

Allison sat on the cold stoned rooftop and observed the sea of houses and swarms of god’s heads extending before her. With night slowly turning to day, she could make out some of their shapes in the distance. Cio sat quietly beside her. Their legs were dangling freely from edge several stories above the street. With weariness catching up with them, the two had found themselves a quiet place to sit away from the more lively streets and let the night fade out unceremoniously. The cigarettes burning in their mouths even managed to cover Throne’s streets’ usual stench. The southern wind carried distant noises with it. Allison eyed however little red devil wine remained in her bottle. It wasn’t much, but that was just as well. She had drunk plenty already. *Where does the wind even come from on Throne*, she wondered and took another swig.

“We’ll have to go back eventually,” Allison finally said lazily.

Cio let her head drop onto Allison’s shoulder. “Aye. Eventually.”

“But not yet?”

“Does tha want to leave?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Then not yet.”

Allison looked over the countless tiny little lights flickering in the distance and smoked. “Thanks for tonight,” she said. “I had fun.”

“Nae mention it.”

“I wonder how much of it we’ll remember,” Allison said and drank some more.

“Most, I’d wager.”

“You think?”

Cio nodded.

“And what about me?”

“Tha too.”

“No, me. Will you remember me?”

“Of course, I’ll remember thee. What’s tha squaking about?”

“You said you forgot. Once things don’t matter anymore, you forget them. Like your first kiss. Remember?”

“Oh, Allison,” Cio’s voice was steeped with concern. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t do this to thyself.”

“Do what?”

“This. Ask this.”

“Why? I want to know.”

“Does tha?”

“Yes?”

“Which answer, then, would tha prefer? Which one won’t hurt thee?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

” ’tis?”

“Yeah?”

“Those-a-ways only misery lies, worryhare. Either one you pick.”

“If there’s misery’s each way, why does it matter which one I pick?”

Cio flicked her cigarette away, staring into the distance. “So tell me, then. Which one.”

“I’d want to be remembered, obviously.”

“Why?” Cio said tiredly.

“What do you mean, why?”

“Just that. Why.”

“Well... I don’t know! I’ll be dead someday, I guess? It’d be nice to know that some part of me would remain. That I mattered. At least at some point. To someone. Like I existed at all in the first place.”

“And what’ll tha do once I’m gone too?”

“Dunno. Nothing, I guess.”

“Aye. The wheel keeps turning, Allison. All waves flatten with time, no matter how tallwise you made the sea rise to begin with.”

“I know. But still. It’d be a comforting thought.”

“There’s nae comfort in beating waves to rise.”

"There's no comfort in being dead and forgotten, either."

"Aye. I suppose so." Cio dropped back and lay on the stone roof.

"So?" Allison pushed.

"So?"

"You haven't said yet. Do you think you'll remember me, once I'm long gone?"

"Perhaps," Cio sighed. "Perhaps. Only time can tell. But I don't think I'll forget thee easily. Tha doesn't simply forget breaking into the vault of Yre. Not even for the second time."

"Is *that* how you'll remember me? For the heist?"

"Not a nice feeling, is it, honeynose. To have thy life known solely for thy violence and robbery."

"I guess not," Allison said bitterly. She swallowed whatever wine remained and dropped the bottle on the street below, watching it fall and burst on the cobblestones. At first, it fell slowly, but by the end, she could barely make out its contours. If it weren't for the sounds of glass breaking, she wouldn't have been sure the bottle had fallen at all.

"Maybe I just want to be loved," she mumbled. "I don't know." Then she let herself drop backwards too and lay next to Cio.

Cio flicked her tail over Allison's leg.

"I know that sentiment."

"It's shit, isn't it."

"Sometimes." Cio snuggled into her. They lay on the hard cold stone roof in silence for a while.

"You were right," Allison finally said. "I shouldn't have asked. Now the mood's all in the gutter. And the wine is gone. Why is the wine always gone?"

” ’cause we drank it all.”

“Oh yeah, right.” She turned her head towards Cio. “Should we go get more?”

“Nay, nae for me. I’m done, good and proper.”

“That’s probably wise. I don’t feel like getting up.”

Shortly before Allison dozed off with Cio tightly in her arms, silent but heavy footsteps approached them. Neither of the two even attempted to look up or move.

“You’ll contract an illness if you sleep here, Allison,” White Chain said, towering above them. “You’re not adequately equipped to spend a night on the stones.”

Allison opened her eyes. “Oh, hey, White Chain! Look, Cio, White Chain’s here!”

“Pah,” Cio growled.

“Wanna have a drink with us? You’ll have to go fetch the drinks, though. We’re all out and we don’t feel like getting up.”

“I can see that,” White Chain said.

“How did you even find us?”

“I followed you ever since you stormed out of our home.”

“The entire night?”

“Yes.”

“So when that guy-”

“Yes. Your stance was pitifully sloppy, student. We’ll have to work on that tomorrow.”

“And then when we-”

“I gave you your privacy,” White Chain looked away. “Even if you didn’t appear keen on too much of it in the first place.”

“Hah! Stoneyarse’s a pervert. Who woulda thunk!” Cio sniggered.

"You were behaving very strangely at home. I was worried."

"You hear, that, Cio? She was worried. I told you she's a softie!"

"Pah."

"A stoney but a softie."

"Stoney I'll give thee."

"I thought something was wrong," White Chain knelt down next to them. "So imagine my surprise when I gathered that all that was was you partaking in too much drink."

"Yeah, sorry," Allison chortled.

"That was not wise, Allison. Nor restrained."

"I know, I know. Sorry."

"Well have to have a long chat about that tomorrow, student."

"Oh no." All colour vanished from Allison's face.

"Yes, we will."

"Not that," Allison jerked up and scrambled towards the roof's edge, where she threw up, the vomit spreading through the air in a majestic arch as it fell onto the streets.

"Ha! I win!" Cio cackled and raised her arms in victory.

"Magnificent," White Chain rolled her eyes.

"The final bit of the wine may have been a bit too much," Allison wiped her mouth.

"Mhm," White Chain glared at her with her arms crossed.

Allison let herself drop onto the roof again.

"We should get going, now," White Chain said.

“Yeah, I’m not going anywhere for a bit. I just need a quick nap and I’ll be back on my feet. Just five minutes. Ten, tops.”

White Chain rubbed her temples. “You can’t be serious.”

“Just five. Five minutes. I promise.” Allison snuggled into Cio.

White Chain approached her and lifted both her and Cio onto her shoulders. Allison slumped like a sack of potatoes, while Cio stretched herself like a cat hung to dry.

“Wheee! All aboard the White Chain train!” the sack of potatoes hollered.

“Do not call me that,” said White Chain.

“And now we’re taking the White Chain Express back home. Because she was worried about us. Isn’t that sweet?”

“Aye, I guess.” Cio swayed lazily back and forth with every step White Chain took.

“We love you too, White Chain!” The sack of potatoes tried to hug her but struggled to get a firm grip on the angel’s back.

“Pah,” muttered Cio.

“Pah,” agreed White Chain and carried them homewards into the rising dawn.

Aesma and the Beetle

Once, a great gathering took place in YISUN's speaking house. Ten thousand lords assembled with twenty thousand reasons carrying their feet and wings and fins and wheels into the russet halls with feathered arches. It was a great commotion, as was custom, and the servants brought out dish after dish to fill the plates and bowls and pots full of wine and liquor to fill their cups. It is said that the bronze walls shimmered red in the reflection of wine, both poured and spilt, and that the air shook with words, both said and unsaid. It is also said that the gilded doors still vibrated for days after the gathering had ended with the din of ten thousand voices spoken with twenty thousand tongues.

Hansa too was part of the assembly of the divines. He sat cross-legged on the floor close to YISUN's throne, as was custom, for he was one of his most ardent disciples. Hansa was known to be one of her oldest and wisest disciples. This was generally agreed upon. He was an avid smoker and always carried his smoking pipe on him, for he knew that it would lead to his death. He was royalty, he didn't mind. He was also an incessant questioner of YISUN. So, lighting his pipe, he asked: "Lord, what is the essence of living?"

YISUN gave it some thought, knowing well that all with ears were listening, when it just so happened that a beetle in flight landed on her bare knee. It was tiny compared to her and its shell shimmered green and purple and octarine like an oil slick of diamonds. He took the beetle in his hand with great care and showed it to Hansa.

"Behold this beetle," spoke YISUN, "a beautiful thing. It lives underground for most of its life. It builds elaborate tunnels to host a colony. With age, it flies away to great lengths to find a mate. The male then digs the first tunnels in the soil. The female lays her hundreds of eggs, upon which she kills and eats the male, for otherwise

he would kill and eat their offspring. She then broods the eggs and defends the colony from predators until the offspring hatches, upon which the offspring kills and consumes their mother's corpse. That is the beetle's way, and that is the essence of living."

The present gods, having listened attentively, nodded thoughtfully and made sounds of wordless agreement. This infuriated Aesma, who had understood nothing. She had skin as black as ash and the deep unlit corners of the universe. But Aesma carried a terrible fire of ambition in her breast and was thus prone to outbursts of anger and rage. She emptied her seven thousand and thirteenth cup of wine, her thirst yet unquenched, and smacked her bright red tongue.

"You're all full of shit!" she yelled.

"It is custom to eat and drink well in my house," said YISUN.

"None of them have understood anything!" Aesma screeched.

"Shut up, you stupid thing!" the gods yelled at her. "We have well learned from this lesson, do not insult us for thy lack of comprehension!"

Aesma was stupid. She knew she was stupid, and it didn't bother her much, for she was stupid, but being called stupid vexed her nonetheless. She clenched her fists and stomped her feet on the floor.

"Prove it then, oh ye wise wiseards!" she bellowed. "Reveal to everyone what you learned here and now so we may partake in thy comprehension! Our father and mother YISUN shall be the judge!"

The gods looked at YISUN, who smiled in the twenty-third way and nodded.

"It is to create," suggested Koss, who was keen to hammer iron and fire and ash at his hearth. "The essence of living is to create, as the beetle creates its tunnels, its offspring, its relationships, its meals, and its deaths."

"That makes them no different from the dead!" spat Aesma. "They incessantly create just as well. From the mounds on the graveyards to the problems their absence raises, they create just as well!"

“The essence of life is to kill and to eat!” spoke UN-Kiham, a minor justice god. “To kill is the living’s right. To eat is the living’s privilege. The beetle kills to eat, it kills to mate, and it kills to survive. The beetle eats to kill, it eats to mate, and it eats to survive. And that is just.”

“Pah!” screeched Aesma. “Even I can tell that is stupid. Does death not find mortals on their own? Does a river not eat the shores it grinds against? Your wisdom is lacking even compared to my own, and you called me stupid!”

“Pree Aesma is right,” said YIS-Calla, a goddess of war. “Preem Kiham, you have seen, but you have not seen far enough. For both eating and killing are part of the same whole. It is violence. The essence of living is violence.”

“Violence is inescapable,” YISUN nodded.

“But is it the essence of living?!” Aesma exclaimed insecurely.

“It isn’t,” said YISUN and shook her head solemnly.

“And it cannot be!” Aesma laughed loudly, emboldened by YISUN’s assurance. “For the unliving imparts violence onto the universe just as well,” she rambled, not halting to consider whether his words had been a lie. “Does a star not violently bend spacetime around its fat belly? Do the winds and tides not violently break trees and nests? Even a stupid like me knows that much!”

And YISUN’s other children had to agree that she was right.

Thus began a long list of gods putting forward suggestions of their understanding, all of which Aesma ridiculed and taunted and disproved hastily, which entertained her well. “To increase entropy,” suggested one. “Beauty,” suggested another. “Royalty,” suggested a third. “The divine,” suggested a fourth, and so forth, and so forth. And Aesma laughed and laughed and drank and laughed, enraging every single one of her siblings present in YISUN’s speaking hall.

“Enough!” they finally yelled. “If you think you are so wise, then tell us what you think!”

“It is to want!” Aesma kept laughing.

“Wonderful,” said YISUN. Her words pulled a silence through the speaking hall behind them as they passed, leaving everybody stunned and watching attentively.

“Was that correct?” Aesma said incredulously, herself stumped just as much as the other gods.

“No,” said YISUN, “but it was wonderful.”

Aesma threw her cup of wine against the nearest wall.

“I think,” Hansa said finally and drew smoke from his pipe, “to live is to spite.” The beetle spites the ground, so it digs tunnels in it. The beetle spites aesthetics, so its shell is beautiful and it lives underground for no eyes to see it. The beetle spites creation, so it destroys. The beetle spites destruction and nothingness, so it creates. The beetle spites its death by living. The beetle spites life by killing and dying. The beetle’s children spite their parents by consuming their life. The parents spite their children by bringing them to life. And the beetle spites us by instinctively understanding what none of us do. So the essence of its life is to spite, I say. It spites itself and others, and it spites life and death equally. Therefore, to live is to spite, as is to die.”

“Hansa is observant,” said YISUN.

“What? That was it?” Aesma whined.

“A part of it, maybe,” lied YISUN.

“But that’s easy!” Aesma stomped her feet on the floor.

“Good,” said YISUN. “To be Aesma is to spite me.”

“What? I don’t want that!” Aesma tantrumed and threw another wine cup against the wall.

“Perfect,” said YISUN.

Prim Walks The Road

Chapter 1 - The Faster Way

Prim walked the road. She had been walking for aeons; for so long that time passing had lost its weight. She had walked ragged and tattered so many shoes and boots and sandals and wrappings that she had lost count. Not that she had been counting in the first place; footwear came and went. To Prim, time had become but another step to walk past. Once that had happened, she trod on. She had the road ahead of her and the road in her back and the road under the soles of her feet, and so she strut on, bare-footed and ever-marching, bent towards the horizon and accustomed to the dirt and dust between her toes and the callouses and cuts and blisters and bruises in her skin and all the other gifts which the branches and stones and rocks under her feet kept giving her.

Thusly making her way, she once came across a scene of awesome, gasping devastation. For miles around, rock and stone were split in mad anger, grass and trees burnt to black ashes, rivers evaporated in their beds. Earthshaking clashes thundered through the air as two gods swung their swords and spears at each other in the distance. Prim could barely make out where the road went, so terrible was the devastation of their battle. Yet Prim trod on diligently, as best as she could.

The road ultimately took her closer to the fighting gods. As she approached them, Prim finally recognized the two blood-lusted ones as Ys-Aesma, the Black-Skinned and Every-Hungry, and Un-Janta with his golden bell around his neck which rang in fearsome clarity with every step he took. Engrossed in combat, the two were in their summoned war forms, donning countless heads and eyes and ears, yet none of them paid little Prim any heed as she neared. Nevertheless, Prim greeted them politely and bowed, as was custom, for there was no finer daughter.

“Who goes there?” bellowed Janta with his back turned to her between ragged breaths and swings of his mighty swords at Aesma.

“I am Prim, who was the slave of Hansa and is now the slave of the road,” said Prim.

“What do you want, godling? Can you not see our battle rages fiercely still?” Janta barked, his caustic spit spraying from his mouths and dissolving everything it touched under painful hisses.

“I see it well, Preem Janta,” said Prim, “but you obstruct the road which I must follow. I wish but to pass.”

Janta turned just enough so he could see her and spat. “Be gone, silly girl! I’ve no time for you!” Then he swung one of his many arms at her to swat her away as a horse’s tail would swat at an irritant fly and returned his attention to Aesma, who had been attempting to stab him several times as he spoke at Prim.

Prim was no stranger to violence, for she had served black bread and ajash to fifty thousand mighty travellers in her father’s house and had listened well to their tales of plight and conquest and battle. But her ears had been just as open to those secrets spoken in her father’s house slurredly in the depths of the night and the bottle. Hence Prim knew well of the nature of violence and the arts of annihilation. Inhaling deeply before Janta’s arm had even reached her, with a single strike she dismantled him into ten thousand pieces and exhaled. It is said that it took Janta’s servants one thousand days to put him back together thereafter.

Observing this deed cut a deep impression on Aesma, for at that point she had been combatting Janta for seven days and seven nights without gaining nor losing ground, whereas it took Prim but a single strike to conclude it. As battle-worn as she was, Aesma the Insatiable was incessantly possessed by a starving red jealousy and a ceaseless black hunger for dominion. That was well-known. The very instant she beheld Prim, as the small goddess cleaned Janta’s blood and bits and pieces off the palm of her hand on her vela, Aesma’s boiling blood desired to conquer her. But having seen Prim’s prowess in the universal art, Aesma knew she couldn’t best her in combat and she understood that her conquest must proceed in a different manner. So she released her war form, shrinking to her small ashen-black self with

her crimson red tongue and licked her lips before greeting Prim back politely, as was custom.

“What brings you here, Pree Prim, daughter of Hansa?” said Aesma, catching her breath, the fire in her lungs burning in her neck and the pulse of her heart beating in her ears and toes.

“I’m walking the road,” said Prim.

“Where are you going, then?” asked Aesma.

“To the end of the road,” said Prim.

“What’s there?” asked Aesma.

“I don’t know,” said Prim.

“Then why go there?” asked Aesma.

“I must see what’s there,” said Prim.

“That sounds stupid,” said Aesma.

“I don’t think so,” replied Prim quietly.

“Can’t you leap there?”

“No,” said Prim. “For I do not know where to leap to.”

Aesma looked her up and down from head to toe as a lion looks at a lone meerkat and licked her lips again. “You’ve rid me of this nuisance,” she said, kicking whatever remains of Janta lay around, “so as my thanks, I shall show you a faster way. Come.” She took Prim by the hand and pulled her from the road into the wilderness, and Prim followed her willingly, for if there was indeed a faster way, she was curious to see it.

Soon they arrived at a roaring river of ice-cold glacier waters, far too wide to cross and with no nearby bridge in sight. Just as Prim was to suggest following it downstream, Aesma struck the ground with a terrible might and opened a deep hole, too deep for its bottom to be graced by the lights above. The river’s waters fell into

the depths of the hole and left the riverbed further down where the stream should have been dry and the fish therein wriggling in suffocation.

"Why did you do that?" asked Prim, aghast. She was no stranger to violence, but she had no particular fondness for it either.

"Because I wanted to cross," said Aesma innocently.

"We could've crossed over a bridge," said Prim. "There must be one somewhere. The road will certainly lead past this river somewhere."

"I wanted to cross here," said Aesma. "Where there is no path, make one. Just like this. It is much faster this way."

"This can't be the road," said Prim.

"It could be if you wanted it," said Aesma. "Come, I've much more to show you." She extended her hand towards Prim again and Prim took it, her curiosity having not left her just yet.

It wasn't long until they reached a tall mountain range made of steep, sharp rocks as far as the eye could see and rising high into the skies. Crows and vultures hid in the stones and whichever sparse, dry branches they could find to prey on whatever foolish creatures dared venture uphill to their certain deaths. They said that the mountains were so steep and sharp that not even moss grew there, which wasn't true, but they said it anyway.

Once they stood before the insurmountable rocky slopes, Aesma looked them up and down and then struck the ground with a terrible might and split the mountain clean in two, all the way to the peak, causing a horrific noise and an earthquake that shook the ground for miles, thus revealing a rocky path before them while ten thousand hungry birds took off and screamed their terrible cries in confusion.

"Was that necessary?" asked Prim, beholding the destruction before them.

"When something's in your path, make it not so," said Aesma. "Just like this. It is much faster this way."

“Surely, this can’t be the road,” said Prim.

“It could be if you wanted to make it so,” said Aesma and took Prim by her hand and led them through the path where the mountain had been.

Passing the mountain range, they arrived at the gates of a shimmering city with thick walls and tall gates. Without any hesitation, Aesma led them into the city’s bowels. Following the cobbled streets, she took them past the busy markets and the tall temples shrouded in the smell of incense to the biggest building she could find, which was a palace. It extended for one hundred acres, bursting with servants and clerks and guards and nobles. The palace itself was placed within one thousand acres of beautiful and lively gardens, filled with blooming trees and supple plants and flowers of all colours and songbirds from one hundred worlds chirping their delightful tunes. Tall towers with golden roofs surrounded the palace’s monumental facade, which was holding up a giant dome of glass and silver.

“Halt,” barked the guard at the palace’s gates. “What business do you have?”

“What is this place?” said Aesma.

“This is the White Glass Palace of King Amur Tuk, the Undefeated One, Lord of One Hundred Worlds!” replied the guard. “How can you not know this?”

“Is he rich, this king of yours?” asked Aesma.

“King Amur Tuk, Conqueror of Conquerors, possesses more riches than any other!”

“He must have good wine and ajash, then?” said Aesma.

“King Amur Tuk, the Blue Flame That Purifies Worlds, drinks ten barrels of fine wines each day before sunrise!”

“Perfect,” said Aesma, “we’re very thirsty.” And with a flick of her wrist, she smashed the guard into the wall and headed towards the palace’s entrance before his squashed remains began dripping onto the ground.

“Surely, that wasn’t necessary!” yelled Prim, catching up with Aesma.

“If someone won’t let you walk past, walk through,” said Aesma. “Just like this. It is

much faster this way.”

Prim rolled her eyes, but she took Aesma’s extended hand once more and followed her, for she understood that there was truth to Aesma’s words, just not the one she was looking for.

Entering deeper into the palace, Aesma did the same with each and every guard they encountered, swatting them away to their instant deaths as a horse’s tail would shoo irritant flies. This continued until they reached a mighty hall with thin tall windows and wide columns of polished white marble and platinum. Underneath the hall’s dome of glass and silver, one hundred guards stood in wait, donning heavy plate armour and pointing their spears at them.

“Who are you?” yelled a tall bearded man on the throne behind the guards. “Who dares challenge me, Amur Tuk, the Undefeated One, in my own palace?”

“Are you the king, then?” asked Aesma.

“Are you blind, or merely a fool?” screamed the king.

But Aesma simply leapt past the one hundred guards, grabbed the king by his head and hurled him with all her might through the glass dome above, shattering it into a billion brilliant splinters which fell slowly like snowflakes and throwing the king so far that he was never seen again. Then Aesma sat on the throne and pointed at a servant by the far wall.

“You there,” she said calmly, “bring us bread and wine and ajash. We’re thirsty and weary from our travels.”

The servant, having been a servant all her life, obeyed instantly, for she had been a servant all her life and knew what was best for her, which fretting about who exactly was sat atop a particular chair was not. The existence of a particular chair was, but that’s a tale for a different time. The one hundred heavily armed guards, many born of parents who had been servants all their lives, wordlessly dispersed and assumed their posts again, for they too knew of the laws of violence and what was best for them.

So the servants brought out ajash and wine and bread and one hundred delicacies on golden plates, which pleased Aesma greatly. And Prim joined her side, for she too was quite fond of fine foods and nourishing drink, and they broke bread and ate and drank together.

"The road is long and dusty," said Aesma finally and swallowed the fragrant meat she had been chewing on. "It offers little in the ways of comfort. Is this not better?" And she poured ajash into Prim's emptied cup.

"It certainly is pleasant," said Prim and sipped of the ajash, remembering how the travellers in her father's house had claimed it to restore one's flesh and spirits. "But I'm not sure that this is the right way."

"It is the right way if you want it to be," said Aesma.

"I don't know whether I want it to be," said Prim.

"Are you not fond of good food and drink, then?" said Aesma.

"I am," said Prim.

"Why should it be wrong, then? Why not want it?" said Aesma.

"The road calls for me still," said Prim.

"Has the road not led you here?" said Aesma.

"No, you have," said Prim.

"But the road has led you to me first," replied Aesma, "so that I may lead you here. Can it be wrong, then?"

Prim contemplated this for a moment. Then she said, "It could be, but it also could not be. I don't know just yet. I'll only know for certain once I reach the road's end, of that I am sure."

"Foolish girl," said Aesma. "If you want something, take it. Just like this. It is much faster this way."

Prim gave it a thought, and finally said, "It seems to me, Pree Aesma, that your

wisdom is much concerned with fastness. Why is that?"

"That's because I nurture and listen to all my hungers," said Aesma and emptied her seventy-seventh cup of wine. "To sate them is urgent, that is their nature."

"Are you a slave to your desires, then?" said Prim.

"On the contrary," said Aesma. "I am their master and their conqueror, which is why I can feed and nourish them so skilfully. It won't do to make them wait, will it? And my desires are many," said Aesma and placed her hand on Prim's thigh, "for so many of YISUN's creations are so lovely to hunger for. They too need their urgent tender attention." Then she leaned to whisper into Prim's ear, "Consider a taste of them, Pree Prim, a small bite of their sweetness perhaps, or a tiny sip, just enough to wet your lips, and you may find that there is more than one road to follow, more than one hunger to sate."

"I am aware of that," exhaled Prim.

"Good," said Aesma and smiled, taking Prim's hand with a starved look in her eyes. "Then come. I'm yet to sate my hungers, as I suspect are you. Come and have a taste of the other roads and feast as much as you like."

And Prim happily took her hand, for she too was quite fond of the tender sweetness of a lover's touch and hot-blooded Aesma's invitation had pleased and tempted and starved her greatly. Thus Aesma led them into the kingly bedroom and they made love for three nights and three days.

In the early hours of the fourth day, wide awake while Aesma still lay asleep in bed between silken sheets, Prim stole away from her clawed embrace. Then she donned her vela and her greatknife and made for the door when the creak of its old iron hinges woke Aesma.

"Where are you going, Prim?" Aesma asked sleepily.

"To the road," said Prim.

"Why?" asked Aesma.

"I must see what's at its end," said Prim.

"Girl, have you learned nothing?" said Aesma.

"I've seen that the faster way leads to comfort and pleasure," said Prim, "but not to where I'm supposed to go."

"You remain willingly the slave of the road!" said Aesma.

"Yes," said Prim. "I need to see its end."

"You have indeed learned nothing," said Aesma and shook her head. But in her heart, burning hot with scolding red jealousy, Aesma saw that she had failed her conquest and that she was not to take the road's place in Prim's heart, at least not yet, and so she said, "So be it," already plotting her next scheme.

At last, Aesma rose to bid Prim farewell and embraced her before their ways parted, as was custom between lovers, and Prim welcomed her in her arms. Holding her tightly, Aesma sank her two-hundred and seventy-seven sharp teeth into Prim's neck, breaking into her skin and leaving a bleeding bite mark on her left side. Startled, Prim pushed her away and held her hand against her fresh wound.

"What did you do that for?" she asked, aghast.

"I have nothing else to give you to remember me by," said Aesma innocently and licked the blood off her lips.

"You've given me plenty," said Prim, looking at her wound's blood on the palm of her hand.

"Yet not enough," said Aesma.

"I shan't thank you for this," said Prim and stormed out the door, and it stung Aesma a little. It is said that she destroyed the entire city in less than a day to vent her rage.

But Prim knew none of that, for she had walked away without turning around, and so she soon returned to the road.

Chapter 2 - Primaurast

Prim walked the road. She had been walking for aeons; for so long that time passing had lost its weight. She had walked ragged and tattered so many shoes and boots and sandals and wrappings that she had lost count. Not that she had been counting in the first place; footwear came and went. To Prim, time had become but another step to walk past. Once that had happened, she trod on. She had the road ahead of her and the road in her back and the road under the soles of her feet, and so she strut on, bare-footed and ever-marching, bent towards the horizon and accustomed to the dirt and dust between her toes and the callouses and cuts and blisters and bruises in her skin and all the other gifts which the branches and stones and rocks under her feet kept giving her.

Thusly making her way, she once came across a knight mendicant sitting in the grass by the road.

“Ho there,” he greeted. “Wherefore such hurry, girl? The day is young and the road long. Where one should idle and partake in blessed youth, thou nearly runnest!”

Prim greeted him as well, as was custom, and replied, “I must proceed, Master Beggar. It is as you say, the road is long and I’m yet to reach its end.”

“The road shall go nowhere, girl,” said the knight mendicant. “It shall be there on the morrow and the day after just as well. But these fields won’t, not if thy feet carry thee away.” And he waived his hand over the wide emerald grasslands surrounding them as if to make a point.

“They are beautiful indeed,” said Prim. “The grass is tall and supple and the wind caresses its blades in gentle waves. But it cannot grip firmly this heart of mine, for I’ve seen many like them before. I’ve been walking the road for many years now.”

“And there shall be many more like them,” the knight mendicant nodded, “yet none quite as these. Behold,” he spoke and pointed to where Prim had just come from.

Prim looked and indeed saw that where the blood off the soles of her feet had soaked into the fertile soil behind her, thistles now bloomed merrily.

“Today, these fields burst with life,” said the knight, “yet none stay. All who pass hurry down the road’s length as fast as their feet carry them. But same as thy feet may carry thee from these growths, so may time. Why not take a rest, girl, whilst the grassen blades yet remain upright? The road shall wait for thee eagerly.”

Prim thanked him, for there was no finer daughter, and considered it. She looked at the road extending in front of her, its unseen end stretching infinitely past the horizon. Then she looked back to where she had come from, and the road stretched indefinitely in that direction too. Then she looked at the thistles blooming underneath her feet and stinging her like a babe screeching for a mother’s attention. Then she gently rubbed the left side of her neck and looked at the sun and saw that it hadn’t reached the zenith yet. So Prim stepped off the road into the grasslands, lay down on the soft soil and grass, and basked in the sunlight.

Long after the knight mendicant had left to beg his daily meal off passing travellers, Prim still lay stretched out in the grass and the sun. Growing weary of the heat, she sat up and looked around only to find more and more grass as far as her eyes could see. So she searched under ten thousand stems, lifting and turning each of them carefully until she found the husk of a great beetle the size of her thumb, bereft of life and glistening ruby red in the sunlight. She picked it up and pulled a single blade of grass from the soil with great care so that its roots remained intact. She then wrapped the plant around the bug’s corpse and covered it entirely with the blade of grass. Then she squeezed it between the palms of her hands so tightly it compressed into a hard-shelled seed, as tough as diamonds and as sharp-edged as volcanic glass. Finally, with a tiny puff, so tiny that not even the ants could hear it, she breathed life into it and observed her work on the palm of her hand with satisfaction.

Prim then dug a hole a foot deep and planted the seed. She covered it with soil and watered it with her spit and sweat. And since those lands were so fertile as few others, she watched a tree sprout before her that very instant. It grew twice her size with a trunk wider than she could stretch her arms and bore plump fruit which shimmered ruby red in the sunlight. Satisfied, Prim sat down in its shade and partook of the sweet and sour fruit.

But it wasn't long until a terrible thirst gripped her, for the sun's heat had parched her. So Prim left her tree and its shade, wandering deep into the grasslands and straying far from the road until she reached a river. She folded her hands and bowed deeply, for there was no finer daughter, and asked the river politely for some of its water. The river, knowing well of Prim and her gentle ways, obliged eagerly and split in half so it could keep flowing where it had to but could just as well follow Prim to her tree, where it gathered in a lake for it could not bear to depart far from her. Prim drank deeply from the river's waters, and they rejoiced in each other's company.

The very next day, the first traveller stepped off the road to rest in the shade of Prim's tree and drink from the river's waters. Soon thereafter, a second and a third wanderer joined them, carried by weary feet and carrying stories from afar. The tree bore many a fruit, much more than any of them could eat, and so the ruby red glimmerings fell as they ripened; and as their soft flesh decayed and the insects and critters consumed it hungrily, they laid bare the hard-shelled seeds within them; and they sank into the soil, whereupon new trees grew in short time as the land was exceedingly fertile. Thus an orchard of ruby red fruit had sprouted at Prim's side in a single day.

The following day, when the rain and the wind found those lands, Prim the Ever-Diligent built a modest shed out of the trees' wood to shelter them from the elements. Then she gathered some white rock and ground it to a fine powder and mixed it into the wet mud, and it made good mortar. Then she went out and fetched smooth river stones and with the mortar she had made, she built a small fireplace and a small chimney to keep them warm and dry; and they were content and rejoiced in each other's company.

Thereafter, new travellers greeted her daily, hoping to rest their weary feet and to bathe in the gentle river streams and to tell their stories from afar. And Prim welcomed them heartily into her hut, which she didn't think of as hers. Yet the travellers thanked her for welcoming her into her home, as was custom.

"It is not my home," said Prim.

"Where do you live, then?" they asked.

“Here,” said Prim. “For now, at least.”

“Then surely this must be your home,” they said.

Prim contemplated this and saw that they were right. Instantly she grew deeply ashamed, for she had welcomed guests into her home but had no black bread nor ajash to greet them with, as was custom. So she dropped to her knees and apologised profusely.

“Rise, Pree Prim, and worry not,” they said. “It is not thine to give what you do not possess; none present are insulted nor maltreated, so rest at ease.”

“But it is custom,” Prim lamented. “And I do not know where to find grain nor ajash here.”

“If it is grain you want,” said a traveller, “then you must plough a field and grow it. If it is ajash you desire, then it is a distiller you seek. The ruby red fruit your trees bear shall do marvellously. You could find both these things on the markets of any town.”

“Alas, I cannot do that,” said Prim and gently rubbed the left side of her neck, “for I fear the road. Once I feel it under the soles of my feet again, it shall carry me away from here, never to return. The road is long and stretches across aeons and calls for me evermore to see its end.”

“Then I shall do it for you,” said the traveller. “Bring me two bags full of this excellent fruit of yours. I shall carry them to the nearest town and trade one for grain and the other for a distiller, so you may bake black bread and brew fine ajash as is your desire.”

So Prim filled two linen bags to the brim with the ruby red fruit and the traveller took off with them the very next day. He returned seven days and seven nights later, pulling a cart full of grain and a distiller in it, but he also brought ploughing tools and farming tools and a saw and an axe and nails and plates and pots and cups and cutlery and even four sheep.

“Forgive me, Pree Prim, for burdening you with more than you have asked,” he

spoke, “but your fruit sold at a high price, much higher than I had foreseen. Travellers passing through town before me had spoken highly of your crop, asking feverishly to partake of more. Yet none of the townsfolk had ever heard of it, and so could not sate their guests’ hungers. Therefore, the townsfolk eagerly and costly traded for but a taste of the ruby red flesh, and it was as good as the travellers had told, so word had spread quickly and I traded well for them.”

“A hundred blessings upon you,” said Prim, for she didn’t know any better, “this shall make my duties so much easier.”

And so they began ploughing the fields and lighting the fires to burn the spirits and when the grain had grown, Prim ground it between two flat river rocks and made black flour. The ajash they brewed she poured into barrels of burnt wood to age it finely; and so she finally could greet her guests properly, as was custom, and she was content and they rejoiced in each other’s company.

As travellers came and went each day, it wasn’t long until Primaaurast (for that was what they called Prim’s humble stead) became known well in the nearby towns and villages. Some of the more courageous young men and women had stepped bravely onto the road and ventured out to see the famed fields and orchards of ruby red fruit of Primaaurast for themselves, and Prim welcomed them all and built a bigger shed and finally a house to let her guests reside in the dry and the warmth, away from the road, so they may rest their weary feet and tell their tales.

When the young men and women indeed saw the trees of ruby red fruit and the supple fields of grain, as the travellers had spoken of, they marvelled in their beauty and their sweet, fresh taste. And Prim welcomed them all, for what little she had was plenty to share, and so they came and built houses to live in and sheds for their livestock and they brought more farming tools and fishing nets and made Primaaurast their home, and they rejoiced in each other’s company.

Soon thereafter a blacksmith came as well, seeking out her fortune in life, alike the other young men and women who had made the journey, and she brought cold iron and heavy hammers and an anvil and built a forge to make tools and nails and to shoe the horses of the travellers on the road and to mend the broken wheels of their carts. And Prim welcomed her heartily too.

Thusly Primaurast grew little by little into a lively village. It wasn't long until the first children of the village were born, and Prim blessed them with health and beauty, for she didn't know any better. And they tended the orchards and the livestock and they ploughed the fields and they sowed and reaped with each season and they drank from the river and they fished in the lake and they were content and rejoiced in each other's company. And Prim thought that the call of the road had finally left her bones and spirits, at least for a bit, and gently rubbed the left side of her neck.

When not much later Primaurast's children had children on their own, and their children had children on their own, more and more houses were built for all of them to live in. Then they built a bridge over the river so they may cross the waters easily and build their homes on the other side as well. Then they built docks for travellers and traders arriving by the river to anchor their boats and they made space for markets between the footpaths and houses and they cobbled the streets with the river's stones so that the carts' wheels wouldn't get stuck in the mud. And when the bandits first came, they fended them off; but when the soldiers came, they built a wall with high towers to defend them. And so Prim watched in satisfaction as the town grew rapidly into a bright lively city of its own, and they were content and rejoiced in each other's company, and Prim became even more certain that the call of the road had finally left her bones and spirits and gently rubbed the left side of her neck.

Thus Primaurast thrived for many years and became well-known for its hospitality and its ruby red fruit, which they put on their flags and banners and their soldiers' uniforms. But Prim, thinking herself finally fully content beside the road, noticed every now and then a pull in her toes and a fire underneath the soles of her feet appearing. This she could not explain. The more the cobbles of the streets cooled off at night, the hotter they burned her feet. When the city was asleep in the darkest hours, the winds pushed her to the city's outskirts and her toes pulled her even further outwards.

One such night, when she let herself get carried away to the rim of Primaurast's borders once more, the sounds of temple bells and gongs heralding the third night of Primaurast's late mayor's wake crept up on her from behind and embraced her

with their cold, sticky fingers, which lingered for but a moment. It was when the shuddering touch left her that Prim slowly began seeing what she had averted her eyes away from: That all who had followed the road into her life eventually also left by the same means shortly. Some travellers stayed in Primaurast but for a few hours or days, whereas others were born here and within a blink of an eye they died of old age, which was an intolerable condition that the true mortals, Aesma's Mistake, suffered. One way or another, they all left as they came.

The following morning, barely even one or two hundred years since Prim first planted her tree, Prim found herself at one of the markets of Primaurast, looking around and seeing thousands of busy people and traders and shoppers and travellers going about their business in haste and in leisure, yet she saw not a single face of theirs she recognised and she saw not a single soul that had been sitting with her under the trees with the ruby red fruit, back when there was just a single tree and a hut in this place they now called Primaurast. It was true that all she saw knew her well by name and by face indeed, but none of them knew her as she had welcomed guests into her hut with no black bread nor ajash to offer.

Then Prim looked at the cobbles under her feet and her gaze followed the streets into the distance. She couldn't see their ends for all the people and animals on them and all the buildings between them. Then Prim looked again and saw that there was indeed no end to them. And then Prim finally saw that the road she had so firmly believed to have left had in truth twisted and turned its snakelike shape while she hadn't been watching, distracted in her attempt to stand beside it; now it led straight through Primaurast, firmly under the soles of her feet as she stood there.

Seeing the mistake she has made drove a cold spike of fear into her heart, but Prim shook it off quickly and sighed a great sigh of relief as she understood that it would make no difference whether she stayed on the road or off it; it would always find its way under the soles of her feet, as it was meant to be, whether she pursued it or not. So she gently rubbed the left side of her neck, raised her head, and went home, where she donned her vela and her greatknife and departed from Primaurast by the road, leaving her door unlocked.

And so Prim returned to the road once again.

Chapter 3 - The Dead City

Prim walked the road. She had been walking for aeons; for so long that time passing had lost its weight. She had walked ragged and tattered so many shoes and boots and sandals and wrappings that she had lost count. Not that she had been counting in the first place; footwear came and went. To Prim, time had become but another step to walk past. Once that had happened, she trod on. She had the road ahead of her and the road in her back and the road under the soles of her feet, and so she strut on, bare-footed and ever-marching, bent towards the horizon and accustomed to the dirt and dust between her toes and the callouses and cuts and blisters and bruises in her skin and all the other gifts which the branches and stones and rocks under her feet kept giving her.

Thusly making her way, the road led her into a range of green hills and formidable mountains, upon which tall evergreen trees grew. Birds flew and nested between their branches, critters scuttled between their roots and fallen foliage and deer and foxes hid between the barks as they scrounged for food. The mountains' peaks reached so high that they were permanently covered in ice and snow. The road led Prim not uphill, but through the snaking valleys cut between the mountains by rivers, and so she followed it into the depths of the mountain range.

On the eighth day of this section of her journey, Prim entered a wide and quiet valley. None but birdsong and the howling winds, combing through branches and swaying the needles of the evergreen trees, accompanied her. Trotting diligently along the road, as she had done for aeons, Prim passed by a tall pine tree on whose branches an ashen-black raven with red eyes was perched. She eyed the raven for a moment and then bowed and greeted it, as was custom.

"Greetings," spoke the raven. "What brings you here, traveller, where there is no sentient being but me within three days of flight?"

"I follow the road," said Prim.

“To which end?” said the raven.

“To its end,” said Prim.

“That is a mighty long journey,” said the raven knowingly.

“Maybe,” said Prim. “I shall see once I get there.”

“Why not stay and rest here for a bit,” said the raven, “where we can partake of good company? I have been waiting here for so long, I do not remember when I last spoke to a talking soul. I would much welcome the change!”

Prim gently rubbed the left side of her neck and nodded, for she had concluded that this was as good a resting place as any, and it was near the road, so she sat down in the tree’s shade and the raven flew down too.

“You travel alone?” asked the raven.

“Yes,” said Prim.

” ’tis a long road to walk alone,” said the raven.

“Maybe,” said Prim. “Sometimes, I encounter companions for brief segments of my journey, but alas, we always part ways eventually. The road takes us all to different places.”

“Have you been travelling long, then?” asked the raven.

“I think so,” said Prim. “It’s hard to tell sometimes.”

“Does your family not miss you?” asked the raven.

“I have none,” said Prim. “Not since my father died. That’s when I first stepped onto the road.”

“What about your lovers?” asked the raven, and licked its ashen-black beak with its long red tongue.

“I’ve loved a few,” said Prim, “but alas, we always part ways eventually. The road takes us all to different places.”

"The road took you into their arms, too, did it not?" said the raven.

"It did," said Prim.

"It may have been wise to stay there," said the raven. "Take my advice, girl, there's nothing at the end of that road worth journeying that length on your own. You'd do better to step off it sooner rather than later."

"Maybe," said Prim. "But maybe doing better is not meant for me. I suspect I shall see once I reach its end."

"There may not be one," said the raven. "Heed my words, girl, I have flown for many days and many miles in my time. But I'm yet to see or hear of such a thing as the road's end."

"Then I shall find out," said Prim, "in due time."

"Ah, time," said the raven, nodding knowingly. "Beware of time, for it is a heartless, cruel beast; a rabid torrent which swallows without baring a single fang nor claw."

Prim pondered this for a brief moment and finally said, "I don't think so. I've not seen it be as clandestine as you tell it. There are always signs of its arrivals and departures for those who know where to look."

"You know where to look, then?" said the raven.

"I think so," said Prim. "Time has taught me."

"It may not have taught you well enough," said the raven. "Come and let me show you in its stead." And it spread its wings and flew into the woods, away from the road, and Prim followed it, curious to see what was to be seen there.

The raven took them uphill, where the trees thinned out and great rocks emerged from the grassen ground. Not much later, it perched on a stone, which had been visibly cut into its shape by hand a long time ago. But the stone's surfaces were smoothed and worn by years of exposure to the elements, and lichen grew boldly across it.

"Behold," said the raven, spreading its wings as if to make a point, "what was once

a great city. It held houses and streets and towers and temples and palaces back in its day, and travellers from afar came to rest and tell their tales and trade with merchants. Billions of souls had been born and had lived and had died here. Great kings and poets and scholars passed through here. Now it is but rubble, buried deep underneath dirt and rocks, no two stones atop each other as they ought to be.”

Prim looked and indeed saw but a handful of stones betraying but traces of their originally intended arrangement, which was now long lost in years long gone. Instead, they were covered in thick layers of dirt and earth and short grass and moss and branches which mighty winds had carried uphill when the rage had taken them. Not even the fiercest battles could have annihilated a city so thoroughly.

“What happened to it?” asked Prim, observing solemnly.

“The greatest calamity of all,” said the raven, “time. As quickly as the city had grown, so it had eventually rotted to its death as time had its way with it. They say that when the city was built, it was built on wide plains and that a river had flowed through it. They say that all these mountains around us have grown only after the city’s demise, as the lands themselves have shifted and folded over aeons.”

“Why show me this?” asked Prim, dismayed.

“Because you need to see, girl, the heartlessness of time. It takes even the ground underneath our feet from us. Eventually, the cruel beast that it is shall take all, in one way or another. It is thus better to take before it is taken from you.”

It was at that point that Prim had stepped on something sharp, which stung her like a babe screeching for a mother’s attention. She picked it up and saw that it was a small seed with a shell as hard as diamonds and with edges as sharp as volcanic glass.

“What was this city’s name?” she asked quietly.

“Primaurst, I believe,” said the raven, but Prim already knew.

“Did you do this?” asked Prim with a trembling voice.

"I couldn't even if I had wanted to," said the raven. "I am but a bird. I have no such powers."

"Enough, Aesma!" yelled Prim. "Tell me truthfully: Did you do this?"

Aesma grinned her toothy smile as she turned back from the feathered form she had assumed. "I didn't," she said calmly. "I wanted to, but I came far too late. Time had taken it first; the city was dead and buried long before I even thought of seeking to destroy it."

Prim fell to her knees and cried bitterly, for as she had known time, it was something that happened around her, not away from her. But now she saw that it had indeed torn away from her grasp and annihilated Primaaurast with its orchards of ruby red fruit and fields of supple grain mercilessly and thoroughly. She had never thought never to see Primaaurast again, that bright city that had grown and changed around her so rapidly, even if everyone she knew there came and went as quickly as a tide. She would've returned eventually, Prim had so foolishly believed, once she had reached the road's end, perhaps, or perhaps even earlier. But now she saw that time was indeed as cruel a beast as Aesma had said it to be, and that it mercilessly took all it wanted and never returned a single thing, just as it had taken Primaaurast from her twice.

"If it weren't you who destroyed it," Prim sobbed finally and looked at Aesma, "why remain here?"

"I waited for you," said Aesma. "If you want to be found, stay in one place. Just like this. It is much faster this way."

"What do you want from me, then?" said Prim.

"I nurture and listen to all my hungers. You know well I desire you still," said Aesma, her infernal greed burning in her eyes.

"You have come to taste my blood again," said Prim and gently rubbed the left side of her neck.

"I have," said Aesma and licked her ashen-black lips with her long red tongue.

“Come then,” said Prim, opening her arms, “and drink your fill.”

“Careful, girl,” said Aesma, inching towards her and trembling to contain herself, “do not tempt me thoughtlessly. My hungers know no end and my stomach no bottom.”

“I know,” said Prim.

As soon as those words departed her lips, Aesma leapt at her and sunk her two hundred and seventy-seven teeth into Prim’s throat. As her fangs pierced her skin, Prim understood that the cruelty of time would not only take from her, but that it could take her, too, if it so wanted, and she felt a little better. As Aesma thirstily drank her blood, Prim saw that the heartless time was cruel to anything it touched with its merciless claws, unequally in equal measures, and that she could grow and flourish and rot in the same way a tree or a city does, and she felt a little better. And as Aesma licked her blood-stained teeth and lips with her long red tongue above her, Prim saw that the cruelty of time was indeed no different from the cruelty of the road and the road no different from time, twisting and turning endlessly and furiously right underneath the soles of her feet. She understood that she was indeed a slave to both equally, yet to master either of them, and that either of them could be mastered as much as a river or a mountain could be, and she felt a little better.

At the same time, the insatiable greed raging in Aesma’s heart fought a vicious battle with itself. Her desire to conquer and dominate the mighty Prim who had slain Un-Janta with a single strike thirsted for more, so much more of her blood, tasting victoriously sweet on her lips. But that desire wrung heavily with her ever-maddening hunger to taste once more the tender affections of the pitiful, pretty little thing underneath her, which she remembered all too fondly in the darkened hours of lonesome nights. Evenly matched, Aesma’s bottomlessly greedy desires battled on rabidly in her heart, and so she removed her teeth from Prim’s neck to look at the lovely figure beneath her and licked her blood-stained teeth and lips with her long red tongue.

“What’s the matter?” said Prim.

"I cannot decide whether to consume you or to love you," said Aesma. "I hunger for both, but can only have one. That will not do."

"Let me decide for you, then," said Prim and placed her hand on Aesma's cheek, which was stained with her blood. Then Prim gently kissed her, and then she gently made love to her for three days and three nights, and she felt a little better.

On the fourth day, Prim released Aesma from her tender embrace and got up, donning her vela and her greatknife.

"Where are you going?" asked Aesma.

"Back to the road," said Prim.

"Why?" said Aesma and stomped her foot into the ground so that the mountains shook. "Why, why, why?" she wailed pitifully, thrashing the ground underneath her.

"I want to see what's at its end," said Prim.

"You daft girl!" screeched Aesma. "Do you still not see there is no end to it?"

"I do," said Prim calmly.

"You'll tread it endlessly, you fool!" whined Aesma.

"That is why I want to go," said Prim. "The first step is a foolish one until the end is reached."

"You'll never get there," hissed Aesma.

"Maybe," said Prim, "and maybe not. The road may yet change its nature. Who's to say it doesn't live and die as a city does? Who's to say it doesn't rise and fall as the sea or a mountain does? It twists and turns and wriggles under the soles of my feet each day, I feel it clearly. So perhaps it shall die someday, too. On that day, I shall like to see it end."

"Half-witted hopes!" barked Aesma.

"Maybe," said Prim. "And maybe I shall grow tired of it someday first. Maybe on

that day I shall finally abandon my road forever. On that day, I shall be dead and the Prim that stands before you no more. Perhaps the road will truly have mastered me then. I shall like to see what Prim I will be at that time.”

“A dead one, you buffoon!” screeched Aesma.

Prim took Aesma’s hands with a gentle, cutting smile. “I shall like to see what Aesma you will be then, too,” she said. “Will you still burn alight with these ceaseless flames of yours? Will you still practice the universal art in pursuit of the fastest way? Will you still welcome me in your arms and your bed? I shall like to see that, too.”

“But I don’t want you to go,” cried Aesma, clutching at Prim’s hands. “I don’t want you to die if not by my claws and fangs! Stay with me and be mine, instead!”

“I can’t,” said Prim in earnest sorrow. “As your will fuels the raging fires in your heart, Pree Aesma, so does mine put my feet on the road. As your will seeks to conquer me, so does mine seek to master the road. I want to go, therefore I must go, as you must wail and rage and curse and destroy and, eventually, seek to conquer me once more.”

Thus Prim bade her farewell and embraced her before they parted their ways, as was custom between lovers, and Aesma welcomed her in her arms, for she knew not what else she could do.

“This time, I shall leave you with a gift,” Prim whispered into her ear. “Wait not for me to find you next time, but seek me out instead. It is much faster that way,” she spoke and kissed Aesma on the left side of her neck, which stung Aesma a little. Then Prim parted from her arms and left. They say that thereafter Aesma had raged for eight days and eight nights, levelling all the mountains she set her eyes on into rubble.

But Prim knew none of that, for she had walked away without turning around, and so she soon returned to the road to master it.

Het's Lines

Now, be so good and fill my cup, fill it to the brim, be so kind, so I may partake of that sweet lubricant for my poor, strained throat, and then pull up that chair of yours closer to the fire and listen well, for 'tis time I told you the story I promised to tell long ago. No, I didn't forget, I didn't forget at all. I said 'twas a tale for another time back then, and that time is now, and that tale is the tale of when Het met Prim again on the road, and this is how it goes.

Pree Prim walked the road. She walked the road to master it. That is well-known. As well-known as the fact that she would eventually master it, indeed. But, back then, she hadn't mastered it quite yet, and so she walked on endlessly. Which is not to say that she would halt once she would master it, quite to the contrary, but nevertheless, there she was, walking the road ad nauseam and beyond, the poor blessed thing. She had walked ragged and tattered so many shoes and boots and sandals and wrappings that she had lost count. Yet, to her, that mattered not. She had the road ahead of her and the road in her back and the road under the soles of her feet. And so she strut on, bare-footed and ever-marching, bent towards the horizon and accustomed to the dirt and dust between her toes and the callouses and cuts and blisters and bruises in her skin.

Thusly making her way, she once found herself in strange, grisly lands, where a heavy quiet suffocated the very air. Beside her, the blades of grass swayed silently in the noiseless winds. The dark-barked trees' leafless branches pierced the red horizon like thorns. Not a single black bird dared utter even a single caw, let alone song. But the road led her through there, and so Prim followed it, as she always did, shivering for the haunted lands she was crossing.

Once the skies darkened as well, the weary Prim sought rest and shelter for the

night. She curled up underneath a wide tree, whose thick roots protruded above ground and curved in gentle serpentine lines, making for a comfortable lean to curl into. But once the black of night descended upon those lands, distant horrors awoke and their terrifying screams, carried by the silent winds, bellowed dreadfully and endlessly. Prim clenched her greatknife tightly and, trembling in fear, didn't close a single eye that night, the poor thing.

As the dawn cut through the night's veil, so did the screams subside. Prim rose and returned briskly to the road, desiring to leave these accursed lands as swiftly as her feet would carry her. And thusly she hurried along, but she hadn't gotten far at all before she came across the pungent stench of death as the winds bore the fruits into her nostrils which the violence that had unfolded the previous night had blossomed.

It was then that Prim spied a womanly figure in the middle of the road ahead of her. The woman sat there in the dirt, hugging her knees and shivering. She was bathed in blood and dirt, and a thick, long staff lay beside her, while a dozen corpses of foul beasts, sharp-toothed and long-clawed demons clad in fur of the deepest emerald green, surrounded her trembling self. Her head snapped as she noticed Prim approaching, who had her hand on her greatknife's handle behind her back.

"Who goes there?" the woman called.

"They call me Prim," said Prim, "and who may you be?"

"Prim?" said the woman, "Prim, daughter of Hansa?"

"The very same," said Prim.

"In other circumstances, I would greet you heartily and bid you welcome," said the woman, "but in this place and on this day, it would do better to wish you far away from these forsaken lands."

"You speak as if you know me," said Prim, "yet, I must admit, I do not recognise you."

The woman leapt to her feet. "Forgive me, Pree Prim," she said, swiping blood and

dirt off her face, “the execution of my grisly work must be masking me thoroughly. I am Het, the Guardian at the Doors.”

“Pree Het,” said Prim and bowed deeply, as was custom, “accept my apologies.”

“Think nothing of it, Pree Prim,” said Het. “What brings you here, of all places?”

“I walk the road,” said Prim.

“Here?” said Het.

“Wherever it takes me,” said Prim.

“You’d do well to leave quickly, then,” said Het, “for these lands are plagued thoroughly by evil.”

“I had no intention of whiling,” said Prim.

“Good,” said Het. “Now come, I shall accompany you for a stretch. I need to head down the road for a bit as well, for the camp I set up is that-a-ways too.” And she beckoned Prim to follow her, and Prim did so eagerly, all too happy for her feet to carry her as far down the road and away from this place as they could.

“What brings you here?” said Prim as she trotted alongside Het, “It was my understanding your duties were at the gates of YISUN’s speaking house.”

“They are,” said Het, “but it is my duty also to vanquish evil, for I am a Watchman too. And here it has festered in darkness and grown so formidable in the shadows that its stench was smelled a world over. Hence, I was sent to purge it.”

“On your own?” said Prim.

“On my own,” said Het.

“That doesn’t seem right,” said Prim. “Clearly, the evil here is strong. It permeates everything. The very air curls my skin. I should’ve thought they’d sent an entire army.”

“No, just me,” said Het and picked up her pace.

"But you're covered in wounds," said Prim worriedly.

"They'll heal soon enough, as they always do," said Het. "Worry not. I have departed many an evil from life in my time. You shall be perfectly safe while I'm here. Besides, the beasts despise the sun's brightness; They'll remain covert while the lights of day last."

And so they marched for a while until Het stepped off the road and made for the woods. "A calm river flows nearby," she said, "where we may rest, for 'tis as good a resting place as any, and I may bathe and rid myself of the blood and guts on me."

Prim nodded and followed her, and they soon reached a wide yet shallow and slow-moving river, where they drank their fill and bathed together, and Het cleaned the blood and dirt off herself and washed her wounds. And Prim, the Gentle One, tore the rim of her vela and tied Het's gushing wounds so they may heal well and quickly, and Het thanked her, as was custom.

"I still do not understand," said Prim, "why they would send the Goddess of Thresholds on her own to vanquish the evil of these lands."

"Evil is a fine line," said Het. "It is so in several ways. Tell me: Do you call a lion evil for feeding on the deer's flesh?"

"No," said Prim. "It is its way."

"Indeed," said Het, "it is its way. And do you call a devil evil for feasting on suffering and torture?"

"Is it necessitated by its survival?" said Prim.

"Does that matter?" said Het.

"I believe so," said Prim.

"Be it so or otherwise," said Het, "it is its way."

Prim considered this. "There must be a difference," she finally said. "The same difference between desire and need, pleasure and necessity."

“Maybe,” said Het, “yet that difference shall look quite differently whether you ask the lion or the deer.”

As Prim pondered this response, Het went on. “And then, there is the question of quantity,” she said. “Purge evil entirely, and it will grow plentiful by itself in due time, for where there is an opportunity, a claw or fang shall eventually extend to grasp it, same as an electron shall eventually occupy a lower quantum state given its availability and ample time. Such is the law of probability and such is the law of everything which knows hungers, for where there is hunger, there is temptation. Kept bounded to a certain limit, though, and the common folk will recognise it for what it is and hunt it down. Let it fester unopposed for but a breath too long, however, and it shall flourish too mightily to be contained, and it shall feast gluttonously on blood and pain and suffering. There is no such thing as purification nor purity, just a fine line between the law of hungers, the dreadful algebra of necessity, the law of large numbers, and an opportunity taken. And so it shall be as long as the Wheel turns.”

“That doesn’t seem right,” said Prim. “Purity is no more than fantasy and illusion, I know that well; Yet there must be something just and noble opposing the horrors and malice, too, must there not? Can there be no such thing as justice?”

“I do not understand justice,” said Het. “I have imprisoned men in one city for drinking on a holy day, and I have imprisoned men a city over for not drinking on a holy day. I have executed men for stealing and attended kings’ parades celebrating their conquests and pillages. As far as I have seen, one man’s justice is another man’s cause for war. So I do not understand justice, as there is no threshold, no fine line; there is but a line that vanishes into thin air with the word that spoke it, a line drawn in chalk that washes away with the next rain. So I do not understand justice, and so justice is not my business. I enforce the old laws and vanquish evil where it thrives; That is my work, and that is why I am here, and that is why they sent me. If they wanted justice, they should’ve sent a justice god.”

Before Prim could reply, she was interrupted by the cracking of branches, the rustling of leaves, and the noise of footsteps in the woods, whereupon three figures appeared from the thickets. The three men clad in rags torn to shreds limped

and wheezed towards the river until they noticed the goddesses, which made them freeze in their tracks.

"Ho there!" Het shouted with fearsome clarity, reaching for her heavy staff, "Be you men or beasts?"

"Who calls there?" the bearded one of the three yelled back with a trembly voice.

"I am Het, the Guardian at the Gates and YISUN's Watchman!" shouted Het and struck the ground firmly with her staff, and the earth shook under her might.

"Praised be YISUN for sending us your way," the men said, "we've been fleeing through these cursed woods filled with cursed demons and their cursed teeth and claws. We've lost a dozen companions just last night, and so we ran, but we have lost sight of the road."

"Be at ease," said Het, who did not detect a lie in their words for there was none to detect, "I shall escort you back onto the road and the path out of these lands, as my encampment lies that-a-ways too, and no harm shall befall you while I'm with you."

And the three men thanked her profusely and bowed deeply, as was custom, and Het led them all back onto the road. They advanced slowly, as the men's numerous wounds hindered their speed, and Prim and Het lent them their shoulders to share some of their burdens as they limped and wheezed each step of the way. Hence, it took them hours to reach the ruins of a former fortress, built in ages untold to guard the road and its travellers, and they arrived when the sun had already begun to set.

"It is here," said Het, "my encampment lies within the keep. I have mended the doors and filled the holes in the walls with stone and timber."

It was indeed as Het had told it to be: The keep's walls, albeit old, were yet sturdy for the most part, and where they had crumbled, Het had filled the holes with thick timber and stones, of which plenty lay about in the ruins.

"The hour has grown later than I hoped," said Het, eyeing the sinking sun. "The

wounded have slowed us down greatly indeed. No matter, what is done is done. You lot should while in the keep and wait out the night, when the devils shall surely emerge again. You'll be safe in there until the morning lights embrace these lands once more."

And Prim and the three men agreed to stay all too gladly, for none was too eager to spend the night outside the thick stone walls. So they hastily gathered some wood and lit a fire in their midst to keep them warm and dry during the night.

As the daylight reddened further, the company grew quieter and huddled by the fire in silent contemplation, whilst isolated screams of rabid beasts spawned in the far distance, saturating the air with so much dread that Prim could see it dripping from thin air.

"They're quieter than they were yesterday," muttered Het, and the three men nodded in agreement as if to convince each other that was indeed the truth.

And soon enough, mere moments after the sunlight's last rays had disappeared beneath the horizon, they heard the deep grunts, the ragged breaths, and the chilling scraping of razor-sharp claws against stone and rock just outside the walls which kept them safe.

"They found us rather quickly," said the bald man.

Het rose to her feet. "It is time," she said. "I shall head outside now and fight the demons once more. You lot stay here and bolt the door behind me. Do not open it until I return or until the morning sun shines above your heads. I shall knock seven times and call out, and that is how you will know it is I. No evil shall pass this door, or I am not Het, God of Thresholds and YISUN's Watchman." Her voice was firm and her hand steady as she grasped her heavy staff, yet she couldn't conceal the tremble in her knees fully.

As Het stepped outside, Prim bolted the door behind her, just as Het had requested, and joined the men back by the fire in silence. They listened attentively to the rabid screeches and screams on the other side of the door, which were ever so often interrupted by pain-filled whimpers and harrowing loud cracks of skulls and bones breaking under Het's heavy swings.

"Pray tell," the bearded man said suddenly, "Do you think she may kill them all?"

"Perhaps," said the tall man serenely.

"Are you not afraid?" said Prim, astonished by the tall man's calm.

"I trust in the strength of my companions," said the tall man.

"Have you met Het before?" said Prim.

"I have not," said the tall man, "but I have heard of her."

"So have I," said Prim. "I have heard much of Het's strength and deeds. Yet I cannot help but shudder in fear from the sounds of ruthless battle and broken bodies outside that door."

"There is no use drowning in fear," said the bald man. "Things shall pass as they must."

Prim contemplated this and finally said, "Is that why you travelled these cursed lands whilst bearing no arms?"

"There is no use in carrying arms," said the bald man, "Even if we had any, we wouldn't know what to do with them."

"I had thought you may have lost them in battle or tossed them in your flight," said Prim. "To cross these demon-riddled lands with no arms, some would call this folly."

"There is no use drowning in fear," said the bearded man. "Things shall pass as they must."

Prim gave it a thought. "Perhaps it is indeed not folly," she finally said. "As leaves belong in a tree's crown and ants belong in an anthill, so do demons belong in evil lands they own."

The three men stared intently at Prim as the fire between them crackled.

"You are demons too, are you not," said Prim.

The three men looked at each other in bewilderment and then eased into wide grins.

“Well-seen,” said the tall man. “We would have waited for a bit longer, but alas, we shall begin now, then.”

The men’s shapes slowly turned into their devilish forms as their limbs lengthened and grew fur of the darkest green, and their long, sharp claws and red teeth shimmered sharply in the fire’s flickers.

“First, we shall take our time killing you, before we step outside to join our brethren and sink our fangs in the back of the unsuspecting Het,” said what used to be the tall man.

“Then we shall slit her throat in leisure,” said what used to be the bald man, “so we may watch life drain from her slowly and so that all may watch and enjoy the sight.”

“And then we shall flay your skin from your corpse and hang it high for all to see far and wide,” said what once was the bearded man, “while we feast on your flesh and blood until the sun rises again.”

“Hm,” said Prim, “I can’t let you do that.”

This made the demons bellow with hearty laughter. But Prim, her hand gripping her greatknife tightly, swung it in a swift, long strike before her and then calmly sheathed it again as the devils’ laughter halted promptly. And even though the vile beasts had been crouching a dozen feet away from where the knife’s edge had sliced through the air, their bodies fell apart, cleanly cut in two, and their foul blood flooded the floors.

It wasn’t much longer until the noises outside subsided. Following a long silence, Prim heard footsteps nearing the door. Seven loud knocks echoed through the keep, now filled with the stench of blood and death, followed by a loud, firm voice calling out. “It is I, Het,” it said. “The deed is done, you can open the door now.”

And Prim did just so, finding Het covered in wounds and blood, both her own and

foreign.

"Well-fought," said Prim, eyeing the dozens of corpses Het had left behind her.

"What happened here?" said Het, nodding towards the dead demons in the keep.

"You said no evil shall pass through that door," said Prim, "so I didn't let it."

Het looked again at the devils' bodies, steeped in their own blood, and nodded. "Have my thanks, Pree Prim," she said and went to lie down by the fire to rest. "The work is done," she sighed as she slumped onto the stone floor, "I have killed them all."

"Do you regret it?" said Prim.

"My work is my work," said Het, "and the old law is the old law. There is no use in regret."

Prim, the Gentle One, fetched her waterskin and washed Het's wounds and ripped more of her veta to tie them tightly so they may heal well and quickly, and Het let her and was grateful for the kindness she was granted.

"Your work demands a high price," said Prim. "Your scars run deep, and your burdens even deeper."

"Indeed, I do not enjoy the killing," said Het. "There is as much sense to it as there is reason to evil. And yet it must be done, and it must be done by someone, and this time that someone was me."

"It seems to me," said Prim, "there is not much difference indeed. It seems to me whoever exceeds in the practice of the Universal Art shall triumph anyway."

"Lord YISUN says that violence is inescapable," Het shrugged. "And that the old laws keep the Wheel turning, same as the Wheel turning keeps the old laws."

"If that were the case, then what use is enforcing it?" said Prim.

"Surely without, we should fall into despair and darkness, and violence and evil shall rule the Universe," said Het.

"Hm," said Prim. "Violence to prevent violence. What a paradox."

"Surely none would want the Wheel to break," said Het hastily.

"Perhaps it is there where I shall find what I seek," said Prim. "Perhaps it is there where the road ends."

"I have no desire to see that day," said Het.

"And hence you keep watch," said Prim, "and hence I walk the road forever."

"If I knew a better way, I'd gladly take it," said Het, "but alas, I do not, so I can not."

"And what way would that be?" said Prim.

"Something involving less killing, perhaps," said Het and sighed. "Something where the lines are not blurred nor shifting endlessly from time and place to time and place."

"You said your business is not justice," said Prim, "yet it seems to me you seek it anyway."

"Who doesn't?" said Het.

"Evil, perhaps?" suggested Prim.

"Evil, perhaps," nodded Het.

"If it is clear thresholds you desire, why not make the cut in the stone yourself?" said Prim.

"The lines are not mine to draw," said Het.

"Are they not?" said Prim. "How curious. The God of Thresholds, unwilling to draw lines in the sand."

"Unwilling indeed!" said Het. "As the sands would wash away with the next gust of wind or wave of sea, so they'd be no less arbitrary and fickle than they are now if I were to set them. For I am not who I was the day before, nor do I expect I shall be tomorrow who I am today."

"Maybe that's all there is to it," said Prim. "Maybe the lines are not meant to be rigid and timeless, for you are not rigid and timeless."

"What purpose do they serve, then?" said Het.

"What purpose do you want them to serve?" said Prim.

"My caprice should not matter," said Het. "The outcome would be no better than it is now."

"As it is now, the Wheel turns anyway," said Prim, "as it always did. Whether it is you who etches the notches in the timber or it is done by another's hand, they will be there, and they will be as volatile as they like, and the Wheel is yet to cease its relentless march."

"It's all futile, then? Is that your claim?" said Het defeatedly.

"Maybe," said Prim and shrugged. "Who's to say. But lines need to be drawn, for if they aren't, they shan't be, and they need to be drawn by someone's hand, and this time, they could be where you cut them to be."

"If I were to do that," said Het, "I'd need to cut continuously and endlessly then. Until the Wheel breaks, and perhaps beyond."

"Indeed," said Prim.

"That is a foolish endeavour," said Het.

"The first step is a foolish one until the end is reached," said Prim.

Hearing this, Het laughed heartily. "Foolish indeed!" she laughed, "And what am I if not a fool, the God of Thresholds who avoids lines, the Watchman who despises the law!"

Het wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and said, "You've given me much to think about, Pree Prim, and for that I thank you. But now, I would like to give it a try."

And with those words, Het leapt to her feet and stepped away from the fire's warmth,

heading outside into the darkness of the night. Stood amidst the dozens of fresh corpses she had produced, she reached for the thin line splitting the darkness of the ground from the blackness of the skies and grabbed it firmly. Then she pulled it with all her might, and she pulled it until she could throw it over her shoulder, and like that she threw the night's black away from these lands, whereupon a new dawn welcomed them brightly into the new day.

Prim joined Het outside, greeting the morning sun. "That was a very foolish first step," said Prim and smiled in the seventeenth way.

"I know," said Het and grinned from cheek to cheek.

And Prim, noticing how the road had twisted and turned its snakelike shape under the soles of her feet, grinned with all her heart, too.

Het and the Cherry Tree

Once, YISUN strolled through the grand red halls of her speaking house. He roamed between the golden feathered arches in the depths of night, once the halls were devoid of any other's presence, so he could bask in the remnant vibrations of all the words that had been spoken there earlier that day and enjoy the taste of the fruit of his creation. Many a word had been said that day indeed, some in contemplation, some in anger, some in folly, and others in drunkenness; but YISUN's favourites were those that had been said just to be spoken. What a marvellous opulence of existence it was, that ability to speak words without saying a single thing, what a colossal, monumental waste and spoil. YISUN rejoiced and smiled in the fourth way and bathed in those imperceptible reverberations engulfing them.

It was then that she noticed another hot flame brightly ablaze in her vicinity. Stood outside, Het the Dutiful, Watcher at the Gates, still guarded the entrance in the depths of the night and silence. As YISUN approached her, Het bowed deeply, as was custom.

"Come, Het," spoke YISUN, "join me for a lollygag in the gardens."

"Oh King of Kings, I would like nothing more," said Het, "but I must guard the gates, for there is none else to do so."

"Worry not," said YISUN, "none shall seek entry before dawn. Instead, let us visit the cherry tree in my gardens. I've much desire to see it tonight."

Het nodded and followed him dutifully as YISUN led them into his famed plum gardens. It was said that a single bite of the plums' flesh would grant immortality, for which reason they were coveted feverishly by mortals. This was much to YISUN's dismay, for immortality was a terrible curse and one of the three For-

bidden Punishments. Hence, the gardens were guarded by a handsome red buck with ten antlers, which none of the intruders scaling the walls or digging tunnels or sneaking through cracks had bested yet. The buck greeted them with a bow, as was custom, and left them to their own devices.

Het and YISUN strolled through the vast gardens, where the famed plum trees were in full bloom, for both seasons and daylight were but a formality in that place. They walked for a good while until they reached a far corner, where there indeed stood a mighty cherry tree among the plums, which Het had never seen before. It stood tall and wide, with deep grooves in its old bark, blossoming beautifully in radiant rose colours.

“Speak freely, child,” YISUN said to Het, while basking in the sight of the pink petals, “I see clearly that questions cloud your mind’s fires. Your duties do not bind you to silence, too, so speak, if you nurture that desire.”

“Oh Queen of Queens, it is as you say,” Het said bashfully, “my thoughts have been troubled lately.”

And YISUN, being in a playful mood, said nothing.

“I stand guard at the gates, as is my duty,” continued Het, “where my siblings and servants and pilgrims and retainers pass through daily. Some come and go seeking wisdom and enlightenment, while others lust for riches, conquests, and glory. Yet whoever passes that threshold fuels their step with aim and ambition.”

And YISUN, being in a generous mood, said nothing.

“But among my siblings, only I remain,” Het went on, “standing still by the gates forevermore, as they toil and scour the universe to sate the hungers of their ambition. Hence, I am troubled, oh Lord of Lords. I worry that duty may obstruct me from myself indefinitely, and I fret I may be in the wrong to remain in this state.”

YISUN nodded and spoke thusly: “In this plum garden, this old cherry tree bears fruit each year. It has done so for many years, and it does so on its own, without any instruction or command.”

Looking at the cherry tree as if it were an old friend, YISUN then said, “Back when it was but a sapling, this tree did not bear any fruit whatsoever; it did not even flower. I remember it well. Though as beautifully as it blooms now, the blossoms are yet to turn into sweet cherries. They shall ripen last. And even though they may be last, they would not be if the tree had not matured first.”

Het contemplated this. “Should I strive to be the tree, then?” she asked, “Or the blossom? Or perhaps the cherry?”

“Why be any?” said YISUN and smiled in the thirty-seventh way.

And when Het looked up again, she saw that the tree before her now was a plum tree, no different from the hundreds of other plum trees in YISUN’s gardens. Het inspected the fragrant and delicate plum blossoms, pondering YISUN’s words. Then she bowed deeply and thanked YISUN for her lesson, whereupon she returned to guard the doors of the great speaking hall with her mind at ease.

The Hunter and the Yelenoshena

Once YISUN observed the vastness of her creations and saw that it had grown stalled and close to reaching a path towards equilibrium. Strife, toil, and anguish had become constant rather than permanent, the machinations predictive and the cycles circular, and entropy increased at a nearly steady rate, as did the Wheel's turn. Hence, with motherly love and fatherly concern, YISUN took a well-rounded stone from a mountain, smoothed by countless years of winds grinding it into its polished shape. Then he broke off a leafed branch from one of the oldest trees in this realm's forests. Finally, she went to her peridotite palace, where she put them into a bowl of water most fine, whereupon he breathed onto it and out sprang a magnificent creature with the four legs and hooves and tail of a doe and the face and torso and arms and hands of a woman with long chestnut hair. They say that she was both beautiful and graceful to behold, and both those things were a lie.

"This is Yelenoshena," spoke YISUN, and everyone listened, "a creature most elusive and shy. It is said that she may evade any trap, arrow, bullet, and hunter, for it is I who says it. And I furthermore say that whoever shall catch her first shall receive their wish granted, whatever it may be." And before YISUN had spoken that sentence to its conclusion, the capricious yelenoshena had leapt with astonishing speed and grace and had escaped through the palace's gates, vanishing into the depths of the forest as tracelessly as the winds.

This had caused a great commotion, for there was none who still drew breath that had not known desire and greed burning and tearing deeply in their breast, and none were strangers to want. Some sought riches, others glory and fame, yet others powers and knowledge and wisdom, whereas some merely craved for their survival; And even those who had long renounced their quests and hungers felt its raging embers once more as soon as the unheard-of prize to ask of YISUN any

boon they may think of was announced in this manner.

Thus, they all hustled and bustled and rushed and pushed and pulled into the woods after the poor creature. Some felt it was best to follow her while the trail was fresh, while others deemed it wiser to hastily make preparations beforehand. But, all in all, none who could afford it let this opportunity slip by, and so began the great hunt for the yelenoshena.

Among the hunting party was a hunter whose name I cannot remember; perhaps it'll come to me later. It shall suffice to know that he was a young mortal man who had seen, say, no more than three decades of YISUN's creations. He was of humble origins, for his father and his father's father too were hunters. As is common to many young mortals, he had a deep and quiet desire to etch his name into the annals of history and the Wheel. But, even more so, the siren song of a hunt most difficult called him adamantly and undeniably, and so he joined the great hunt all too eagerly. With him, he carried but his great hunting knife, some rope to build traps and shelter with, a bow with three arrows, and a flute to pass the time in the long nights. Since he would not even have dreamt of owning a horse, let alone a carriage, he quickly fell behind to the rear of the hunting party, along with everybody else giving chase on foot.

The yelenoshena turned out to be just as elusive as YISUN had told it. She ran faster than any hound or horse, she fled speedier than any hawk flew, and she could gallop for a day and a night without halt. At fifty paces, her spotted fur and chestnut hair made her indistinguishable from the woods. When she dove into the waters, the sun's reflection made her look no different from one of the hundreds of passing waves. And when she climbed into the rocky mountains, she swept steep stones and climbed cliffs as swiftly and precisely as goats would do, her spotted fur seemingly taking on the colour of lichen. On those rare occasions where one of the chasers had by some miracle neared her enough to attempt reaching for her, they would find her slipping through their fingers most quickly, more slippery than a fish, and some even swore that their hand had passed through her as if she was made of naught but breath. But those who had gotten lucky enough to approach her to that extent would also find that their luck would turn instantly, as her hooves were a formidable force too, splitting their shields in two and denting their armours

beyond repair, and let us not speak of those poor fools who had reached for her without donning any armament.

Thus, the crowd, as rabidly as they had joined the chase, thinned out quickly over the span of the first dozen days. All their spears and arrows and guns had proven useless, all their traps ineffective, all their horses and carriages and hounds and hawks too slow. So, many proclaimed having better things to do than to waste their lives on the yelenoshena, whom they decried as but a trickery of YISUN's, and they declared the task impossible by design and abandoned the quest. Others readily admitted the limitations of their prowess, realising the futility of their attempt, and returned to their lives humbled and pensive. Hence, it took but a few weeks for only a handful of fools to persevere in the chase, our hunter among them. But as time went on, the elusive yelenoshena shook them off, one by one. "It can't be done," some said. "It's not meant to be done," others said. "If I can't do it, then no one can. You should give up, too," they said as they left. Even YS-Shkela, god of the hunt, eventually shook his head and let out a bellowing laugh as if he had just understood the joke and then gave up on the hunt, returning to YISUN's Speaking House to recount what he had learned about the universe at the divine court.

Yet the hunter persisted, for he was first and foremost a hunter. Moreover, he was a hunter who had laid eyes on his prey, and that was his undoing; for a chasseur without a chase was none at all. Each day, he would rise with the sun and give pursuit, and each day the yelenoshena would elude him masterfully and with ease. Then, when the sun reddened, the hunter would seek a place to rest for the night, and he would build a simple shelter and a small fire and play his flute to pass the time until sleep found him. And so the days went on, and the weeks turned to months, and eventually the hunter was the last one to stalk the fabled yelenoshena.

It was around that time that the yelenoshena had, or so it appeared to the hunter, grown bolder. As if the months of the fruitless hunt had made her overly confident in her skills of flight, she let him near her further than before. She stepped closer to each trap he had laid down, yet still never sprung one. She cheekily looked in the other direction as her lone stalker approached. And, as time went on, she even neared his encampment at night, observing his shelter and his tools and the fire he had lit with curiosity flickering in her eyes. The hunter noticed her, of course,

for he was a skilled hunter, but he knew better than to rabidly give chase through forests engulfed by nightly darkness, and so he lay back calmly and continued playing on his flute to pass the time.

It was precisely while he was playing his flute that the yelenoshena first spoke to him.

“What are those sounds you make?” she said, hidden well in the night’s blackness between the woods.

“We call this music,” said the hunter.

“I’ve never heard anything like it,” said the yelenoshena. “No bird I’ve seen sings in that manner, no animal cries that way. Why do you produce it?”

“I do it to pass the time,” said the hunter. “Do you like it?”

But his only answer was the sound of galloping hooves.

The next night, when the yelenoshena returned, the hunter interrupted his playing and greeted her.

“Welcome, oh master of flight, undefeated lord of the hunt,” he spoke, not expecting a response. “I have been a hunter for many years, but never have I heard of or seen a chase such as yourself. Each day you escape my grasp effortlessly, for what has now become months, as if it were no more than a child’s game to you. Know that I have much admiration for your prowess, unparalleled in all of YISUN’s realms, and I hold equally as much desire to best you in your game someday, for if there ever was a true measure of a hunter’s skill, it must be to overcome the challenge that is the yelenoshena.

“But tonight, my weary bones need rest. Until the sun rises on the morrow, I shan’t be hunter again, of that I give you my word. So, be at peace this night. Stay and listen to this flute of mine, if you harbour such inclination, or go wherever your path takes you, and go in assured calm.”

The yelenoshena once again said nothing, but no sound of escaping hooves reached the hunter either, so he leaned back and played his flute until sleep took him from

this realm.

The next day, as the sun rose, so did the hunter. Once again, he gave chase, and once again the yelenoshena would evade him effortlessly, and once again she would seek out his makeshift shelter at night to listen to him play his flute, and it was in this manner that the days went by. And when the cold autumnal winds swept through the lands, once the sun had set, the hunter would invite her to join him by the fire to keep warm, and she did, for she rightly understood that he had every intention to keep true to his word and to best her in her flight through the woods only and in no other way. And when winter's frost came biting from the ground they stood on, the hunter lit larger fires, and they shared the bedding and covers he had made of furs he had obtained through his hunts to keep warm throughout the night. He would then play his flute for her as they lay side by side, and each morning, just before the sun rose, Yelenoshena would leave their bedding and disappear wordlessly into the woods again, whereupon the hunter would stalk after her as fruitlessly as ever, only for her to return to him at night. And even after spring's arrival, they still shared their nightly camp, not out of necessity for warmth any longer, but because nightly company had turned into habit and admiration had turned to adoration and friendship.

It was on such a warm late spring's night, as they lay by the fire and the hunter rested his head on Yelenoshena's back and played his flute as her fingers combed through his hair, that she asked of him, "If one day you caught me, what would you do?"

The hunter halted his music and laid his pipe down, saying, "I don't know, I haven't thought that far."

"Will you not ask your wish of our motherfather, YISUN?" Yelenoshena asked.

"Maybe," he said.

"What will your wish be?"

"I don't know," said the hunter, "I haven't thought that far."

"Have you not joined the hunt for the prize?" said Yelenoshena.

“No,” said the hunter, “I came for the hunt.”

“And what does a hunter do after a successful hunt?”

“He goes back home,” he said.

“Will you go back home, then?”

“Maybe,” he said. “But I’m yet to catch you first. Though I carry many doubts that shall happen soon. You remain too fast for me, you see through all my traps before I even lay them into the ground, you hide too well from me.”

“Will you admit defeat, then, like the others?”

“Why would I?” said the hunter, “To chase after one so extraordinary and so beautiful, I wouldn’t know what else to want.”

“Then will you remain, chasing me in daylight forever more, and keeping me company and playing those sweet melodies of yours in the nights?”

“That is my intention,” said the hunter, “I wouldn’t know what else to want.”

“Good,” said Yelenoshena and smiled shyly upon him as her fingers swept through his hair, “for you are my last pursuer. I fear I may grow terribly bored once my last playmate abandons my game before its conclusion.”

“A game, you say?” said the hunter. “I called it that once too, but I wouldn’t name it such no longer. For I see it more as a dance, where you, a dancer without her match, rightfully takes the lead which is yours, while I, a clumsy clog-foot, attempt to match your swift steps.”

And Yelenoshena, who had learned of music and dance from the hunter, said, “You must keep up before the tempo changes, lest I lose my hold on you,” and she playfully tapped his nose.

“I was never a good dancer,” the hunter said, “but I’m bound to learn eventually.”

This amused Yelenoshena. “If it were on you, how would you lead this dance of ours?” she asked giddily.

“Like this,” he said and kissed her tenderly, and she too embraced him tightly. And as their lips parted, Yelenoshena fell into the hunter’s arms, devoid of any life.

The hunter, once he regained his wits, held her closely as he so bitterly wept over her demise. And when he finally ran out of tears one day and one night later, he pulled out his great hunting knife and cut so many branches that the pyre he built was the height of his shoulders. Then he carefully placed Yelenoshena atop and crowned her coldened chestnut hair with a handful of white blooms, which was all he could find in the vicinity, and he set the pyre ablaze. Once its embers had cooled, he reached for the ashes and rubbed them over his face and his arms, and he mourned her for three days and three nights, as was custom, after which he made for the road back.

When he returned to YISUN’s peridotite palace with empty hands and ashensmeared cheeks and forearms, the hunters both divine and mortal who had given up the hunt long before him recognised him and ridiculed him.

“The fool has returned!” they chuckled.

“We told you it couldn’t be caught!” they laughed.

“We told you you couldn’t best our skills!” they snickered.

But the hunter, having laid his eyes upon his prey, paid them no heed and made for YISUN’s throne, the Great Seat of the Queen of Queens, for he was owed and he had come to collect.

“Lord of Lords, I have returned,” he said to her, “Yelenoshena is no more.”

And the other gods and mortals present laughed even nastier. “So he claims!” they bellowed. “But he brings no proof but the dirt on his face, which surely he obtained as he tripped and fell into a puddle of mud!”

“I bring no proof for I have burned her remains,” spoke the hunter, “as is custom. Then I have rubbed my face and arms in her ashes, as is custom. And then I have offered her ashes to the sixteen winds, as is custom. By the end of the third night of my wake, there was no proof left to bring.”

And the others laughed even more. "What hunter gives his prey the rites!" they cackled. "What hunter mourns his game!"

But YISUN looked him up and down and smiled in the seventh way.

"You have earned your prize," said YISUN, and the palace's halls filled with the deadly silence of disbelief and shame and jealousy. "Speak, hunter, and name the reward you are owed."

The hunter looked at YISUN and spoke firmly, "Oh King of Kings, my wish is for you to bring her back, for my hunt is not concluded."

YISUN's smile vanished as she said, "That, I cannot do."

"I thought so," said the hunter. "Then, my wish, oh Lord of Lords, shall be for you to bring her into existence."

And YISUN smiled in the nineteenth way and said, "*That*, I can do." Then she knelt and touched the ground beneath her feet with the palm of her third hand, and the ground split open before their very eyes and out sprang a magnificent creature with the four legs and hooves and tail of a doe and the face and torso and arms and hands of a woman with long chestnut hair, and they say that she was both beautiful and graceful to behold. The yelenoshena took a look around, seeing all the gods and mortals and hunters gathered there. Then she looked at the hunter before her, and the hunter saw naught but fear and dread in her eyes, and that very same instant she fled with astonishing speed and grace through the palace's gates into the depths of the forest as tracelessly as the winds, and the hunter leapt after her into the endless dark of the woods and gave chase.

They say that, as he ran past the gates, he was smiling in three ways without even knowing, and indeed he wouldn't have known, for he was a chasseur with a chase and the ways of smiling were no concern of his.

Ryam's Last Student

Ryo was a child blessed by the misfortune of being born into a military family. Both his father and his five older brothers served as soldiers, lieutenants, and majors in the West Midlands army. And despite all the daily training they had suffered through since their infancy, they all fell in battle one by one before Ryo had even seen thirteen summers. Thus, Ryo concluded that all their teaching was worthless throughout and set out to find a worthy master who would turn him into a swordsman most fine.

As had every young boy far and wide, Ryo had heard of Ryam, the Sword Hermit, as well as of his many heroic deeds and of the numerous battles he had won and of all the countless famous and infamous men he had slain. Thus, Ryo set his mind to seek the fabled Sword God and to learn the deadly sword arts from this unparalleled master and from no other. So he departed his childhood home, leaving his crying mother widowed and childless, and set out on the road, stopping in each and every village and settlement he came across along the way, asking whether they had heard of the famed Ryam's whereabouts.

This way, Ryo had travelled for three years and three days until he finally found Ryam wandering the hills of Agradda. On the road, the boy had frequently been beaten and robbed and laughed at and spat at. Therefore, he had nothing of value on him any longer, as they had even taken his father's fine sword from him, which had been his last inheritance, and his once fine woollen clothes were reduced to nothing but filthy tatters. Yet all that mattered not to him, for he had finally found the renowned Sword God Ryam, and when he saw him, Ryo threw himself at his feet and begged to be taken on as his student.

"Begone, filthy louse, and leave me be," Ryam said, "I do not take any students." And

he turned to leave, but Ryo leapt in front of his feet and smacked his forehead into the dirt and begged with folded hands to be taught the sword arts. Ryam then broke off a branch from the nearest tree and thrashed the boy savagely until he couldn't move any longer, and he left him there in his blood for the hungry wolves to find, upon which Ryam hurried away from the foolish boy.

But Ryo had no intention of abandoning his ambitions and took pursuit, catching up with Ryam just two months later in the Kraha desert, which back then was as flat as a calm sea as far as the eye could reach. And Ryo again threw himself before Ryam's feet and begged him with folded hands to take him on as his student.

"How am I to teach an idiot who does not understand clear instructions?" said Ryam. "Have I not told you I do not take students? Have I not told you to leave me be? Now begone, you foolish child. Do not bother me again."

Yet Ryo threw himself at his feet and held onto him and begged and begged again, and so Ryam took his wandering staff and beat him savagely with it, leaving him there in his blood for the vultures to find as he hurried away from the foolish boy.

But Ryo, a fool indeed, was not to be deterred. So he followed Ryam again, and it took him three months to catch up with the Sword Hermit in the grasslands of Otama. He found him by the muddy road, cleaning the blood and fat and guts off his sword on the garments of dead highwaymen who had attempted to rob him mere moments ago. Ryo leapt into the mud to his knees and begged again and again to be taught the arts of the sword.

"You are a comprehensive idiot, boy," said Ryam. Then he took off an old, blunt, and rusty sword from the hand of one of the corpses beneath him and threw it in the mud before Ryo. "Here's a sword, child. If you desire to be taught, then take it and do not return until you have killed one hundred men with it. But if you have a single ounce of working brain in that thick skull of yours, you will not lay a single touch upon this poisonous steel, and you will return from whence you came and learn a proper trade."

But Ryo scrambled onto his feet and leapt onto the sword, which was sinking into the mud, as a man drowning in storm-enraged waves clings onto a piece of floating

driftwood.

“Idiot boy,” said Ryam and shook his head. “Now go and kill with this cursed metal and do not dare come before my eyes a moment before you have killed one hundred, for now you too carry a sword and I shall cut you down where you stand like any other if you disobey.”

And so Ryo set out to kill, and kill he did. It was two years and two days later when he returned to Ryam, whom he found deep in the mountains of Kresh, which reached so high into the skies that no trees nor bushes survived there, and barely any grass grew at all. Instead, the winds combed and whistled through naked stones and rocks. When Ryam spotted him approaching, he shook his head in disapproval and said, “Fool of a boy. Why do you return?”

“I have killed one hundred men, as you told me to,” said Ryo.

“Have you still not learned?” said Ryam.

And Ryo, covered in bruises and blisters and cuts and the stench of death, said, “I have learned to kill with this sword.” And he showed Ryam the old rusty sword, whose blade now was covered in kinks and dents and cracks so much that it was a miracle that the metal held together at all.

“You have learned to butcher,” said Ryam, “you have learned nothing. You do not understand killing, for you do not understand death, nor do you understand life.”

“Then teach me, master, I beg you,” Ryo said, throwing himself at his feet.

Ryam then picked up a rock, eyed it for but a moment and then threw it before Ryo. “Take this rock,” he said, “and go kill one hundred men with it. Do not return before my eyes ere you have done so, or I shall cut you down where you stand the very instant I see you approaching.”

And Ryo did as he was told and descended the mountains and went on to kill, and kill he did. It took him one year and one day to complete this task, for he had indeed become more skilled at killing, but not at much else. When he finally sought out Ryam again, he found him sitting on a smooth stone deep in the dense,

snowy forests of Hookrah, where the white frost covered the grounds and the trees' branches. Black birds hopped through the snow as the setting red sun's glimmer pierced through the woods.

Seeing him approach with the rock in his hand, Ryam said, "Why do you return, boy? Have you learned nothing?"

"I did as I was told," said Ryo, "I have killed one hundred men with this rock. And I have learned that anything in my hand can be a sword, if I want it to be. Whether it is sharp steel or this rock, I will cut through my opponent's flesh with it."

"You truly are an idiot, boy," Ryam shook his head. "What have you learned of death?"

"I have learned that it can reach everyone," said Ryo. "The strongest and the smallest, the richest and the poorest. I have killed all alike with this rock and with the sword in my hands."

"And why did you kill, boy?" said Ryam.

"Because you told me to," said Ryo.

"Would you have killed if I hadn't told you to?" said Ryam.

"Maybe," said Ryo, "I don't know."

"Then, what is the point of killing?" said Ryam.

Ryo gave it a thought, and then said, "I don't know. What is the point of living?"

"I'll show you," said Ryam and snatched the rock from Ryo's hand. "Look here, boy," he said and smashed the rock against the stone he was sitting on, and the rock in his hand split clean in two, revealing a fossilised ammonoid in its midst, and he showed the beautiful spiral to Ryo. "Do you see now?"

"I do not," Ryo replied honestly. "What should a snail's shell hidden in a rock tell me?"

"You are a fantastic idiot indeed," said Ryam. "I have rarely seen a boy with a head

this empty. Tales will be told about the void between your ears.” Then he stood up and said, “Come. I shall fill that void with the poisons you desire, and one day you will curse me for it.” Then he wandered off deeper into the snowy forest, and Ryo followed him.

And so Ryam took on his last student.

She-Ra and the Princesses of Power

Of Summer Rains And Songs Of Old

On this calm and warm summer evening, big heavy raindrops danced joyfully from the skies, sparkling like little silvery fireworks as they dropped onto the grass, the pavement, the bushes, and the trees, while the cool breeze refreshed the air with scents of earth and rain. Finn and Catra were sitting on the front porch, watching the droplets mingle and play as they fell. It was a welcome cool after the hot summer sun they had enjoyed during the day.

Catra had been cleaning up after dinner when the rain started. The downpour came without hesitation, without a slow start that crescendoed into a heavy fall. It arrived as if determined to clear out the summer heat that very instant. After a brief look through the window once it had started, Catra had given it no further thought and continued with her work. With the leftovers packed up neatly and stashed away in the refrigerator, the washing up was due. Elbow-deep in the sink with both hands, Catra was just about halfway finished when she noticed a suspicious lack of noises her four-year-old should've been producing playing or just generally being a four-year-old. So she put down the sponge after she finished the plate she had been holding, dried her hands on the tea towel hanging by the oven handle, and went to the living room to check on Finn, whom she found gazing silently out of the window.

"Hey, honey, what are you looking at?" Catra carefully asked as she approached her toddler.

"The rain."

"The rain?" Having arrived behind Finn, Catra took a look through the window. There was, unsurprisingly, rain, and nothing remarkable or out of the ordinary to be seen.

“Yes, Mama, the rain. It’s raining.”

“It’s raining indeed, honey. Quite heavily.”

“Yes.”

They stood quietly by the window and looked at the rain. Some droplets stuck to the glass and slowly made their way downward, merging into bigger ones when they touched others and leaving behind a thin watery trail as they descended.

Catra had seen countless rains so far. There was nothing special or noteworthy about this particular downpour. And yet, something deep and urging told her unmistakably that the dishes in the kitchen sink could wait. After all, who knew how long the rain would keep up? Somehow, today’s rain felt a bit different nevertheless. As if it came with a sprinkle of nameless wonder and magic. There was certainly no sprinkle of nameless wonder and magic in doing the dishes. So they could wait.

“Honey, how about we go out the front door and watch the rain from the porch?”

Finn took a moment to think. “Yes.”

And so they found themselves sitting on the front porch, entranced by the mundane spectacle of a summer rain and the monotone choir of noise drizzling along with it. Every once in a while a cool breeze would caress their cheeks, dancing playfully along their skin, the blades of grass, and the leaves on the trees. Despite sitting under the roof, they could feel faint sprinkles of raindrops landing on their legs, arms, and faces, cooling and refreshing them. They watched the drops fall and glisten, they watched the clouds float by, they watched the trees and the grass bend in the breeze.

As it grew dark, the usual sunset’s fiery skies remained hidden behind the persisting heavy clouds. By now Finn had grown tired and had laid their head on Mama Catra’s lap, enjoying gentle caresses and scratches behind their ears. Their yawn betrayed what Mama Catra had suspected already.

"Honey, it's time for bed."

"But Mommy hasn't come home yet."

"She'll be back soon, love. Maybe even in time to kiss you good night."

"Can't I stay up a bit longer?"

"No, honey. You're nearly falling asleep already. It's time for bed. Now."

"Okay."

Finn didn't move.

"Now, honey. Off we go to brush your teeth." Catra lifted Finn's head gently.

"Okay."

Reluctantly, Finn got up and staggered towards the bathroom, and Catra followed.

Having just tucked Finn in, Catra was about to lean over to give them a kiss, when Finn asked, "Mama, can you sing me a lullaby?"

Catra gave it a quick thought.

"All right, fine. But you go straight to sleep afterwards. You promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Ok then. Let's see. Oh, I know. How about

Once upon a time, a Sapphire came to-

"No, Mama, not that one."

"Not that one?"

"No."

"Which one do you want, then?"

“Dunno. Some other one.”

“Then, how about

Let’s go in the garden, you’ll find some-

“No, Mama, not that one either. I know that one already.”

“Hm. Which one do you want me to sing then?”

“A new one.”

“A new one?”

“Yes, Mama. A new one.”

“Hm. I don’t know any new lullabies, honey.”

“Pleeeeeease?”

“I’m sorry, honey, but I don’t know any new ones. Why don’t you pick one I know?”

“But I’d like a new one. It doesn’t have to be a lullaby. Any song. Please, Mama.”

“But honey...”

“Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeease!”

A gust of wind slammed some cheeky raindrops against the window glass. Which was lucky for Catra, giving her an idea.

“Okay. I just remembered an old song. But it’s not a lullaby.”

“That doesn’t matter, Mama. Please?”

“Fine. But remember you promised to go to sleep right afterwards, right?”

“Yes, Mama.”

So Catra cleared her throat and began.

The rain, the rain keeps falling dear

*The drops won't stop, the skies won't clear
The sun has not appeared in weeks
A cold wind blows, our old roof leaks
Yet there's no place I'd rather be
Than here, where you are close to me*

*I don't know what tomorrow brings
I only know that you're my light
That you're the wind beneath my wings
To you, my love, I give my hand
If you'll have me, as I here stand*

—

*The leaves have fallen from the trees
Few weeks remain until it's here
With ice and snow and chilling freeze
Yet I don't fear cold winter's bite
While we have us, we'll be alright*

*Whatever might tomorrow bring
Through summer, winter, fall, and spring
For all the time, come rain or shine,
You'll always have this heart of mine.
You ask, will I take you, my dear?
With you I'll spend all of my years!*

*My love, my love, I have to leave
The ship is setting sail this eve*

*The sea is calm, a good wind blows
Where to? Only the Captain knows
We sail away to distant shores
I might be gone some months or more*

*I don't know what lies past this night
I don't know what tomorrow brings
I only know that you're my light
That you're the wind beneath my wings
To you, my love, I give my hand
If you'll have me, as I here stand*

—

*I know, love, you set sail this night
While I need stay here on dry lands
Each day in sunset's crimson light
You'll find me on the beaches' sands
For those white sails I'll search the sea
Which carry back my love to me*

*Whatever might tomorrow bring
Through summer, winter, fall, and spring
For all the time, come rain or shine,
You'll always have this heart of mine.
You ask, will I take you, my dear?
With you I'll spend all of my years!*

They told me if I wanted gold

*I should come conquer kingdoms old
In war, they claimed, lies wealth and fame
I said "go back from whence you came"
The only thing that I'd fight for
Is to love you forevermore*

*I don't know what lies past this night
I don't know what tomorrow brings
I only know that you're my light
That you're the wind beneath my wings
To you, my love, I give my hand
If you'll have me, as I here stand*

—

*Let's hunt the beast, let's storm its cave
Come slay the dragon, take its loot
They said, in search for fools so brave
But all I gave them was the boot
The only quest I'd set out for
Is to love you forevermore*

*Whatever might tomorrow bring
Through summer, winter, fall, and spring
For all the time, come rain or shine,
You'll always have this heart of mine.
You ask, will I take you, my dear?
With you I'll spend all of my years!*

*The birds, they chirp, the sun shines bright
The bees, they buzz, no cloud in sight
Adventure calls, love, let us go
Tread paths unwalked, into unknowns
To forests deep and mountains tall
While you're with me, I'll brave it all*

*I don't know what lies past this night
I don't know what tomorrow brings
I only know that you're my light
That you're the wind beneath my wings
To you, my love, I give my hand
If you'll have me, as I here stand*

—

*I hear the call, love, take my hand
Let's go as far as we can walk
Adventure calls to distant lands
Past meadows green and hardened rock
There's nothing that will slow my stride
As long as you are by my side*

*Whatever might tomorrow bring
Through summer, winter, fall, and spring
For all the time, come rain or shine,
You'll always have this heart of mine.
You ask, will I take you, my dear?
With you I'll spend all of my years!*

“There you go. Now off to sleep,” Catra said as she tucked Finn back in and planted

a soft kiss on their forehead. But Finn had other plans.

"More, Mama, sing more!"

"That's a song I haven't heard in a while," a voice behind her said.

Catra's head spun around, towards Adora, who was leaning in the door frame.

"Mommy! You're back!" Finn squealed, untucking themselves in the process.

"I didn't hear you come in, love," Catra said, trying to regain some sort of composure for reasons she didn't really comprehend herself.

"I tried to be quiet. I thought you two might be in bed already," Adora said, joining Catra at Finn's bedside. She gave Catra a quick kiss on top of her head before taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

"Did you like the song, Finn?" Adora asked.

"Yes. It was nice. A little strange. I don't really understand it. But I liked it. I liked the sailing bit. Setting sail to sea. That sounds good. I like it when Mama sings."

"I like it too," Adora replied. "It's a very special song."

"How come, Mommy? Why is it special?"

"That's a story for some other time," Catra said "Tomorrow, maybe. Now it's time to go to sleep. That was the deal. You promised."

"But..."

"If you promised, you promised," Adora agreed. "We'll tell you all about it tomorrow, honey. But now it's time to say good night." She leaned over and gave Finn a kiss on the forehead. As Adora leaned back and stood up, Catra gave Finn another kiss as well and wished them a good night.

Catra closed the door to Finn's room upon exiting and checked both sides of the corridor for signs of Adora, who was nowhere to be seen. The sound of her footsteps and running water betrayed she had made it into the kitchen, where Catra was headed anyway. The dishes in the sink were still waiting for her. She found

Adora there, putting on the kettle.

“How was the meeting?” Catra inquired, leaning back on the counter.

“Not too bad. We didn’t get much done either, though. Everybody comes up with new urgent ideas and wishes all the time, and instead of getting some actual planning and organising done, they keep talking about what else would be nice and cool and spectacular and romantic and classy and... You know how they are when it comes to the Princess Ball,” she sighed.

“I can only imagine,” Catra smirked. “Are you hungry? There are some leftovers in the fridge.”

“No, thanks. Glimmer ordered takeout for everybody. Didn’t I tell you I’d have dinner with them?”

“You did. I was asking just in case.”

“Thanks, love. I was just gonna make myself a cup of tea. Would you like some too?”

“Perhaps later. I should get those dishes done now.” Catra went over to the sink and grabbed the sponge and a plate.

“Want some help with that?” Adora asked while pouring the boiled water into her mug.

“No, that’s fine. I’m nearly finished anyway,” Catra replied between putting away the cleaned plate in her hand on the dish rack and getting hold of the next one.

“Was Frosta there tonight? How is she doing?”

“Oh, she’s doing fine for herself. Keeps pestering us about making one ballroom a ‘metal chamber of eternal doom’ and letting her band put on a show.”

“Are you going to?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Personally, I wouldn’t mind, but some other princesses feel that ‘brutal blackened grindcore with death metal influences’ is not the most danceable type of music while wearing dresses. And I think they might have a point

there.”

“Dresses aren’t great for mosh pits, that much’s true.”

“Yeah. We’ll see.”

“Heh. Death metal at the Princess Ball. That actually kinda sounds like fun,” Catra smiled. Adora did too and took a sip of her tea. She was leaning on the door frame again, lest she bumped into Catra cleaning up.

“Say, honey...” Adora began hesitantly.

“Hmm?”

“Just out of curiosity... Before, when you were singing *My Heart For Your Hand*, why did you leave out the last two verses?”

Catra stiffened her neck, trying not to look away from the final plate she currently held in her hands, but couldn’t suppress a smile forming across her lips. “Busted,” she thought. She was hoping Adora wouldn’t notice. Okay, maybe she was hoping a little Adora *would* notice. And then not bring it up. Okay, maybe bring it up, but not like this. She had hoped only a little. Barely even at all. You couldn’t even call it hoping, so little did she hope it would happen. Or Adora noticing.

“Hm. I dunno... Just because, I guess. No real reason.”

But Adora had noticed. Adora had noticed as clear as day. And a mischievous, merciless plan had begun to take form in her mind’s eye.

“Is that so? It couldn’t be... that you forgot how they went, could it?” Adora teased.

Catra looked at her, her pride clearly bruised. “Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous. I’d never forget our vows. You sang them to me hundreds of times. Just on our honeymoon alone. And I to you.”

“I did, I did... So... why’d you skip them?” Despite them being far from their teenage years, Adora still couldn’t resist poking and teasing Catra every now and then. Especially when the latter was being shy.

Catra sighed and thought of what to say. Adora, on the other hand, wasn't waiting for her response in the first place. In preparation for her fiendish, fiendish plan, she quickly leaned back through the door and glanced towards Finn's room, ensuring their door was indeed closed. Then she hastily, yet quietly, closed the kitchen door too, put her mug on the counter, and silently approached Catra on her tippy toes. Catra, who just put away the last clean plate and turned off the faucet, didn't notice what was going on and was surprised to feel Adora's arms around her waist. Adora approached into a close hug and put her cheek on Catra's.

"It seems to me you could use a reminder, love," Adora whispered softly into her ear. She could feel Catra's cheek extending into a grin as she put her arms on Adora's. And so, Adora began to sing ever so quietly.

*Oh what a day, can this be true?
I get to sing and dance with you!
I want the world to see and hear
How much you mean to me, my dear
It's more than ever I dreamed of
Today's our day of joy and love*

By the third line, Adora had begun to move her shoulders up and down, following the song's rhythm. After the fourth, her hips followed suit. Catra too had joined into the timid dance. Now Adora released her hold on her and gently pulled on her hips, inviting her to turn around, which she did, laying her arms on Adora's shoulders and locking her hands behind her head, her gaze fixed on Adora's sparkling eyes and goofy grin, which she caught widening as soon as she spotted it. Adora, freshly encouraged, continued her verse with an ever-so-faint blush gracing her cheeks.

*Each day with you is shining bright
Each day with you makes my heart sing
Each day with you, it feels so right
Each day with you is everything
Oh what a day, I'll burst with pride*

For on this day, I am your bride!

Adora gave Catra a playful, expecting look. But Catra did not skip a beat, and began her part:

*You dance and sing of love with me
I can't believe we've come so far
Was our fate written in the stars?
It's more than ever I dreamed of
Today's our day of joy and love!*

*Each day with you is shining bright
Each day with you makes my heart sing
Each day with you, it feels so right
Each day with you is everything
Oh what a day, oh what a life
From this day on, I'll be your wife!*

Warm memories of times long past flooded Adora. Memories of their wedding day, memories of their honeymoon, memories of blissful days, together alone with Catra. Memories of the fresh spring morning, where Catra had woken her up with gentle caresses while singing this song, with golden sunshine permeating through the curtains. Memories of the walk back home from Bow's birthday party, where Adora and Catra, slightly buzzed with Salinean wine, sang and danced to this song in the middle of the night on the streets of Brightmoon, giggling, kissing, getting yelled at by some lady about how late it was and why they were making such a ruckus at that hour. Memories of their hiking trip in the Kingdom of Snows, where they spent a night in the cabin in the mountains, snuggled up in several blankets when Catra suddenly leaned on her shoulder and began singing. Memories of her chest so full of love and bliss it felt like it was about to burst.

Alas, Adora wasn't given much time to reminisce. As Catra began her verse, she took a side step, guiding Adora into a slow rotation as they danced along to the

song that had marked the beginning of their marriage, the exchange of their vows of love and devotion in the presence of all people they held dear.

*When we were kids, back in the day
I'd sometimes fall and scratch my knee
You sweet girl kissed the pain away
And now it's clear as day to me
That I've loved you back then the same
Long 'fore I knew love had a name*

*With these words, love, a vow I make
You as my cherished wife to take
With you I'll sing and dance and live
With you I'll laugh and cry and grieve
Wherever leads our road ahead
Together on it we will tread*

Adora felt her pulse pumping through her ears, her cheeks burning. Catra hadn't broken eye contact the entire time, unyielding, unrelenting, determined. Her disarmingly gorgeous gaze was burning holes through Adora's very soul. Adora's blood was beginning to boil. She hadn't anticipated it to become so intense. Has it always been this intense? Maybe? She couldn't recall. She barely could form a coherent thought. Luckily, she didn't need to think right now. Adora's lines, which she had written herself, were ingrained into her heart. For all the time, through rain or shine, she'd never ever forget her rhymes. And so she replied in song, breathing heavily, aching from having to sing with a whispery voice, aching for the kitchen not permitting enough space for the dance which should've accompanied these vows.

*I travell'd this world wide and far
Through mountains, deserts, 'mong the stars
I found no sky to be so blue
As when I'm sharing it with you*

*Please don't ask for my heart today
I can't give what's yours anyway*

Catra pulled her arms in, cradling Adora's cheeks, and moved her head in closer. Eventually, their foreheads were leaning against each other. Adora felt Catra's hot short breath on her face. She felt it was nearly impossible to focus on her final few lines. Their dancing, as much as the kitchen and their wish to keep quiet as to not disturb Finn had permitted, slowly decayed into a standstill. Adora braved on.

*With these words, love, a vow I make
You as my cherished wife to take
With you I'll sing and dance and live
With you I'll laugh and cry and grieve
Wherever leads our road ahead
Together on it we will tread*

As soon as the final words departed from Adora's lips, Catra pulled in hastily for a long kiss. "Thank the stars," Adora thought, as she had barely managed to hold it together herself until the end of the song not to devour Catra on the spot. She pulled Catra into a tight embrace, still kissing, breathing heavily.

"See, I told you I didn't forget," Catra whispered after their lips departed and they slowly caught their breath.

"I know, love. I was just teasing you." They eagerly shared more and more kisses, until Catra pulled back, holding onto Adora's collar.

"It's just... The last two verses. They're ours. They're special. We wrote them. By ourselves. For each other. I don't want to sing them to anyone but you. Not even Finn. Does that make any sense?"

"It does, love."

"I know it's selfish but I just... can't. Won't."

"It's not selfish at all, Catra. It's perfectly okay. I'm sorry I teased you about it. I didn't mean to make you feel bad about it."

Catra replied with a kiss. As she laid her head on Adora's shoulder, still in a tight embrace, Catra noted, "It's been ages since we last sang to each other like this."

"It has."

"This was... intense."

"I know, right?" Adora confirmed hastily. "I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest. It's still beating like crazy. I feel like a teenager again."

"Glad to know I still have that effect on you."

"You still have many effects on me, love." Adora pulled back so she could see Catra's face and caress her cheek. She wanted to tell Catra that she loved her, and to kiss her again, but the sight of Catra tightening her lips and trying without success to suppress laughter made her giggle as well instead.

"I can't believe we're giggling like teenagers again," Catra said between chuckles. "I thought we'd have outgrown that by now."

"I'm glad we didn't. Even though we're Mommy Adora and Mama Catra now. This is nice."

"I feel like I'm a blushing bride in my twenties again."

"I loved my blushing bride in her twenties. But I wouldn't trade my blushing wife in our kitchen for anything."

"You're such a dork."

"I'm your dork and you love it."

"Yes, I love it. I love you."

They kissed again.

"Shall we go to bed too?" Adora proposed.

“In a minute. Let’s just... stay like this for a bit, yeah? It feels really nice. And special, somehow.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

They maintained their close embrace wordlessly. Were they so entranced with each other they didn’t notice time passing, or did the steady sound of rain drown out the kitchen clock’s ticks? Neither of them could tell. Not that either of them cared to even think about letting this moment end. And so they remained, drawing deep breaths of carefree bliss, as the summer rain’s big raindrops kept tapping cheerfully on the kitchen windows through the night.

Heavy Is The Head

Glimmer locked the door behind her, sealing herself away for the night. Finally, she got a moment to herself. She dragged her feet over to the sink and brushed her teeth while inspecting the dark rings under her eyes. *It's not as bad as it looks. It's just the bad lighting here. You still look as lively and chipper as ever*, she comforted herself. She nearly believed it.

The duties of a queen were many. Doubly so in wartime. Glimmer had no idea how much shit her mom was dealing with every day without her knowing. Everybody wanted something. Everybody needed something. Fucking *everybody*. She had to sign off on strategies. On disaster relief. Rebuilding plans and budgets. Dealing with finances and the treasury. Architects had ideas. Villagers had needs. And ideas. And empty stomachs. And sick people. And wounded people. The soldiers needed medics too. And new armour. And new recruits. The cooks needed instructions. What to make for the diplomats' dinner. And what for the generals' meetings. And what for lunch with the agriculture representatives meeting. And what for brunch with the Princess Alliance. Same with the decorators. All the choices had different meanings behind them, as was tradition. A queen can't afford to insult someone by serving the wrong dish.

Heh. Fuck tradition, Glimmer thought, while spitting out toothpaste. She wished the dignitaries would also want to fuck tradition. But they seemed adamant in upholding it. They weren't fond of the notion of someone changing the rules of the game they were playing. Besides, upholding order, tradition, and appearances kept the citizens of Brighthmoon at ease too. Even Glimmer saw the use in that. She rinsed off her face and finally teleported herself into her bed, which was hung from the ceiling.

Going out on missions with Bow and Adora had been easier. Make a plan, rush in, watch the plan go to shit, improvise, kick some ass, get out, celebrate or rant, depending on how it ended up going. Rinse and repeat. This was different. Even when alone in her room she couldn't find a restful thought. Instead, only items on her to-do list kept popping up and away, occupying every inch of headspace they could find.

She had tried techniques to get all that under control. She was never any good at meditation. Glimmer was probably doing it wrong anyway, she understood that much, and be that as it may, it didn't help. Writing down everything she had on her mind and working the list item by item helped a little since she could comfort herself into not feeling guilty for not thinking about some of it for a bit. But it didn't do much for the few minutes of downtime she could afford before sleep.

She tried working out a schedule in her mind, a schedule of the next day, week, month, in an attempt to sort out everything she had on her mind. It made her feel better, it made her feel as if she had things under control. As if it was manageable. But she quickly learned the hard way that none of her schedules worked out as planned. And this time around, she couldn't just fight, kick, bite, or teleport her way out of it. It just kept piling and piling.

Anything she didn't finish today would wait for her tomorrow, patiently, like starving wolves waiting out a lone traveller who climbed a tree for safety. She could feel their hungry yellow eyes and their hunger to devour their prey alive fixated on her. People went hungry, cold, wet, sick, injured. Diplomats, functionaries and officials got annoyed and difficult. Soldiers got hurt and lost morale. Any misstep would cost her an arm and a leg.

The day's exhaustion worked in her favour. You can't be locked in with your thoughts for too long when exhaustion forces you into sleep. Even if it was a light, restless slumber, it was still a welcome respite.

Glimmer locked the door behind her, sealing herself away for the night. Finally, she

got a moment to herself. She looked over at the sink on the right side of her room, and her eyes caught her toothbrush, exactly where she had left it this morning, waiting eagerly to be used. With a sting of guilt, she teleported herself directly onto her bed. Skipping brushing your teeth once every now and then can't be that bad, she figured. She'd brush them in the morning, she promised herself.

It had been another shit day in a series of shit days. Bow and Adora hadn't been as supportive as she had expected them to be. They had different ideas on how to proceed. They disagreed with Glimmer's plans. Instead of supporting her, they joined the ranks of everybody else wanting and needing shit from her. They joined the ranks of shit she had to keep track of on her to-do lists, which contained an innumerable amount of shit items already.

Glimmer had trusted her friends to support her through all this queen and war business. Disagreeing with her felt not supportive at all. She knew they were trying their best and trying to do what they thought was right, but she couldn't help but feel the cold sting of betrayal.

Despite being surrounded by people every minute of her day, Glimmer felt alone. How on Etheria did her mom deal with all this on her own for years? Glimmer didn't let the thought linger on. She didn't have the capacity to deal with Angella being gone right now. Not again. Instead, she went over the next day's schedule while staring at the ceiling, until a knock on the door made her shoot up and stare at it like a deer hearing hunters approach.

"Glimmer, are you awake?" Bow called out from beyond the thick wooden door.

Glimmer tensed into a frozen state. She didn't want to see him right now. She didn't want to see anybody right now. Nor to be seen. She wanted to be alone. Alone, where she didn't have to put up an act of the queen being on top of her game and having everything under control. Her heart was racing. She hadn't turned off the lights. Would Bow figure her out? Could she get away with telling him tomorrow that she had fallen asleep with the lights on?

"I just... I just wanted to wish you a good night. But I guess you're asleep, and I'm just talking to a door, so I'm gonna go now. Good night, Glimmer."

Glimmer heard footsteps receding on the outside. Her shoulders sagged with relief, her fists unclenched their tension. Yet her heart was still relentlessly pounding. She could feel her pulse in her neck and through her ears. Relief turned into anger. Anger into rage. Her heart beat faster and faster.

Why the fuck can't they just leave me alone for a fucking minute for fuck's sake, she screamed internally. She was about to burst. But she couldn't do it here, in her room. She had to keep up appearances. And nobody could know. So she teleported herself into the Whispering Woods.

The first place that came to mind was her and Bow's old secret place, a small clearing not deep inside. They used to meet up at night there, back when they were kids and they sneaked out from home. Bow had just been knocking on her door, so she was certain to be alone there.

She screamed curses. Hit trees. Stomped her feet. Yelled until her voice was hoarse. *Why the fuck did everyone decide to be a problem today. Why the fuck didn't anything she tried work. At all. Why the fuck couldn't she do anything fucking right. Why the fuck aren't her friends there for her when she needed them. Why the fuck did her mom have to up and die and leave her with all of this fucking bullshit to deal with. On her own. Why the fuck do these fucking shitheads have to wage war all the fucking time. Aren't they getting that they can't win? That the Rebellion will never cease to fight? Why the fuck are they prolonging this unnecessarily?*

She powered herself out completely with a long scream of pure frustration. Exhausted, she teleported herself directly into her bed and curled up around a pillow, falling asleep nearly instantly. Without turning off the lights.

Glimmer locked the door behind her, sealing herself away for the night. Finally, she got a moment to herself. She went over to the bathroom, looking at her pale self in the mirror and the inviting toilet bowl. She decided against it and teleported to her secret place in the forest instead, where she threw up immediately. She hadn't eaten much that evening, so there wasn't much to throw up aside from her stomach

juices. It stung her throat and tongue.

Acidic stench replaced the fresh forest air. Her prolonged dry heaving annoyed her. The retching shot painful convulsions through her stomach muscles, but she didn't mind them very much. Couldn't she just throw up quickly and be done with it? Why must her body be so difficult at times? Still, she was a bit impressed with herself. She had managed to keep it all in for the entire day.

Seventy-two wounded. Fifty-two dead. The Horde had launched a new offensive. Which cost the Rebellion seventy-two wounded. Fifty-two dead. Fifty-two mothers and fathers and parents not returning home. All in just one morning. Fifty-two sons and daughters and children. Fifty-two brothers and sisters and siblings. Fifty-two not seeing another day. Fifty-two not singing songs around campfires. Fifty-two not seeing their children grow up. Fifty-two not reading the book they always wanted to. Fifty-two not planting seedlings in their garden come next spring. Fifty-two not seeing next spring. Fifty fucking two. And the number will keep rising. And that's without counting for the dead soldiers on the Horde's side. They too are people, like Adora. Glimmer threw up nothing again.

They told her about the unexpected attack in an urgent morning meeting. By late afternoon, the aftermath was known. All the while they kept rushing her from meeting to meeting. About useless jabber, as if there weren't people dying at the front that very moment. She had had no time to panic or deal with it. Instead, Glimmer decided on a strategy some general proposed. Reinforce flanks, and send reserve troops to the front. As soon as the front was back under control, they'd send out more medics and roll out a systematic plan to find and evacuate whatever civilian hadn't made it out of there yet. Glimmer was sure the generals and other high-ranking military officers were fucking psychopaths or sociopaths or whatever. Fifty-two dead didn't seem to make a single dent in their mental state. No way normal people just get on with business as usual after hearing that fifty-two of their own died that morning. Fifty-two never cooking dinner again. Fifty-two never cooling off in the lakes and rivers during a summer heat. Fifty fucking two.

Glimmer had been numb and on auto-pilot the entire day. It made staying in control and keeping up appearances manageable, and she felt it was probably best to re-

main that way now as well. She teleported herself back into her room and brushed her teeth, hoping to get the taste of puke out of her mouth. It helped a little, but the sore throat and stomach muscles remained. She walked up to her suspended bed without turning off the lights. Leaving the lights on helped her get up in the morning, before first light. It didn't help with the sleep though, but nowadays she never got a good night of sleep anyway.

That night was no different. Glimmer was woken from a dreamless sleep by her heart pounding as if she had sprinted up the stairs of Brightmoon's tallest tower, gasping for air. She had sweat through her pillows and sheets as if she had been sprinting long distances. To top it off, she felt like throwing up again. But that wasn't new. Glimmer was used to waking up in this manner by now, with feelings of drowning and failing and falling and being hunted by unseen pursuers, faceless problems that needed solutions this very instant, mocking her through their very existence. The urge to throw up as soon as she regained consciousness came along with all that garbage like a bonus a merchant throws in an attempt to sweeten a deal. She had woken up this way for the past few weeks, but despite being used to it, it annoyed her.

The clock on her wall told her that she couldn't have slept for more than three hours. She was exhausted but wide awake, her heart still racing. There would be no more sleep for her that night, she figured. The sweat-drenched bedding wasn't inviting either. So she dragged herself over to her desk to read over remaining reports, where she eventually nodded off, only to be awoken by the guards knocking on her door moments later, waiting to escort her to her first meeting of the day.

Glimmer locked the door behind her, sealing herself away for the night. Finally, she got a moment to herself. She barely noticed her hand shaking while trying to lock the door through the blurry tears in her eyes, which had begun welling up as soon as she had closed the door. She wiped them away as she teleported to her secret hideout in the woods, where she fell over on her arms and knees, on all fours, and tried to throw up. Nothing came out though. She was just heaving and convulsing

uselessly in the dirt.

One hundred and fifty-five. One hundred and fifty-five dead.

Before, soldiers had died defending. Their homes, their friends, their families. They were being attacked by the Horde. But this time, Glimmer had ordered a counteroffensive. The generals had convinced her that it was a good idea. “A worthwhile strategy” they called it. Hollow words, when faced with the consequence of her decision. One hundred and fifty-five. One hundred and fifty-five dead. Following an order she had given. She had ordered one hundred and fifty-five to go fight and die. And they fought and died. They were gone. Because of her. All for a strategy. That might not even pay off later. No strategy is guaranteed to work. But the dead are guaranteed to stay dead.

She tried to throw up again. In the past, it had made her feel better, but that night, her body refused her the catharsis she sought. Silent tears dropped on the ground between her hands. She wasn’t even granted that rotten excuse for relief.

She slammed her fist into the ground. The pain in her knuckles quickly subsided in the numbness that permeated her. All she managed was to let out a few sobs.

“Glimmer?”

Bow, behind her, called out to her as softly as he could, but his voice cracked through the cool night air like a whip. All strength left her, leaving her frozen, while Bow stepped into the faint moonlight from the cover of a tree.

“I didn’t want to startle you. I wanted to talk to you this week, but you keep being overbooked during the day, and I never seem to catch you in your room once your meetings are over.”

His gentle concerned voice sent panic through Glimmer’s bones. Everything inside her was screaming at her to run for her life. But she couldn’t move. She couldn’t even shiver. He slowly approached her.

“I heard you teleport away from your room a couple of times late at night. So I tried my luck with our old hiding spot. And what do you know, here you a-”

Bow stopped dead in his tracks as he noticed the state Glimmer was in. He slowly knelt beside her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I want to ask you if you're okay, but you clearly aren't. Do you want to talk? Can I help somehow?"

Glimmer, barely having regained basic functioning from a mind filled with screaming thoughts, leaned back and sat on her feet, her gaze fixed on the ground.

"Glimmer, please. I'm really worried about you."

She turned and faced him.

The forest's trees and branches were catching the faint moonlight with their nets of shadows, allowing only a few rays of the pale light to reach into their depth. The woods were adamant to keep their secrets under a veil of darkness. The shadows danced across the ground to the tune of the cool breeze sweeping past branches, never revealing all they concealed. But they permitted Bow to see enough for the sight of Glimmer to carve itself deep into his heart, as gentle as a red hot branding iron marking cow's hides.

Her hair had fallen and was messy. Any trace of her characteristic sparkle had left her. Big silent tears were rolling down her pale, sunken face. Bow had noticed that she had lost some weight over the past few weeks, but he had never seen her cheekbones protrude as pronounced as this before.

And the look she was giving him. By the Old Ones, the look. There was nothing but despair and pain and helplessness to be found in the flickers of her eyes that the dancing shadows let him witness. No hope. No joy. No determination. Just defeat and misery and pain and anguish.

"Glimmer..."

The shock written all over Bow's face dispersed any remaining shred of self-control Glimmer imagined herself to have. She threw herself at his chest and clasped onto his back for dear life.

And finally, she cried.

And cried.

And wailed.

And howled.

With everything she had.

Bow held her tightly and let her cry her soul out. In the years to come, when thinking back on this moment, he could swear that the entire forest remained dead silent that night as if it understood the sorrow and grief of the queen echoing between the trees. He could also swear that he had never heard a sound so heartbreaking as the queen's wails in his arms, neither before nor since.

He ached to reassure her, to console her, but he couldn't find the words. He couldn't find any words. He couldn't tell her it was going to be okay. It was not going to be okay. It was war.

"We're gonna make it through this," is all he could come up with.

Glimmer let out another long howl of agony, sobbing, shaking, further dissolving into the beaten and broken puddle of misery that she was.

Bow couldn't tell how much time had passed when Glimmer finally relaxed her grasp on him, muttering apologies with a broken voice.

"You don't need to apologise for this, Glimmer. Ever."

She squeezed her hug tighter in appreciation.

"We should probably get you to bed soon," Bow suggested. Glimmer nodded into his chest.

"Can you walk?"

She shook her head.

"Alright. I'll carry you then."

Glimmer nodded again, and Bow picked her up gently, making his way towards

the palace.

Glimmer was woken up by the guards knocking on the door, waiting to escort her to the day's first meeting. She was surprised to wake up with daylight shining through her windows. That hadn't happened in what felt like ages. She was even more surprised to wake up cuddled up to Bow. Glimmer smiled. She couldn't resist diving back into his warm embrace for a fleeting moment before getting up and getting ready for the day, as much as she wanted to stay in bed with him.

We're gonna make it through this, she knew. Nothing else was an option. There were no alternatives. So she just as well might not let her mind wander along what-ifs.

Stargazing

Cold. Wet. Sweat? Heart pumping. Dry throat. Jaw wide open. So wide it hurts. Fast breathing. No sound escapes her throat. Unknown place. Heaving. Cramping. Claspings. Muscles on overdrive. Fractions of thoughts overlapping, racing, breaking against her skull.

This is a familiar sensation. She's been here before. A single clear thought emerges, cutting through the din like a bell's ring in a storm.

Breathe.

Catra tries to inhale deeply. It's forced. It's difficult. It's staggered. She manages. Something soft on her legs. Blanket? Yeah, just the blanket.

Breathe.

The second breath is easier to draw. The third even more so. She unclasps her hands from the sheets.

Breathe.

Catra feels herself calming down. The heartbeat pulsating through her ears quiets down into an echo.

As her breath steadies, she feels her fingers aching. She had clasped at the sheets too violently. Her hands are now relaxed, and she moves them away. A quick rub relieves the tension while she takes a look around.

She recognizes the room she's in. The same familiar empty walls, the same familiar metallic ceiling. She wonders why she didn't see it earlier. It's the same place she spent the last couple of days in - the room on the First One's ship Adora came to

get her with.

The room is dark, as always. It doesn't have any windows, and even if it had any, there isn't anything around that would illuminate it in the depths of space they were travelling through. The only light source is a few small blinking lights strewn along the walls. They cut through the darkness, pulsating their red and blue indications in regular intervals, silently whispering their secrets into the dark. The lights tell their tales in a language meant for mechanics and technicians. A language she doesn't speak.

Adora isn't there, Catra notices. Usually, she'd be snoring on the left side of the bed. Or sitting against the wall to the left, pretending to "just have closed her eyes to think".

Usually, whatever that's supposed to be, Catra catches herself thinking.

It's only been a handful of days. That's not enough for "usually" to be a thing. And yet the sight and smell of Adora lying asleep next to her feels so familiar as if they hadn't spent a single day apart in their entire lives. Each time she wakes up and sees Adora asleep next to her, her arms and legs spread all over like the graceless mess she's always been, she *knows* that she isn't dreaming anymore. That the nightmares were over. That the nightmares were just... nightmares.

Which doesn't make any sense. If anything, the part where Adora rescues her from the clutches of Prime should be the dream. Not the horrid tortures she has endured. Not the horrid tortures she keeps enduring in her nightmares. Not the unyielding hands pushing her into the green liquid to repeatedly drown her every other night. No, still being tortured makes way more sense to be the real thing. Adora snoring next to her should be the dream. Laying next to her and watching her sleep should be the dream.

The idea that all of this is some fucked up mind game of Prime's has entered her thoughts several times. But then she sees Adora next to her, either snoring as if she doesn't have a single care in the world or thrashing around as if fighting some battles in her dreams. Like a puppy would after an exciting day in the park. A big, blonde, dorky puppy. Whenever she sees this, somewhere deep inside, Catra

knows that this is the real thing.

Catra feels drops of cold sweat running down her back. Right now, she's glad Adora isn't around. She doesn't want to be seen. Not like this, weak, out of control, vulnerable. She hates it when she gets like this. Whatever "this" is. She hates that she needs more than a single moment to collect herself. So Catra is relieved she's able to get a grip by herself without anybody witnessing her needing to get a grip.

And yet, somehow, she is also disappointed. If Adora had seen her like this, she'd try and talk to her about it. Then Catra wouldn't have to bring it up herself. That makes it easier to talk about it. She sure *didn't* want to talk about it, but somehow she also *did*, and something told her that she *should*. Or maybe wanted to? Which was silly. Very silly. There's no use in talking about these kinds of things. You get a grip, you stop being a whiny little bitch, and you get on with it. You don't strike up a conversation just about a silly bad dream you had. Besides, Adora has done enough already. No need to burden her with more of your own garbage. Your own garbage is supposed to be your own.

The cold sets in quickly. She must've sweat a lot. Her fur feels heavy and damp. Damn those nightmares. Full of green shit and Horde Prime preaching his bullshit. And him reaching, and taking, and doing as he pleases. His cold sterile fingers on her shoulder, on her back, around her neck. Chantings, chantings, hundreds of tiny green eyes blinking through the darkness. Catra shudders. *The nightmares are over*, she assures herself. *It was just a dream*, she tries to comfort herself. *This time*, a tiny voice in the back of her head whispers. *This time, it was just a dream*. Catra shudders again.

The empty walls echo the sound of her breathing right back at her. They close in on her, all high and mighty. They mock her, they do as they please. The sterile dots of light chant in repeating patterns, at their own pace, paying her no heed. Why should they? They were indicator lights. Doing what they were programmed to do. And yet they push in on her like she's the nail sticking out that needs to be hammered into submission. She's not welcome here.

She can't tell whether her thoughts echo across her own skull or the blank walls. Have the walls become her head? Catra needs to get out. She needs a distraction.

Maybe even assurance that the cursed black fingers won't grab her neck the next second when she isn't watching. Fuck it, she could use being in the same room as Adora right now. Everything's fine when Adora's around. So she gets up.

The corridors outside her room are dark and silent too. *The others must be sleeping*, Catra figures, hearing no noises nor voices. She takes extra quiet steps, following the tiny guiding lights on the floors. Catra is always light-footed and rarely makes any noise when walking, but she puts in extra effort now. Everybody on this ship deserves at least that much, having rescued her from the clutches of Prime at their own peril and all that. But more importantly, she doesn't really want to see any of them now. Nor to be seen by any of them.

Passing the empty restroom, she concludes that the only other place Adora would be is the main deck. Catra finds her there, sitting on the floor and staring outside. Adora's seemingly lost in thought, surrounded by a choir of blinking indicator lights and the computer screens around the windows. Catra doesn't want to startle her, so Catra whispers, "Adora?", hoping it is loud enough for her to notice.

It is. Adora turns her head.

"Oh, hey, Catra. I couldn't sleep, so I came here to look at the stars."

"Oh, okay," Catra whispers, rubbing her elbow.

Adora's eyes narrow as she gives Catra an inspecting look. Catra stands still by the entrance, her head lowered, her tail motionless on the ground. No snark, no quips, no witty remarks come from her.

"Are you... okay?" Adora asks hesitantly.

A "no" instantly shoots up inside Catra, but it immediately gets stuck in her throat. She notices herself tense up. Adora's piercing blue eyes shine across the room like searchlights, directed straight at her. They see through her as if her skin is made of glass. *Adora only asked to be nice*, Catra is certain. *She knows already*. Despite her clothes, Catra feels naked.

"Yeah," she lies.

The two women stare at each other, frozen in place.

Get a grip, Catra reminds herself and lets go of her elbow.

“Is stargazing a princesses-only kind of thing? Or can a simple girl join in?”

“Sure,” Adora replies and turns her glance back towards the starry horizon. She seems mesmerised by the starry sight. But Catra recognises the faint wrinkle on Adora’s forehead, betraying the worry she’s trying to hide.

Catra tiptoes over to Adora’s right and sits down next to her, careful to leave what she feels is an appropriate distance between them. Fighting the urge to cling onto her, Catra hugs her own knees. The metallic floor below her is cold. Sometimes Catra thinks she can feel it vibrate as the engines propel them through the voids of space. That night, the floor underneath her feels steady.

Adora keeps looking at the innumerable stars. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this,” she says with awe.

Catra inspects her expression, but it remains unchanged, firmly directed towards the glistening stars outside.

“What are you talking about?” Catra asks.

“All these stars. It’s *incredible*.”

Catra takes a good look herself.

“I guess it’s pretty, yeah,” she says, unimpressed. Despite her genuine try, all Catra sees is a bunch of black darkness and a lot of shiny points. Some are blinking, others aren’t. Not much different from the indicator lights, or the guiding lights through the corridors. Except for the colours - the stars don’t blink in blues, reds, or greens. Fucking *greens*. Perhaps she just can’t focus enough with all the annoying thoughts in her head popping up all the time uninvited?

Maybe I’ll figure it out later.

Or maybe Adora’s just weird.

Or maybe I'm just weird.

Or broken, a tiny voice whispers in the back of her head.

The room is filled with the ship's low humming, which does nothing to alleviate Catra's agonising over how to break the silence between them.

"Bow says we're travelling at incredible speed," Adora finally continues to Catra's relief. "He says that at this speed, we could fly a circle around Etheria in a couple of seconds. And that we could fly from Salineas to Brightmoon faster than Glimmer could teleport us."

"I bet Sparkles didn't like that fact."

"We've been going through space at this speed for *days*, Catra. And yet we're still nowhere near home! I've been looking out the window for hours. *Hours*, Catra! But the stars remain where they were. We're not getting anywhere near close to them."

Home. That single word leaves a cold sting between Catra's lungs.

Adora uses that word so carefree.

"Entrapta says that stars are these huge spheres of hot gas. Like, *really* huge. Hundreds and thousands of times larger than entire Etheria."

"How'd she figure that?"

"She found some data on it on Darla's storage systems."

"But they all look so tiny."

"I know, right?" Adora beams.

Adora has this irritating glimmer in her eye again that she gets when she's looking at something she thinks is wonderful. Back in the day, Catra would've rolled her eyes at it. At this moment, however, Catra's stomach drops at the sight of it. She can't believe it's still there. After all this time, it still remains a part of her? After all this, some parts of the Adora she knew as a kid are still there, alive and well?

Maybe I didn't manage to destroy just about everything.

Please let it be so.

Memories of days long gone come flooding in. The same shiny look five-year-old Adora gives her from below, on the ground, after Catra shows her how to climb that tree. Adora seeing a waterfall for the first time. Adora tasting wild berries Catra finds in the Whispering Woods. Adora -

Catra turns her head back towards the stars, hoping Adora doesn't notice the sting in her eye. She really doesn't want to have to explain tears right now. She probably wouldn't even know how to. Is that a happy tear? She hadn't expected to see Adora like this, nor that it would hit her this deep. Or is it born from grief? Memories of the distant past weigh heavy on her these days. Especially memories of those rare carefree moments from their childhood - they feel like promises life has made and didn't keep. Probably never even intended to keep. Promises she was robbed of.

You robbed yourself of, a tiny voice in her head says.

"But apparently they're so insanely huge," Adora continues. "And hot. And even more insanely far away."

"Huh," is all Catra can add. She gives it another honest try. She looks and looks at the stars, but she just can't see anything of the hugeness Adora is talking about. It's just blackness and a ton of small shiny points to her.

"And yet there they are. Just... sitting there. Just doing their own thing. Not a single worry in their lives. They've been there all along. They haven't even noticed an entire planet being locked away in a different dimension. All they do is just exist and shine. That's all they do, all day long. Just being stars, and just shining away. Like nothing else matters, or has mattered, or will matter."

"So they never change?" Catra frowns.

"That's what it looks like."

"Then why do you keep staring at them? Haven't you seen what's to be seen?"

"I don't know. I can't look away. They seem so... grand. So... beyond me, beyond it all. And that makes me feel small. In a good way! Nothing I do, nothing we do, matters to them. They're just out there. Millions of miles away, shining on. If we died tomorrow, they'd keep shining. If we lived for another hundred years, they'd keep shining. They don't care! We don't matter to them. They're just... being them. And somehow being this little small nothing in the face of all these infinite huge stars makes me feel... grand again? Does that make any sense?"

"Not really, no."

"It's like they're... at peace. Beyond it all. Gigantic and calm. Whatever happens, however things turn out, they're at peace with it. They don't bother, and it doesn't bother them. And that gives me peace of mind as well, somehow. Like I'm part of it all? A tiny part in a huge huge world? All the things I'm scared of and worry about, whatever happens, however it ends - these stars are gonna keep doing their thing. Just... doing their thing. It makes me feel like everything's gonna be okay somehow, however it turns out, you know?"

Catra doesn't know. But something else concerns her more.

"You're scared?"

Adora looks at her fearlessly with a courageous smirk, but Catra can see the exhaustion behind her eyes.

"Yes, Catra, I'm scared. All the time," she whispers. "All the time. Sometimes I'm so scared I can't think straight. Like when Prime took you and Glimmer. Or when he presented you to me, chipped and obeying his commands, speaking through you, willing to make you jump off the ledge, to hurt you." Her voice cracks. "I thought I was gonna lose my mind back there, Catra."

Catra doesn't move a muscle. Her throat is dry. She's helpless to do anything but stare at Adora, as useless as the faint deep humming of the engines or the occasional beeps coming from the computers that fill the silence.

Adora clears her throat and sighs. "We keep losing things we hold dear. We keep losing people, friends, family, our homes, our livelihoods. Every time I have to

make a decision I fear I made the wrong one.” Her voice is low and tired. Every word she says sounds like it takes tremendous effort.

Catra sinks further into her knees. The idea of a scared Adora weighs heavy on her. How much did she contribute to that, Catra wonders? But Adora gives her the faint smile of someone who has accepted a burden as their own and turns back towards the starry horizon like it’s nothing.

“Do you sometimes wish things were different?” Catra mumbles.

Adora looks at her again, surprised. “Yes, Catra. I do. All the time. Don’t you?”

“Yeah. I do too.”

Adora gives her a patient, expecting look, but Catra’s lips remain shut.

“The truth is, Catra, I’m tired,” Adora continues with another sigh. “I’m tired of fighting. And of battle. And of war. Usually, I don’t get to be tired. There’s too much to be done to get to feel tired. But here, on this ship, with nothing else to do all day, it catches up with me. I’m just so tired of it all. Even just the thought of it. And yet it waits for me as soon as we arrive.”

“I get that. I’m tired too.”

“I can imagine.”

Adora lays down and crosses her hands on her belly, staring at the ceiling. Catra does the same, but she also uses the opportunity to close the distance to Adora, careful not to actually touch her.

The ceiling was full of blinking indicator lights too, sparkling in red, green, and blue in their perfectly regular patterns. They are busy, working. Blindly fulfilling their purpose, talking in unspoken languages.

“Catra?”

“Hm?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Do you ever think about the future?”

Catra thinks for a moment.

“Not really, no. I’m usually too busy with getting by.”

As Adora keeps watching the ceiling, Catra senses that she’s waiting to be asked the same question in return. So she gives it a try.

“Do you?”

“Recently, I have, yeah.”

“So, what were you thinking about?”

“I don’t know. It was nothing... specific. There is so much to think about. So much to take care of and to be done. There’s all the rebuilding we need to do. And reorganising. I gotta make sure everybody’s safe. And accounted for. And that there is enough food available for everyone. And that it gets distributed efficiently enough. And that there is enough shelter. And medicine. And healers.”

Catra shrinks again. This time, she knows exactly how much she has contributed towards Adora’s concerns. She hopes Adora won’t bring it up right now. Or ever, for that matter.

“But after that,” Adora continues, “after that... I have no idea. There is so much we could do. So much to choose from. So much! Rest? Travel? Explore? Visit other planets? Like the one the Star Siblings came from? See other stars? Honestly, I wouldn’t know how or what to pick!”

Catra thinks about it, perhaps even for the first time in this way. A life after war? After military and battle? After the Horde? There has never been an ‘after the Horde’ in her past plans. A life after violence? Maybe even... Safe? That... that actually sounds nice. It’s a really nice thought to have. It warms her like the campfires in the Whispering Woods used to during survival trainings.

“I don’t think I’ve ever thought about an ‘after’ before,” replies Catra. “At least not

in a good way.”

“Wanna give it a try?”

“Hm, I don’t think so,” Catra replies after considering it for a second. The urge to keep her actual wishes and dreams concealed remains insurmountable. What remains unsaid can’t be taken from you. Or used against you.

“Come on, it’ll be fun! What do you wanna do? Where do you wanna go?” Adora turns towards her, radiating with giddy excitement.

Catra gives in, remembering how fuzzy the previous train of thought of the future has made her feel. She lets her mind wander. No more fighting. No battling. No strategy meetings. No conquering. No violence. She feels lighter once more. Like a heavy rock she didn’t know she carried has just been lifted off her back. Freedom. Warm summers. Tranquillity. Birds chirping. A place on her own, maybe? No, *definitely*. No more sharing bunk beds with twenty other soldiers in a room. Ever. And no more sharing her shower and toilet with others. *Privacy*.

What else? Enjoying morning coffee and breakfast without hiding from anybody who’s bellowing orders? Without bellowing orders herself? The thought makes her feel even lighter. Heck, why not skip breakfast altogether and sleep in until noon!

What would she even do all day? Go for walks? Chat with the neighbours? Plant stuff in her garden? Hang on, a garden? Where did that come from? But why not, a garden sounds nice and peaceful and joyous. Watching things grow instead of being destroyed is a mesmerisingly attractive prospect. A Catra growing and raising plants, instead of a Catra burning down forests? What an idea!

Maybe she’d go for a stroll through town, saying ‘hi’ and ‘bye’ to everyone she knows with a little smile and wave? Maybe not that, she doesn’t really know anyone outside of the Horde yet.

But they know me, the tiny voice in the back of her head says, and her heart sinks.

Yes, they know her. She has been the face and the cause of too much destruction

and damage. There's no way she is going to be forgiven and forgotten. There's no way Etherians would tolerate her presence. And even if they didn't just lock her up for eternity somewhere, there's no way she would encounter smiley happy faces on the streets. They would look at her with fear and hate. Maybe even disgust. In fact, *probably* even disgust. They would have the same expressions carved on their faces as the cadets in the Horde. Strolling through town, waving and smiling? Not an option. She had made her bed, now she must lie in it.

And you'd deserve it, the tiny voice says. You've earned it.

"Somewhere far away, I guess," Catra finally answers truthfully. "Far away from swords and boots and tanks." *Somewhere where nobody would know me nor what I did* - she keeps that last thought to herself.

"That sounds nice. I think I'd like that too."

I don't think I can take you there with me, Adora. You don't deserve more of the mess I made.

"Although Brightmoon would be nice as well. I would get to see Bow and Glimmer every day, and the other princesses too when they came to visit. But exploring Etheria and other places sounds like a lot of fun too! There is so much we could go and see and do together!"

Catra wants to tell Adora that she hopes her wishes come true and that they have tons of fun on their adventures, but Adora doesn't give her a chance to do so.

"All I know," Adora whispers, "is that I can't stand the thought of a future without you in it. Whatever I do, wherever I am after this war is over, I want you there with me." She makes that last sentence sound like something between a statement and a plea as if she hasn't decided what it was herself.

To Catra, this sounds surreal. Did she just hear that right? Her chest tightens and her shoulders tense up, but her tail gives her away as it flicks outwards, grazing Adora's thigh. Oh why, oh why didn't she place it on the other side when she had laid down? Away from Adora? Frightened about what to expect, Catra slowly turns her head left and is met with Adora's warm gaze and soft smile.

This scares her even more.

Adora slowly extends her right arm towards Catra, her palm open, and rests it close to Catra's hand, all the while looking straight into her widening eyes. The invitation is too sweet for pride and reservation to have a chance to kick in; Catra has come to the main deck looking for Adora, starving for her presence, but now Adora's offering so much more than she's hoped to find that night. Before she realises what exactly she's doing, Catra places her hand into Adora's, who immediately clasps it firmly.

"It's been too long, Catra. I don't want us to be apart again," she whispers. "Ever. I was so scared I would lose you for real back there, Catra. So fucking scared." Adora's voice cracks as starlight shimmers in her watery eyes.

Catra has many thoughts. The problem is that none of these thoughts is a complete one. They race and overlap, fight each other for dominance, shouting over each other, resulting in no more than noise and flickers of half-constructed images.

She sees Adora's chest rise and fall as she breathes. How many breaths were that now since she finished speaking? Four? Five? Too many! Fuck! Fuck! Anything is better than silence! Anything!

"Since when did you start cursing?" she clumsily tries, making sure not to let go of Adora's hand. She doesn't have the slightest intention to do so, but she wants to make sure nonetheless. *Extra sure*. She can't have her slip away.

Again, a tiny voice in the back of her head adds.

Adora smiles faintly. "I guess I picked it up from Glimmer."

Crisis averted.

"I see," Catra says. A few wordless seconds later, Catra decides to double down on her 'words are better than no words' strategy.

"As long as you don't start sparkling someday."

Adora chuckles, and Catra feels like the funniest comedian in the entire universe.

“She’s a good one,” Catra adds earnestly.

“You mean Glimmer?”

“Yeah, Sparkles. She seems like a good person. And a good friend.”

“Yes, she is. After all that’s been said and done, she’s a great friend. And a great person.”

“I think she loves you guys a whole ton. Back on Prime’s ship, she wouldn’t shut up about you.”

“I think so too. I’m sure both Bow and I love her too.”

“Yeah,” Catra says absent-mindedly. *Back on Prime’s ship.* The words echo through her skull.

A dark pit opens in her stomach and spreads towards her head like black flames devouring everything in their path. It crawls towards her arms and toes.

Back on Prime’s ship. These words were enough to project the long white corridors before her eyes. A choir of clones’ steady footsteps resound behind her. And in front of her. And from her sides. A firm hand clutches her shoulder. The pool of burning green liquid marches towards her.

They’re not here. You’re lying on the floor. You’re just imagining things.

Her breathing becomes faster. She shifts her eyes away from the mechanic blinking lights onto the stars outside. The endless void between them extends towards her. It threatens to engulf her as she rapidly shrinks and falls. She closes her eyes. She keeps falling.

“Catra?”

You’re not falling. You’re lying on the floor.

“Catra, you’re squeezing me a little too tight there,” Adora says, wriggling her hand in Catra’s.

Her body is not listening to her. No limb obeys her command. She keeps falling

through the floor. The terrible hand on her shoulder is relentlessly pulling her further down, towards the green pool. She wants to scream but has forgotten how. She wants to run, but her legs are not there. Her breathing is fast and shallow.

“Catra? What’s wrong?”

She lets go of Adora’s hand and clutches onto the floor for dear life. A sensation on her cheek startles her, making her twitch and open her eyes wide to find herself staring into two ocean-blue eyes.

“Look at me,” Adora’s soft voice emerges from underneath those blue eyes. “I’ve got you,” Adora says, keeping her gently placed hand on Catra’s cheek. “Just keep looking at me. You’re okay. You’re fine. I’ve got you.”

Catra locks in on those eyes. Those same eyes had looked up at her from the ground when she showed her how to climb a tree. Those same eyes had looked at her in awe while tasting wild berries for the first time. Those same eyes that she had been waking up to see these past few days.

“I’ve got you. Breathe with me. In, and out, and in, and out.” Adora moves her hand up and down in an exaggerated fashion in tandem with her instructions, prompting Catra to take slow, deep breaths.

With everything going on in her head, doing what Adora wants her to seems like the right idea. At least it’s an idea. It’s the only thing resembling a clear thought she has right now. Catra tries to breathe with her, as well as she can. As soon as she remembers how to, that is.

“There you go. You’re doing great. In, and out, and in, and out,” Adora continues, growing quieter as Catra’s breath eventually steadies.

The noises and images subside. Gradually unclenching, Catra begins to feel Adora’s breath on her face and the callouses on Adora’s sword hand against her cheek.

“You back with me now?”

Catra nods silently.

“Okay. Good. You doing okay?”

Catra nods again.

“Do you need anything?”

Catra shakes her head.

“Do you wanna go back to bed?”

Catra shakes her head again.

“Alright,” Adora says calmly and lays back down next to her, looking at the ceiling.

The more Catra gathers herself, the more the exhaustion spreads in her. Every single limb of hers weighs a ton. Her heart is still pumping as if she just finished running a marathon. And finally, the humiliation sets in. Losing control like that. In front of fucking Adora. What the fuck.

She chances a glance at her. Adora has put her arms under her head and lays there with closed eyes. Catra can’t help but wonder what she’s thinking. Or actually, fear what she’s thinking. What does Adora think of her now? Does she think she’s weak? Or sick? Or broken?

Does she know? Did she figure it out? Why isn’t she saying anything?

“Are you... Are you...” Catra stammers. Her voice is hoarse. Her throat hurts.

As Adora opens an eye, curiosity and fear leave Catra to let embarrassment back in.

“I’m sorry,” Catra mumbles.

“Don’t be,” Adora replies. “Nothing to be sorry about having a panic attack.”

Is that what that was?

“What?” Adora adds, noticing Catra’s questioning look. “It’s not the first panic attack I’ve seen. It’s okay, don’t worry about it. No need to apologise for that.”

The ship’s low humming fills the room again, interrupted only by distant infre-

quent beeps from some machinery. The lights on the ceiling keep blinking as if nothing has happened at all. The same regular intervals, the same blue, red, and green lights.

The least she can do is some damage control.

“Are you...” Catra whispers as she slumps back down on the floor, “Can we not talk about this? Ever?”

“I guess,” Adora shrugs, but the wrinkle on her forehead returns with a vengeance. “I mean, I’d like to know what’s going on. I wanted to let you recover first before asking. But I never could get anything out of you unless you wanted me to anyway, so I don’t think I’m gonna push my luck now. I’m too tired for that.”

Catra opens her mouth, unsure what to say.

“But for the record: I am worried about you.”

Ugh. Great. She’s made her worry again. Enough to even say so. As if her worry-wrinkle doesn’t betray her already. Well done, Catra.

“I’m... sorry,” Catra says.

“Don’t worry about it.” Adora turns towards the stars again.

Deep dissatisfaction seizes Catra. This situation is not what she has wanted. At all. She has come here to be in the same room as Adora, but instead, she has made a fool of herself, an embarrassing display, and to top it off, she has made her worry. And Adora won’t even push her on that.

The urge to talk begins boiling Catra’s insides. Not just say things, but *talk*. She wants to tell her. She wants to vomit it out like a poison that’s been eating her for too long. *All* of it. She wants to scream her lungs out about how deathly afraid she still is. About how shaken and insecure and broken she feels. About how she’s barely keeping herself together. About how she needs help, a friend, a place to feel safe. She hates herself for not being able to say any of it. She hates herself for having the urge to talk in the first place. She hates herself for being needy and shattered.

Just shut up about it. Your garbage is your own to deal with. Leave Adora out of it. You've humiliated yourself enough for one night.

But I want to. I want her to know.

But then she'll know. She'll know what a mess you are. She'll know that you're broken. Nobody likes a broken toy.

Well, maybe she should know. Maybe she deserves to know.

She doesn't deserve to deal with more of your bullshit.

But she deserves to know. So she can make plans for her future without me in it.

But I want to be in it.

Then she deserves to know what she's signing up for.

You've embarrassed yourself enough for one night.

And I survived. I'll survive a little more.

"Adora...?" Catra breaks the silence.

"Yes?"

"Can we maybe... talk?" Catra asks foot-draggingly while reaching for Adora's hand again.

"Of course -"

Catra makes a quick decision. She really doesn't want Adora to see her face while it's happening, so she moves closer to her and buries her face into her shoulder, interrupting her mid-sentence.

"I'm scared too, Adora. Fucking terrified."

Catra feels Adora freeze up momentarily, but then she gently strokes Catra's palm in her hand while she wraps her other arm around her. With Catra's long hair gone, Adora can hold her back unobstructed.

"I don't want to be," Catra sobs. "I want to be gone. Somewhere far away from all this. Somewhere out of anybody's reach. Somewhere no one can find and catch me and lock me up. Or make me do horrible things. Or do horrible things to me. Somewhere where I'm not hated. Or hunted. Somewhere where I can sleep. Where I don't feel like being drowned from the moment I wake up. And I want to beat the shit out of him and be done with his ass, but these fucking nightmares keep haunting me and messing with my head."

"Did you have a nightmare tonight too?" Adora asks softly after Catra remains quiet for too long.

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, Catra."

"Don't be, It's not your fault."

Catra puts her right arm around Adora's waist and clings on tightly.

"Just, don't go. Don't leave me. Please," Catra whimpers.

Adora tightens her hold. "I won't. I'm not going anywhere, Catra."

"You promise?"

Adora moves her hand from Catra's lower back to her shoulder blades and places her chin on Catra's head.

"I promise."

"Even if the entire world hates me?"

"Even then. I'm not letting go of you."

"Please," Catra whimpers.

"I promise."

Catra clutches her fingers into Adora's clothes, careful enough not to hurt her. She can feel Adora's chest rising and sinking with every breath she takes. She can feel

her heartbeat against her forehead, pulsating through Adora's neck, and the strong muscular arms enveloping her being gentler and softer than they had any business to be.

They hold each other closely, enveloped by the engine's deep humming and faint starlight. The indicator lights above them sing their ever-repeating song of blinks. Only timid beeping signals arise from the computers in the room as if they're trying not to disturb the passengers.

"How do you do it, Adora?" Catra mutters. "How do you deal with all this fucking fear?"

"Well, usually I don't," Adora admits. "Usually I just keep pushing until it's over and done. Bow calls it the 'head-through-the-wall approach'. But these days, I've been stargazing."

"Huh?"

"I'm serious. Look." Adora turns on her back and points to the window, while making sure to keep holding onto Catra's hand.

"I've been watching the stars. Just look at them. They're all at peace, they're all unconcerned with whatever we've got going on. Whatever happens, they'll shine on. Whatever happens, it'll be ok. They'll be there. They'll be calm. They'll be shining."

Catra looks. And she sees what looked like the same bunch of stars not giving a shit about any of them that had been there since she entered the room.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, seriously," Adora replies.

Catra looks at the stars again, and then back at Adora with narrowing eyes.

"Is this a prank? Are you pranking me right now?"

"No! I mean it!"

"Well, I don't see it."

"Just give it a minute. Dive into the experience."

Catra snorts. " 'dive into the experience'? "

"What's funny about that?"

"You're such a dork."

"Maybe I am. Sue me."

"Where did you get that from? Did you go snorkelling in Salineas or something?"

"It's just an expression, Catra."

"Yeah, no shit. The lamest expression I've heard in years."

"Oh, you can hear with those things? I thought those big ears were just for decoration. And for when we need an extra pair of signalling flags."

"Those big ears are going to give your face a good slap if you keep making fun of them." Catra wiggles them, failing to make them appear threatening, even as a joke.

"And signal a tank battalion to switch manoeuvres in the process?"

"You're just jealous your ears aren't magnificent and fluffy."

"They *are* fluffy," Adora agrees, brushing along Catra's ear.

"Hey, no touching!" Catra grins.

"If your ears are not for touching, then why are they so soft?" Adora keeps stroking her ear.

"To trick princesses into scratching them."

"So you *do* just want them scratched?"

"No, you dork. They lure princesses like you into a false sense of security. And then I kidnap them."

“And then what?”

“And then I take you somewhere secret and far away. Where it will be just the two of us. And your punishment for making fun of my glamorous ears will be that you have to scratch them every day. Actually, three times a day, every day. Until you admit how majestic they are.”

“Oh no, how horrible. Anything but that,” Adora chuckles, pushing her arm under Catra’s head so she can reach behind it to scratch her other ear.

“I missed this, you know?” Adora sighs.

“What, being called a dork?”

“No silly. This. Just the two of us, bantering through the night.”

“Oh. Right. Good thing I asked, I was about to call you a dork every day from now on.”

“How kind of you.”

They giggle. Catra lays her head on Adora’s chest.

“I missed this too. Probably more than I’d ever admit. Don’t tell anyone I said that”, she adds, raising her head. “Actually, they wouldn’t believe you anyway.”

“You’d be surprised what they’re willing to believe.”

“Adora...”

“Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

Adora reaches over to take Catra’s hand back into hers. Catra feels Adora’s arm move and awaits her hand with her fingers spread out, ensuring they would interlock as Adora’s hand reaches hers. They lay there on the hard cold floor in a soft embrace.

Growing weary of the ceiling’s indicator lights’ rhythmical shouts through the darkness, Catra chances another glance at the stars through the windows in front of them. There they are again, a sea of still, shimmering dots quietly illuminating

the galaxy they are passing through. Unwanting. Uncaring. Unchanging. Silent, unreachable watchers of everything that has been, is, and will be.

Watchers. That's what they are.

Funny. I'm watching the watchers. Catra smirks.

They see me, and I see them. We watch each other.

A sense of belonging spreads through Catra. She, Adora, the stars - they're all the same right now: Watchers. Mere witnesses of time's passing as they drift through the void of space. All of them - in their own way - are nothing but a tiny part of the endless vastness, watching quietly from afar.

What a strange sensation it is to feel related to the pretty little lights on the other side of the window! It tingles in her lower back, and Catra feels big, grand even. Like one of the pretty lights out there. Like part of it all.

As time passes, Catra notices that the stars remain motionless, and strangely, that comforts her. Nothing she does, nothing anybody does, will make them move. Nothing. Not even what has been done already. They don't care about who she has been, or what she has done. To them, the past doesn't matter. And right now, the past doesn't matter to Catra either. Right now, there is only right now. And right now, she's stargazing with Adora. Catra grins.

Nothing she does, nothing anybody does, will make the stars move, she realises anew. The stars do their own thing. Forever. They want nothing from her, nothing with her. They are just what they are, and they let be, whatever *be* is.

That's a new idea - being let *be*. An entirely unfamiliar sensation. Liberating and energising - the mere thought of it tempts her to leap into action and move entire mountains. But somehow, it's also terrifying. The same sort of terrifying as having to find your way through the woods without a compass and map. But in an exciting way. She couldn't help but *be* excited.

If she could, *what* would she be?

Not if. When.

'Be' could be this, Catra imagines.

'Be' could be spending an eternity in Adora's arms. Stargazing together. Feeling safe and wanted.

The thought warms Catra from head to toe. It makes her tail tingle.

'Be' could be that garden.

'Be' could be our garden.

A long-forgotten joy washes over her, rife with giddiness and impatience, shimmering just like the stars outside.

Perhaps stargazing has something to it after all, she thinks and smirks.

As the ship continues its journey through the endless sea of stars, Catra lets Adora's heartbeat and the ship's humming lull her into daydreams of what one day would come to be.

Steven Universe

So Long, Oh Rose Of Mine, So Long

The faint wail of the warp pad activating echoed lonesomely through the temple chambers. It disappeared into the suffocating veil of silence as softly and swiftly as it had arrived. *Two thirty-seven on the dot*, Garnet confirmed with a glance at the little alarm clock in her room. She knew the warp pad was Pearl clandestinely stealing away somewhere in the dead of the night. Pearl did that sometimes, in irregular intervals, but it was always two thirty-seven on the dot. Precisely like clockwork. Precisely like Pearl.

Garnet hadn't asked Pearl where she was going, or what she was doing. Nor had she talked to her about it. She also hadn't made use of Sapphire's sight to look. Pearl, like everybody else, deserved privacy and alone time when she needed it. Especially so in times of pain and grief. Garnet appreciated any time she could spend on her own to navigate through the aching emptiness Rose's passing had left in her heart.

Besides, the ever-diligent Pearl only ever snuck away like that when there was no mission due. She would always return before sunrise, never showing signs of having gone in the first place, leaving no trace of what she had been up to, never neglecting her duties. So, as far as Garnet was concerned, there were no issues.

Weeks later, the faint glimmer of the warp pad activating shone across the beach house windows in the dead of night once more. Garnet knew it meant it was two thirty-seven again. She sat on the stairs by the front entrance, watching the ocean waves caress the beach sands with its foamy fingers and deep gentle swooshes. A cold wind pushed from the ocean, carrying heavy clouds on the horizon; Summer was ending. Soon, the chilly autumn rains would arrive. *By the looks of it, as soon as tomorrow*, Garnet thought, eyeballing the dark clouds. She chanced a look into

the future. Would Greg need help with Baby Steven?

Baby Steven remained a wondrous mystery to her. Unbelievably fragile and needy, incapable of even walking or talking. Greg had explained that was the norm for human babies, but the concept of babies remained beyond her grasp. Gems entered life ready-made, sure, and Steven was no Gem, or so Greg claimed, but even animals could walk and swim almost as soon as they came to be. This one, though, didn't. He slept and ate and he screamed and he cried and he pooped and he looked at her with those funny eyes and tried to grab her with those tiny hands. And sometimes he chuckled. That was a most adorable sound and sight. The little one had already grown at least twice in size and weight since he entered the world and had at least tripled in adorableness. And yet, the little cutie pie remained helpless. So adorable, but so fragile. Truly a wondrous mystery. So Garnet looked into what tomorrow may be.

She saw herself visiting Greg and the little one together with Amethyst. They would play with the child, exchange pleasantries with Greg, and have a nice time, at least superficially. He had taken care of all pending arrangements regarding Baby Steven. *The man is continuously growing more dependable*, Garnet found herself thinking, somewhat relieved.

Pearl wasn't there, though. Very unusual. Garnet looked through more probable futures. Pearl remained missing throughout the day in most of them.

Hmm.

Garnet stood up, dusted herself off, and headed for the warp pad. Her journey was short. Only a few moments later, she stepped off the warp pad on the other side of her trip and approached the amphitheatrical arena, where in times long gone Gems used to fight to entertain the gem public and nobility. These days, the Crystal Gems merely used it occasionally as training grounds. It was a reasonably safe and secluded place to get a little too wild for human eyes to witness without causing them distress.

Pearl, gliding through the air in precise acrobatic leaps with her eyes closed, didn't seem to notice Garnet's arrival. Garnet took a seat on the stone bench and observed

quietly.

Pearl danced like the world was watching, like the empty stone-hewn seats were bursting with an unseen audience in stunned silence, their gazes following her every move. She leapt, jumped, turned, floated, and bent into hauntingly beautiful figures. Her precise movements cut through the air, sharp as blades.

I wonder what music she's dancing to, Garnet thought.

Pearl danced on relentlessly. Her tempo and ferocity gradually took up speed, the rhythmical taps of her soles on the ground conducting the absent orchestra at a faster pace. Still-held figures and slow, deliberate motions faded into the past. Quick steps and turns became the dominant elements of this clandestine performance. Garnet felt a little guilty at observing this display meant for no eyes to witness.

Perhaps she's dancing to the absence of music.

Over time, slowly but unmistakably, Pearl's dance grew ever wilder and faster. She performed leaps, somersaults, mid-air pirouettes. As she landed on her toes, a slight tremble shook through her lean legs. Yet she danced on, flying anew through the air, circling herself twice, then three times, then four times. The tremble kept rising upwards towards her core, but she kept flipping and turning in a frenzied heat. It was when she completed a spectacular somersault that her ankle finally gave in. She lost her footing and stumbled, taking a sidestep to regain her balance. The music that never played stopped dead in its tracks. Pearl, frozen in the pose she was holding, opened her eyes.

"Urgh, this is useless," she hissed, lowering her arms from above her head and releasing the figure she had been holding stubbornly. Pearl kicked a rock next to her feet.

The pearl on her forehead began to glow. She reached for it to pull out one of her swords. Once it was in her hand, she leaned forward, her gem still glowing. A cone of light shone from it, materializing a second, translucent Pearl in front of her. With a swift motion, she cut off the rays beaming from her pearl, completing the construction process.

“Do you wish to engage in combat?” the conjured Hologram Pearl asked in a mechanic voice.

“Yes,” Pearl growled.

“Commencing duel.”

In a blink of an eye, they swung their swords at each other. Their movements mirrored their opponent’s in perfect synchronisation. Clanks of metal hitting metal in the rapid exchange of blows filled the air with a deafening din. Pearl’s usually composed demeanour turned into an irritated frown.

“Why-” *clang* “won’t-” *clang* “you” *clang* “lose-” *clang*, Pearl grunted between hits of the blade.

As her annoyance grew, little by little Pearl exchanged her trademark grace and precision for more force in each swing, the initially small imprecisions in her strikes growing into savage blows.

“You-” *clang* “little-” *clang* “useless-” *clang* “excuse-” *clang* “for-” *clang* “a-” *clang* “gem-” *clang* “why-” *clang* “don’t-” *clang* “you-” *clang* “just-” *clang* “give-” *clang* “up-” *clang* “like-” *clang* “you-” *clang* “always-” *clang* “do” *clang*.

Pearl’s footwork became sloppy too. Her incessant brutish strikes were the only reason Hologram Pearl hadn’t made her lose her balance yet.

“I-” *clang* “hate-” *clang* “you-” *clang* “I-” *clang* “hate-” *clang* “you-” *clang* “I-” *clang* “hate-” *clang* “you-” *clang* “so-” *clang* “much-” *clang*.

By now, Pearl was just battering rabidly onto Hologram Pearl. With a swift precise motion, Hologram Pearl sent her sword flying across the arena. Garnet got on her feet, on stand-by to leap into action. Hologram Pearl drew to a sweeping sideways swing. It would’ve split Pearl in half. But Pearl quickly closed the distance and safely caught Hologram Pearl’s sword arm. Clamping it down under her left elbow, Pearl thrashed into her opponent’s face with her fist.

“Why-” *smack* “are-” *smack* “you-” *smack* “so-” *smack* “dis-” *smack* “gust-” *smack* “ing-” *smack* “ly-” *smack* “weak-” *smack* “I-” *smack* “hate-” *smack* “you-” *smack* “I-” *smack*

“hate-” *smack* “you-” *smack* .

They tumbled over, Pearl remaining on top and showing no sign of relenting, still holding onto Hologram Pearl’s arm as she battered into her.

“Match-” *smack* “set.” *smack* “Challenger-” *smack* “wins.” Hologram Pearl announced robotically between hits to her face. Pearl didn’t seem to care.

“Why-” *smack* “are-” *smack* “you-” *smack* “so-” *smack* “weak-” *smack* “did-” *smack* “you-” *smack* “let-” *smack* “her-” *smack* “go-” *smack* “why-” *smack* “didn’t-” *smack* “you-” *smack* “stop-” *smack* “her-” *smack* “why-” *smack* “didn’t-” *smack* “you-” *smack* “you-” *smack* “why-” *smack* “why-” *smack* .

Pearl screamed through her throat with every blow she descended into Hologram Pearl. A dent formed in the stone floor where the real Pearl bashed into her.

Garnet saw Pearl straighten her back, take a breath, and reach far behind herself to gain momentum for a vicious strike accompanied by a visceral scream. She watched her fist descend into Hologram Pearl’s face, go through it and smash the ground underneath her to smithereens, shattering her own swinging hand and arm into countless pieces, only to poof herself a moment later. Garnet closed the distance between her and Pearl in a single leap.

Pearl straightened her back, took a breath, and reached far behind herself to gain momentum for a vicious strike as Garnet softly put her hand on her shoulder.

“Wha-, who?” Pearl stammered as she scrambled to turn and found Garnet’s expressionless face looking at her. Garnet stood there calmly with her hand on her shoulder.

“Garnet? What are- I was just-” Pearl, still sitting on top of Hologram Pearl, gestured frantically. Finally seeming to notice the extent of the damage she had caused, she let her arms drop in defeat, her shoulders drooping along with them. Sinking into herself, her lower lip began to tremble as big shiny teardrops filled her eyes.

“It’s alright, Pearl.”

Hologram Pearl poofed away. “I’m sorry. I’m just-”

Garnet knelt beside her, her hand still on Pearl's shoulder.

"You needn't apologise. We all grieve in our own ways."

These words blew a strike onto Pearl harder than any swing Hologram Pearl had thrown at her that night. She coiled back, frozen, looking frightenedly at Garnet. A first tear made its way over her cheek. Then her trembling lip twisted into a paining frown. One by one, her tears flowed freely into an unending stream.

And then, Pearl wailed. She wailed without restraint, clutching helplessly onto Garnet. With a long howl of pain, she held tightly onto her as she sobbed and shook.

"Everything I ever did was for her. But now she's gone. And I'm still here," she whined between agonizing cries.

Garnet embraced her tenderly.

"What am I supposed to do now?" Pearl continued. "What should I do?"

Garnet stroked her tousled hair. "I don't know," she said.

Pearl wailed again.

"How do you do it, Garnet? How do you go on?"

"I don't know," Garnet said somberly. "I just try and do what needs to be done. One thing at a time, one step at a time."

"I miss her so much", Pearl snivelled, shaking, with a voice thinner than paper. "Ever so often I forget she is gone. And then I want to talk to her, or show her something, or see her, and then I remember, and every time it just hurts again and again and rips the ground from underneath my feet."

"I miss her too. Every day." Garnet wiped a tear.

The two gems held onto each other. Garnet cradled Pearl softly, hoping to comfort her somewhat in this way. The slow rhythmical motion turned into a more fluid one as Garnet and Pearl's shapes dissolved into light, revealing three floating gems.

The radiant mass stretched and squeezed into a larger one, the blinding light fading to reveal a figure much bigger than its original constituents - Sardonyx.

Sardonyx still donned her formal attire - the tuxedo, the bow, the gloves - but all of her garments, if you can call them that, were pitch black. Including the star on her chest and her glasses. The vivacious spring in her step and the cheeky smile were missing as well.

“I hear some humans say ‘grief shared is grief halved’, hoho.”

Her showbiz laugh rang hollow. She sank back onto the floor, one pair of arms clasped around her head, the other around her knees. “Boy, were they wrong.”

Leaning back on her arms, she cried silent, bitter tears in quiet desperation.

Rose being gone had uprooted everyone’s life. Even if they had known in advance of her departure, they weren’t prepared for what it actually meant to see the sun rise and set and rise again with her gone. How does one even prepare for such a thing? How does one prepare for the sun to lose its warmth, the sky its color?

Sardonyx recalled how life used to be with Rose around.

Wading through swamps, forests, and jungles with Rose. Discovering Earth. Its beauty, its organic weirdness, its daily wonderfully chaotic madness.

Sitting by a fire on the beach with Rose. Singing and chatting and watching the ocean and the sun rise.

Never again.

Joking, laughing, chuckling with Rose at the kitchen table. Playing cards. Watching her get annoyed over constantly losing against Garnet, who absolutely definitely one hundred per cent didn’t use future vision to her advantage.

Drawing swords together. Following her charge into battle for freedom. Taking a blow for her so she could strike back in turn. Her hovering over them, covering them with her brilliant shield.

Never again.

Her determined demeanour as she laid out strategies for the next mission. The way everyone listened when she spoke. The way leading and commanding came to her as naturally as sunshine reflecting on the ocean waves.

That happy look she gave them when they returned home safely. The proud, quiet joy that look radiated, warmer than any fire could be.

Never again.

Seeing her eyes light up as she made some wonderful discovery of human mundane life. Like that one time she found out what ice cream was.

Never again.

The silly snort laugh she did when she understood a joke way too late, minutes after it had been told.

That one time she had fallen asleep on the beach and a seagull had begun building its nest in her hair.

Sardonyx chuckled through her tears.

That one time an elephant stole her hat with its trunk and she had to chase it for hours to get it back. Pearl swore that the elephant knew exactly what it had been doing.

Sardonyx giggled at the memory of Rose running after the cheeky elephant, yelling, upsetting several meerkats in the process.

“Oh Rose,” Sardonyx exhaled. “I wish you never changed.”

That one time Greg was making posters and she discovered that permanent markers were indeed *permanent* only after Garnet had let her draw cat whiskers on her and Pearl had gotten a long thin curly moustache. It took them weeks to scrub off the last traces of it.

Giggling, Sardonyx wiped her eyes underneath her pitch-black glasses. “Well, whadaya know,” she stood up and dusted herself off. “We had some good times with Rose, didn’t we? We did, we certainly did.”

She let out a big sigh.

“But now – the show must go on,” she said, raising her head.

“Step by step.” She wiped her eyes again, giggling yet another time at the memory of the seagull being upset with Rose destroying its hard day’s work in her hair. She exhaled and clapped her hands. “Shall we, dear? The show awaits.”

A slow groovy bass line filled the air. It may well have been just a melody playing in her head, but it felt as if it permeated the entire space around her.

“Whaddaya say, Pearl, you wanna take the lead? Show them how it’s done?” Sardonyx moved her feet with the rhythm of the bass line and struck a pose.

The bass line disappeared.

“No, no, no. This is all wrong.”

Sardonyx put two of her hands in her pockets. With a third, she snapped her fingers rhythmically and tapped her foot in sync. After about a dozen snaps, she yelled - “Hit it, Jack!”

A quick drum beat strummed a propulsive swinging groove, following along with her snipping. As the beat struck up the first repetition, Sardonyx’s foot began tapping vigorously on the ground. By the third, she struck a pose, just in time for the unseen big band’s horn section to bellow out a visceral bang into a fast, jumpy melody. The trumpets went wild, giving her all they got. And Sardonyx danced. Boy, did she dance. Fast, small steps. Rapid turns. Grand expository figures. And a hip swing that would’ve earned her the local’s recognition during Brazil’s carnival. Like the big band that wasn’t there, she too gave it all she got. Fast, free, unhinged.

As the band closed in on the end of the tune’s theme, Sardonyx produced her hammer in a blink of an eye. She struck it handle-first into the ground. It stuck there upright. She then slapped the hammer head with all four palms, and it shrunk in her hands, leaving her holding onto a microphone. She leaned into it and began to sing.

In this wild and wondrous garden
Bloomed a Rose, fair and strong
She grew her roots deep and harden'd
And her pricks inches long
As her petals danced with the wind
Her head still held up high
"List'n well love," she said and grinned
"I know my time is nigh"

-

So long, oh Rose of mine, so long
Some day this ice will thaw and spring's sun will shine
I'll be here, tending this garden, singing this song
But you shan't bloom ne'er more, oh Rose of mine

Many one tried this Rose to pick
Jealous, greedy, reaching
They all got a taste of her pricks
Each thorn a new teaching
My Rose stood proud through rain and storm
No flood, no draught shook her
And yet, the call of a new form,
a new life, then took her

-

So long, oh Rose of mine, so long
Some day this ice will thaw and spring's sun will shine
I'll be here, tending this garden, singing this song
But you shan't bloom ne'er more, oh Rose of mine

The roots my Rose laid ran deep
Through earth and dirt and stone
Upheaving the realm of her keep
On fresh soil, the sun shone
Rotten ruin washed by summer rains
And soon new blossoms bloom
Tender growths now grace earthly plains
Where once was nought but doom

-

So long, oh Rose of mine, so long
Some day this ice will thaw and spring's sun will shine
I'll be here, tending this garden, singing this song
But you shan't bloom ne'er more, oh Rose of mine

As the invisible band played the tune to completion, Sardonyx took a bow in front of an audience that wasn't there.

"Thank you, thank you. I'll be here all week. Drive safe!" she called out, sending kisses flying towards the empty seats. And with these words, she separated into a teary-faced giggling Garnet and a teary-faced giggling Pearl.

"Oh wow," Pearly chuckled. "This would've been fun if it just didn't hurt so darn much."

"I know. It sucks," Garnet replied with a soft smile, tears still wetting her cheeks.

"But it sucks a little less now," Pearl exhaled tiredly. "Thank you for that."

"Thank you, too. I think I needed that as well." Garnet got up and approached her, extending a hand. "Shall we head home?"

"Yes, let's do that," Pearl said, taking Garnet's hand. "Step by step."

They silently walked back to the warp pad, still holding onto each other's hands. With the high-pitched warping noise, the former fighting arena fell back into its usual deafening silence, broken only by the southern winds' occasional chilly howls

announcing autumn's arrival.

The Amazing Digital Circus

Come As You Are

Pomni's entire body shivered and trembled as she processed that day's adventure. Caine had tasked them with capturing the firewolves causing trouble in a rural community he made up. Much to Pomni's chagrin, firewolves were ferocious beasts which, from a distance, looked like burning wolves and, from up close, like bear-sized monstrosities with manes of fire, big sharp claws, and even bigger, sharper teeth. They had been a nuisance to farmers, or so Caine claimed, preying on their livestock and burning their crops simply by passing through the fields.

Jax ever so helpfully had put forward the proposition to solve the firewolf problem by using someone as bait. Even more to Pomni's chagrin, his way of putting forward a proposition consisted of shoving her into a basket and pulling up said basket to hang from a tree branch for the firewolves to find and leap and snarl at. In effect, that had led to Pomni staring down fiery, hungry eyes, teeth, and throats howling and growling at her for the better part of the day.

Back in the Circus, it took Pomni several hours to calm down from being twitchy to merely trembly, even though she'd been holding Ragatha's hand for reassurance. Though her gaze remained somewhere far, far away in the distance.

Ragatha thought it a good idea to look after her for a bit. She spoke to her in a soft, calm voice and gave her enough time and space to do things at her own pace. Eventually, she managed to motivate Pomni to go to her room and get some rest. Gently guiding her by her hand and chatting away with idle ramblings to keep her mind off the firewolves, she slowly got her there.

The red and blue walls of Pomni's room were not what Ragatha had hoped to find. They seemed too exciting and agitating for the current situation, as if their bright colours exerted pressure on the room itself, leaving the inhabitants with expect-

tations to be bright and joyous too; Unwaveringly so, at all times. The painfully colorful furniture and toys strewn throughout the floor and on the desk and under the bed joined in on the walls' bullying their occupants into cheerfulness. The room itself resisted gloom in an oddly oppressive manner. Ragatha wondered whether it may have been better to take Pomni someplace else, but on the other hand, a safe, familiar place may have been the safer bet after all.

"There we are," Ragatha said overly cheerfully. "Isn't this better already?"

Pomni didn't look better at all. She just stood there absentmindedly, holding her own elbows, a hunched ball of misery in a double-pointed hat.

"Ragatha?" Pomni peeped shyly.

"Hmm?"

"Do you think this is hell?"

"Hmm?"

"Are we in hell? Or purgatory? Or something like that?"

"No," Ragatha shook her head, "I don't think so."

"Those things did look an awful lot like hellhounds."

"But they weren't actual hellhounds. Just something Caine made up."

"Are we being punished for something? It feels like we're being punished for something."

"I don't think that is the case. Although I can see why you would say that. You did *not* have a great time so far."

"Does anybody? Have a great time? Is anybody enjoying this?" Pomni looked at her with big, drowsy eyes.

"I don't know for sure. Sometimes, it's not too bad. But I don't think anybody genuinely thinks of the Circus as punishment."

"But it's all just so... horrible," Pomni shuddered.

"I know it can feel like that sometimes. But you just had really bad luck with the adventures so far, I promise. It's okay. It will pass. You'll feel a lot better soon."

"But it won't pass, will it?" Pomni twitched. "It *won't* pass. There is no exit. There is no end. Each day Caine can come up with some new horrible, horrible thing that looks cute and benign at first and then shatters me or one of us. We're completely at his mercy and there is no way out." She clasped her face in terror.

"Well... Yes. But Caine isn't bad or evil. He means well, you know that. He just gets it a bit wrong sometimes. Okay, really *really* wrong sometimes. But you know he means well, don't you?"

"I'm not sure I do. Sometimes, that's hard to believe," Pomni drooped her shoulders.

"I know. But it's important to remember that he's not out to get you. Especially when he gets one of his more... creative ideas."

Pomni slouched down further.

"And in any case," Ragatha placed her hand on Pomni's shoulder, "you've got us. We're all in the same boat. That makes us comrades, at the very least. But I like to think of us as a rag-tag group of friends."

The little jester appeared to shrink even further as she held herself for comfort, her gaze disappearing into the far distance again.

"How about you get some sleep?" Ragatha suggested. "I'm sure you'll feel better once you've gotten some sleep."

Pomni stared distraughtly at her bed.

"Come on," Ragatha said, pulling away the covers, "I'll tuck you in."

Pomni reluctantly dragged herself onto the mattress.

"There you go," Ragatha gently pulled the covers up to her chin. "Doesn't that feel better?"

Pomni nodded weakly, staring at the ceiling.

“Great! And I’m sure you’ll feel much better tomorrow. Good night, Pomni.”

Pomni’s hands shot up and grabbed Ragatha’s arm.

“Can... Can you... Can you stay a bit longer?”

Ragatha looked down at her concernedly.

“Please?” Pomni whimpered. “I... I don’t want to be alone right now.”

“Sure,” Ragatha gave her a soothing smile and took a seat on the bedframe. “I’ve got nowhere to be.”

As Pomni silently kept staring at the ceiling, Ragatha began humming a tune and let her gaze wander through the room. The longer she looked, the more toys she discovered. Dice, those blocks with letters on them she didn’t know the proper name of, monopoly money, checkers, a rocking horse, toy cars, the list went on and on as if more of them gradually kept appearing over time.

“There’s so many toys in here,” she said. “Do you have a favourite?”

“Not really,” Pomni mumbled. “I haven’t played with any of them.”

“You never played dice or checkers?”

“I mean these ones. I haven’t played with them since I arrived here.”

“Ah. Right. Do you... want to?”

“Maybe later.”

“Of course.”

Ragatha hummed her tune again, thinking of ways to lift the little jester’s spirits. In a room full of toys, none of them were of any use if Pomni was not interested in a game. A room full of entertainments with an occupant not in need of entertainment, but solace. It was almost a bit cruel. But the bottom line was that nothing digital was of help. Then maybe an old-fashioned idea might be, Ragatha figured.

“How about,” she tried, “we make a sleepover out of it? I haven’t had a sleepover in ages. Since I was a kid, I think. We can, I don’t know... Tell stories and jokes and chat deep into the night? Talk about boys, maybe? Or horses? Do you like horses? It’ll take your mind off things, I bet. How about that, would you like that?”

Pomni managed a faint smile and nodded.

“Great! Then scoot over,” Ragatha said and slid under the covers next to her, hitting her feet on the lower bedframe. “Wow, your bed is short,” she noticed and tucked her knees in so she could fit comfortably. “My feet barely fit in.”

“Sorry.”

“Oh no, sweetie, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Sorry,” Pomni sunk deeper into the mattress.

Ragatha turned on her side towards Pomni, propping her head up on her fist.

“You don’t need to apologize for anything, sweetie.”

“Sorry,” Pomni repeated, her features distorting into a pained grimace as she caught herself apologizing again. “And thank you for staying,” she added hastily, pulling the covers up to where her nose would’ve been if she had one. “I really didn’t want to be alone right now.”

“It’s no trouble.”

Ragatha gave Pomni’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. The little jester twitched and looked at it. Then she turned towards Ragatha, enveloping her hand with both of hers before the latter could pull away and curled into a ball.

“Is this okay?” Pomni whimpered.

“Sure, sweetie.”

Pomni visibly relaxed with a deep exhale. “You’re being very kind to me,” she murmured.

“Well, of course.”

"Thank you for that."

"You're welcome."

"Ragatha?"

"Hm?"

"I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep anytime soon."

"That's okay. We can just chat. Or stare at the ceiling together."

Pomni looked at the hand in hers and with much concern between her brows.

"Ragatha?"

"Hmmm?"

"Are you nice to me because there's something wrong with me?"

"No, why would you say that?"

"I don't know, you all seem okay with all of this madness. None of you freaked out about being chased by firewolves. I'm the only one freaking out constantly."

"No, honey, no. There's nothing wrong or weird about that. We've just had a bit more time to adjust, that's all. Everyone had a hard time when they first arrived."

"They did?"

"Yeah, they did," Ragatha nodded. "When Jax first arrived, he was freaking out and raging. If you think he's destructive now, you should've seen him back then. Nothing and no one was safe. He wouldn't even go on adventures, he'd just run around and scream at things and people and thrash and break everything he got his hands on. It was constant mayhem with him, let me tell you. All he did was break and destroy and then break stuff some more. It went on for about a week until he realized how futile it all was. Caine could always fix everything with a single snap of his fingers, provided he remembered he could do that. Then Jax locked himself in his room and thrashed that too. He wouldn't come out of it for days. And when he finally did, he's calmed down a bit, thank goodness. At least he

had stopped spending all his time on indiscriminate destruction. He stayed quite hostile and standoffish for a while, though. Even now he's still a jerk a lot of the time. But it was a lot worse when he first arrived.

"And Gangle, the poor thing, was frightened out of her mind. She also thought this was some sort of punishment at first. She's shy and timid at the best of times, and she needed a lot of encouragement and reassurance when she arrived. She was frightened and scared of everything and everyone and saw doom around every corner. I kept telling her that everything was fine and everything would be alright and that she didn't need to be scared of any of us. She wouldn't even join us for games or food or to hang out, you know. Always made some flimsy excuse and went off to hide somewhere by herself. The poor thing. But eventually, she adjusted too and came out of her shell, even if only a little."

"What about you?" Pomni looked at her with big eyes.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Did you do okay?"

"I was a little like you too, I guess. Everything freaked me out, especially that there was no exit. And everything was different and unfamiliar and I didn't know anybody. I'd act tough, you know, like I had it all together and everything was alright and like I wasn't scared out of my wit for the first few days. Luckily, that worked out well for me. Kinda. But on the inside, I was very afraid and worried. Every time I got a chance, I'd sneak off to my room to be alone and away from it all. But there is no away from it all here, as you know. So I tried to sleep a lot. Which meant staring at the ceiling a lot. I thought that maybe if I went to sleep, then maybe I could wake up back in my previous life, out of here. But obviously, that didn't happen. I still like sleeping, though, even if I don't really need it. It relaxes me. That's why I think it'd be good for you too," she gave her a kind smile.

"Does it really help?" Pomni tightened her grip on Ragatha's hand. "It feels like waking up in a nightmare over and over again. Every time I wake up and look at these rubbery cartoon hands, it's like I'm thrown off a cliff all over again and need to catch myself before I hit the ground."

"It takes some getting used to," Ragatha admitted. "But it does help eventually. Having somewhat of a routine helps to deal with all the craziness. I promise."

"How long," Pomni whispered solemnly, "until it gets better?"

"Hard to say," Ragatha pondered. "A few more days, maybe? A week or so?"

"That quick?"

"Maybe. Maybe a bit more, maybe a bit less. But people adjust quicker than you might think. Even if it seems hard and impossible right now. It'll be okay."

"Thank you, Ragatha." Pomni squeezed her hand again. "Thanks for looking out for me. For all of us, I guess. It feels a bit like you're the one who's trying to make sure we're all getting along and are together."

"Well, I try."

Ragatha took a moment to ponder a thought. Pomni had relaxed a little, but she still looked worried and downtrodden. She didn't want to upset her more, but perhaps sharing was the right thing to do in this instance, even if it wasn't an entirely pleasant thing to share.

"Pomni, can I tell you a secret?" she muttered somberly.

Pomni nodded, making big eyes.

"The truth is, I don't do so well on my own. I like company. I *need* company, to be honest. I think I may have had a big family back in the real world. I think I miss them. And I think that's why I'm trying so hard to get along well with everyone and to look after everyone. Sure, it's the nice thing to do, too, but I also want a community. A close community. And to be part of it. Everyone else here doesn't seem to mind being together, but they also don't seem very keen on it either. It's like they can take it or leave it. At least they don't seem keen enough to push for it or put in more effort than necessary to get by. So I figure that if I want community, I need to make it happen myself. But some days are hard," she swallowed. "Especially in the beginning, when I was still the new one here. Some of those days were really hard. Kaufmo was alright. He was pretty straightforward. Kinger is... Kinger."

Gangle and Zooble have their hands and minds full with their own stuff going on. I can't blame them, and I don't, but it doesn't do much in terms of maintaining a close community. Although Zooble tries sometimes when she feels like it. I love it when she does that. It really feels good. And Jax is... a handful. So the first few weeks here have been... a bit rough for me."

"You were lonely?" Pomni probed carefully.

"Yes. Not all the time... but yes. It caught up with me once I settled in properly and the novelty of it all wore off, I guess."

"Do you... Do you still feel like that?" Pomni didn't let her out of her sight.

Ragatha's head snapped back. She blinked several times at Pomni. "Sometimes," she finally sighed. "After a bad day, maybe. Like when everyone is fighting and there's nothing I can do about it. Then we have these dinners where nobody talks to each other. They just stare at their plates until Jax does something rude and obnoxious again and the next fight breaks out."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Everyone has bad days. That's just life. Even digital life. Bad days come and pass. Nothing to worry about."

Ragatha swallowed. "But truth be told, I'm a bit worried about you. That's what I wanted to tell you. Remember when I told you I used to go to sleep hoping I'd wake up back in the real world? Back when I was still hoping there was an exit or a magical escape from this place? That... wasn't exactly all there was to it. Sometimes, well, mostly on the really *really* bad days and once I understood, really *really understood* there was no exit, well, maybe then, sometimes, I had been going to sleep hoping I wouldn't wake up at all, you know."

Pomni's eyes darted left and right as she was trying to make sense of what she had just heard. Her irises shrunk into tiny trembling dots, firmly fixed on Ragatha's, once it had sunk in.

"And... I don't, I don't want you to go through that too," Ragatha stammered on,

gripping Pomni's hand tightly. "It's a very unpleasant thing to go through. I didn't mean to scare you or upset you. I was thinking that maybe I could help it. I can let you know about it. It may happen, and if it does, we can do something about it to make you feel... not that way. So if you ever start feeling like that, please come talk to me, okay? Then we can figure something out together. But please promise you'll come talk to me, okay? Promise?" Her hands were clasping Pomni's.

"I promise," Pomni nodded firmly.

"Good," Ragatha squeezed her hand affirmingly. "I'll hold you to it."

Pomni squeezed her hand back. "You really are kind."

"I try," Ragatha smiled softly.

Pomni fell into deep thought, stroking her thumb over Ragatha's hand. Ragatha wondered whether she had said too much. Pomni had enough to deal with, she didn't want to worry her further, and she may just have done that. But she had genuinely thought sharing this darker unpleasantness with her could help. If not today, then maybe someday in the future. That had to be a good thing, right? That had to be the right thing to do, right?

"Ragatha?" Pomni eventually looked up at her with big determined eyes. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Ragatha said, unsure what awaited her.

"How lonely are you, really?"

Ragatha stammered a series of hasty and frantic "um"s and "ah"s, but no words formed on her tongue, no useable white lie or distraction entered her mind. She gave up with a deep breath, her lips spreading into a grim smile.

"Very," her voice cracked.

Pomni hesitantly reached for her, her fingertips carefully brushing along her cheek as they made their way towards her nape and Pomni held her cheek in her palm. Ragatha leaned into the exploring caress, embracing the sensation on her textile

skin, and held onto the hand on her cheek as if it were a distant memory that could vanish any second without a word of warning.

"I remember feeling lonely a lot too," Pomni admitted. "Before I arrived here."

"I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that."

"Well, neither do you."

Ragatha whimpered.

"Next time you're feeling lonely, just come over and let me know, okay? We can look out for each other. We can do another sleepover or something, okay?"

Ragatha slung her arm around Pomni and pulled her into herself, burying her face deep into the jester's hat.

"Okay," she sobbed. But moments later, she snapped away from Pomni.

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry," the flood of words rushed out of her like an avalanche.

"I don't know what I was thinking, just grabbing you like that. I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay, I didn't mind. I *don't* mind." Pomni's hand exploringly snaked around Ragatha's waist with a hesitant touch. "Is that... okay?"

"Yes, very," Ragatha nodded and shimmied into Pomni again, holding her firmly.

"We can look out for each other."

"Yes, we'll look out for each other," Pomni exhaled as she nuzzled into her neck.

Comfortably Numb

As Zooble knocked on Ragatha's door, not having noticed that its bolt hadn't been fully shut, it slowly opened inward as she called out, "Ragatha?"

Their hand shot out to grab the door handle before it swung out of reach, reluctant to enter Ragatha's room uninvited. Darkness and a stifled snuffle greeted them from the inside of the room.

"Are you in there?" they tried again.

"Yes," a weak voice from the deep corner replied.

"Great," Zooble continued tiredly. "Do you have more Stupid Sauce lying around? I ran out," they waved the empty bottle in their other hand.

"Maybe," the weak voice said.

Zooble waited for a few long and awkward moments of silence before they asked, "Could you... check?"

"It should be in the drawer over there," Ragatha sighed.

"If you're pointing at something, I can't see #@!% without any lights on," said Zooble.

"The big drawer on your right-hand side."

"Can I turn the lights on?"

"Don't," Ragatha said hastily, and then added more calmly, "please don't."

"Alright," said Zooble and stepped into the room. "I'll just fetch the Stupid Sauce and then I'll be out of your space again, okay?"

“Okay,” said Ragatha and sniffled.

Zooble chose to gracefully ignore the sounds of emotional distress and rummaged through the drawer, whatever little light entering the room through the open door proving itself to be somewhat of an aid after all, until their hand gripped the squeazy plastic of the condiment bottle they were looking for. “Got it,” they said and made for the exit. “I’ll see you later then,” they added as they closed the door.

“Bye,” Ragatha said weakly, her voice cutting off as the door bolted.

A few steps down the hallway, Zooble halted, looked at the Stupid Sauce in their hand, sighed, and turned around to knock on Ragatha’s door again.

“It’s me again,” they said. “Can I come in?”

A soft “Okay” came from the other side of the door. Zooble stepped back inside Ragatha’s room and closed the door behind them, shutting out the only source of light with it. “Ragatha?” they asked gently, “Are you okay?”

Ragatha sniffled again, but said nothing.

“You’re sitting alone in a completely dark room, and you sound like you’ve been crying,” continued Zooble after a while. “You don’t seem like you’re doing too good.”

Their only answer was silence.

“Do you want to talk to someone? Should I get Pomni or something?”

“No!” Ragatha blurted out swiftly. “Don’t.”

“Oh-kay,” Zooble said slowly in a low voice with a tiny uplift stemming from a thin layer of curiosity and confusion. “Are the two of you on bad terms now?”

“No, nothing like that,” said Ragatha. Zooble could hear her red woollen locks swoosh through the air as she shook her head. “At least, I don’t think so.”

“Something else bugging you?”

“Why do you care all of a sudden?” grumbled Ragatha.

“Look, I was just trying to be nice. If you want me gone, all you need to do is say so. There’s no need to come at me like that.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Ragatha muttered hastily. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just... I thought you hated me, and now you’re in my room, being all concerned and whatnot.”

“Girl, what? I don’t hate you. What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know, it feels like you’re avoiding me and like you hate being in the same room as me and hate talking to me.”

“Well, yeah, obviously.”

Zooble could feel Ragatha staring daggers at them through the darkness of the room.

“But that’s not because I *hate* you. It’s because I hate it *here*. And most of the time, I just wanna be left the &%!# alone. But being left alone is apparently an unattainable luxury around here. Which makes me hate it here even more. That doesn’t mean I hate you. Or that I enjoy seeing you being miserable like this.”

It wasn’t a lie: As their eyes grew progressively more accustomed to the darkness, Zooble became increasingly capable of making out shapes in the room. Ragatha’s shape was that of a curled-up rag doll sitting on the floor, hugging her knees tightly in the far corner of the room and hiding her face behind her elbows.

Ragatha sniffled.

“Besides, what do the two of us even have to talk about? You don’t really know me, and I don’t really know you, and idle chitchat is exhausting me, so I’m doing my best to avoid it. Still doesn’t mean I hate you. Even if you can be pushy sometimes.”

“I know,” said Ragatha. “I’m sorry. I’m just... I don’t know what else to do. Do you hate it that much?”

Zooble slowly moved deeper into the room and took a seat on the edge of Ragatha’s bed, facing the curled-up doll. “Look,” they said, “I try to assume that you’re coming

from a good place. But a lot of times, I can't stand it. Partially because I'm me, and I'm not in the mood for any of it. But partially, it's because you can come across as... kinda fake. As in, I can't tell if you're being genuine or if you're after something else. Like you're trying to fulfil some weird social obligation nobody cares about, or like you're trying to insert yourself into my life for some reason, or get some information out of me for some reason."

"I'm sorry," whimpered Ragatha. "I'm doing my best, I promise. That's just me trying to be nice. And friendly. And I'm not trying to be fake or impose on y'all or get information out or anything. All I'm trying to do is connect with you. I promise. And be friends. I just don't know how else to do it. I don't. It's like everybody else got handed a manual on how to make friends at some point, and I didn't get mine, and now I'm stuck trying to figure it out on my own, getting nowhere and messing up all the time, and nobody tells me what I'm doing wrong or what I should be doing to do it right. I keep trying and trying to connect to people any way I can think of, and all I do is push everyone away and end up crying in my room by myself."

"Can't you just, y'know, be yourself?"

"But this *is* me! This *is* myself. I don't know how to be someone or something else! I would if I could, if I knew how! But I don't!"

Zooble sighed. "That's... That's a fair point."

"Me being me and me trying my best messes things up with everyone. Always. I messed it up with you, I messed it up with Gangle, I messed it up big time with Jax, and now I also messed it up with Pomni today. I keep failing and I just... I don't know what to do," Ragatha whimpered tearfully. "I don't know where I'm going wrong. I don't know what's wrong with me and I... I can't figure it out."

"Is that what you've been upset about?"

"Mhm," Ragatha snivelled.

"Why do you say you messed up with Pomni? I thought the two of you made up after that award show or whatever ended."

"Kinda," said Ragatha. "But I shouldn't have messed up in the first place. If I wasn't this... incompetent, there wouldn't be anything to make up about. At least things seemed fine after the award show. Maybe I got lucky this time, and I didn't cause any permanent damage. We had a nice chat and cleared things up. And we're both worried about Jax. He seems... unwell. But he's not letting anyone get close to him, and he doesn't talk to anyone, not really, and now he's getting worse, maybe?"

"So? Let him."

"What?"

"You do realise you're not responsible for him, right?"

"I do, sort of. But I can't help it. I'm still worried."

"By the looks of it, you're worried sick."

"Maybe." Zooble sensed Ragatha shrink into herself from across the room. "But even if I tried, all I would do is mess things up even more."

"You *do* realise you're not responsible for him, right?"

"Kinda."

"And yet you're still blaming yourself for 'failing', as you put it?"

"I guess."

"Sounds a lot like you *don't* realise you're not responsible for him after all."

"Easier said than done."

"Look, Raggie, I feel you, but you can only lead a horse to water. You cannot make it drink. If Jax doesn't want to let anyone in, there's pretty much nothing you can do about that. If he doesn't want to get helped, there's pretty much nothing you can do about it. If he wants to continue being a %#&!^ #/@+! to everyone, there's pretty much nothing you can do about it."

"I know. But he's clearly unwell. What if he keeps getting worse? What if he abstracts? What if he *abstracts*, Zooble? I just... I can't just sit back and watch it

happen and do nothing. I just... can't. I don't have it in me. But at the same time, I don't know what to do."

"Pushing him ain't gonna help, I can tell you that much for free."

"I know. I just... Don't know what to do."

"I don't think there's anything you *can* do, Ragatha."

The doll dropped her forehead onto her knees.

"There's just... nothing to be done," Zooble continued with a gentle voice. "You're damned if you do something, damned if you don't. You'll just have to sit this one out with the rest of us."

"Is there really nothing we can do?"

"I can't think of anything," sighed Zooble. "I'd love for things to be different, too. But... it is what it is, I guess."

"That sucks," whispered Ragatha.

"Yup. It sucks *big time*."

"I hate it."

"Me too, girl, me too."

Ragatha straightened up and let her head rest against the wall on her back. "So, now what?" she asked with an exasperated voice.

"Nothing," said Zooble, equally exhausted. "Nothing. The same thing over and over again. Waiting for time to pass. Call it what you will, but the essence remains the same. Godot is sure to come tomorrow."

"Godot?"

"Never mind," said Zooble. "Just a book I read a long time ago."

They sat in motionless silence until the weight of the Stupid Sauce in their hand reminded Zooble of the original purpose of their visit.

"We still have this," they said and lifted their hand with the bottle.

"The Stupid Sauce?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not sure that's a great idea."

"Probably. But it's not like there's much else to do around here. I was planning on getting &\$*&#! tonight anyway. You... Wanna get Stupid together?"

"I dunno," mumbled Ragatha.

"Fair enough. I don't wanna push you into it."

"Does it help?" Ragatha asked meekly.

Zooble shrugged. "It helps pass the time. And it keeps your thoughts from spinning in circles for a while, while time passes. You've done it before, you know what it's like. At least for me, it makes me feel comfortably numb for a while. And to me, that's at least something."

"Hm."

Zooble looked at her. "Does that mean you're considering it?"

"Maybe," Ragatha said weakly.

"Well, if you change your mind, come find me in my room, okay?"

"Could we... could we do it here?"

"Sure, why not. Scoot over," said Zooble and joined Ragatha on the floor in the corner of her room.

Once she was leaning against the wall next to Ragatha, Zooble eyed the bottle of Stupid Sauce in their hand. "Funny", they said. "Here we are, one who wants nothing more than to connect with people, and the other who wants nothing more than to be left alone and get out of this place, and all we can do about it is Stupid Sauce."

"Yeah." Ragatha exhaled tiredly. "Funny."

“Wanna go first?” Zooble asked, handing her the bottle.

Ragatha took the bottle and looked at it. “Is this it?” she said. “Is this what eternity in here is going to be like? Nothing ever changes, the same thing over and over again, until we abstract? Squirting Stupid Sauce in our faces to pass the time?”

“I don’t know,” said Zooble. “Maybe. Maybe not. Who’s to say.”

“And me being unable to make friends, alone and lonely, until I abstract? Is that going to be who I am, too?”

“Don’t say that,” said Zooble. “Just, maybe, take it easy for a bit? Relationships are tricky business. I’m sure if you just give it some time and don’t try to force it, things’ll change for you. It won’t work if it’s one-sided. If you’re the only one trying to make a friendship happen, it’s bound to leave you with something different from what you’re looking for.”

“Heh,” Ragatha smirked. “Kinger said something similar.”

“He did?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there you go.”

“There I go,” sighed Ragatha. “Still in the same place I’ve been, still in the dark corner of my room, still clueless and without any answers. But there I go, waiting for something to somehow change tomorrow.” She looked back at the condiment bottle in her hands. “Until then, we’ve got the Stupid Sauce, right?”

“I guess so.”

Ragatha took off the lid. “There I go,” she said and squirted the pink liquid into her eye, the thoughtlessness embracing her mercifully quickly. Moments later, Zooble followed her into the realms of sweet delirium, both shrouded in the gentle veil of forgetful, warm, and comfortably numb darkness of Ragatha’s unlit room.

Three in a Tree

Dervobirds

Beleard sat in the comfy armchair in the tree's living room, sipped his tea, and opened his copy of *Nelverod's Modern Ornithology*. He browsed through the pages of the thick tome until he reached the section with the descriptions of species.

The dervobird is a native songbird found throughout the continent, he read. While they generally prefer the warmer and temperate southern regions, dervobirds are nevertheless commonly observed nesting even beyond the northern mountain ranges. They shy easily and keep away from humans and settlements, although some can be observed scavenging for food in human proximity during winter months.

"I am *not* cleaning this!" Yara yelled in the kitchen.

"We are not having this discussion again," Vulfgaar's voice barked through the kitchen door. "It's your turn to do the dishes."

Dervobirds are omnivores. Their diet consists mainly of insects, seeds, berries, and other fruit, but they are also known to feast on lizards and small mammals on rare occasions. Furthermore, they will happily help themselves to animal carcasses given the opportunity.

"I said I'd do the dishes, not clean up whatever war crime you committed in the oven!"

"A sustained wall of fire has been perfectly legal warfare for over 167 years."

"You're not supposed to wage war on the *chicken*, you goob!"

"I didn't hear you complain while you were stuffing yourself with dinner!"

"Stuffing myself? *Stuffing myself*? How dare you! I didn't have any more than any

of you two!"

Female dervobirds are larger than their male counterparts, measuring eight to ten inches. Their plumage is glossy black throughout with a long tail. With their blackish-brown legs and an orange-yellow bill, they are easily confused with male blackbirds if it weren't for the blackbirds' yellow eye-rings (see page 192ff.). The male dervobirds grow six to eight inches in length and are easily recognizable due to their sooty-brown black-speckled plumage, their reddish head and crest, and green speculum feathers. Their bills are yellowish-brownish and their legs are black.

"Be that as it may, you didn't complain about it anyway, so my point still stands."

"And what point would that be, exactly? Huh?"

"That you were perfectly happy to get your share of dinner, but not your share of chores!"

Dervobirds preferably nest in rock and tree cavities, where they build a flimsy stick nest. The female typically lays two or three eggs in late spring and early summer. Pairs and small family parties establish a territory, sometimes lasting year-round, sometimes just for a season. They appear not to migrate any great distance but will make local movements with the seasons.

"Just look at this, Vulf! It's baked into the tray! There's no cleaning this!"

"Nonsense, that's nothing a bit of scrubbing and a simple advanced water burst spell won't clear."

"I'm not flooding the house with water spells to clean up after your lack of cooking finesse!"

"Hah! Lack of cooking finesse! You're the one to talk!"

It is a common misconception that the dervobird song is performed for courtship purposes. Instead, territory is marked and established through male dervobirds' singing. Should a challenger appear, a pair or family party who has already bonded will commonly engage them together.

"I don't have time for this, Yara, I have more important things to attend to."

"And you're free to attend them as soon as you've cleaned up your mess."

"Look, I'm getting tired of this being a thing every week."

"Then stop leaving me with uncleanable messes to sort out!"

Vulfgaar sighed. "Do you want me to teach you a refined water burst spell that won't flood the entire house? Even a wizard like you could get the hang of that in a day or two."

"A wizard like me? A wizard like me?"

Courtship proceeds with male dervobirds attempting to impress a female through what is now believed a feat of endurance. A hopeful male will approach the female in a series of small skips and monotonous chirps while flustering up and flapping his wings. An interested female will chirp back at them, while uninterested ones turn their backs on the males. The female will then test the male through a series of picks and wing slaps. The male is expected to maintain his posture and chirp throughout. Should a male endure successfully, the female may pick him as a mate. Previously, the seemingly aggressive behaviour of the females was thought to be a forceful rejection of over-eager males as it resembles a violent altercation, but today the overwhelming consensus is that it is indeed a courtship ritual, albeit a somewhat unusual one among birds.

Vulfgaar's groan as air escaped his lungs was followed by the sound of a metallic tray crashing on the floor. Yara stomped loudly through the living room with clenched fists and shoulders and disappeared into the corridor. Soon after, a breathless Vulfgaar leaned onto the kitchen door frame, one hand holding his stomach.

"You're still doing the dishes today, Yara!" he called after her, yet catching his breath.

"Hm," Beleard exhaled.

"Can you believe her?" Vulf turned to him.

"Don't look at me," Beleard mumbled without looking up and turned a page. "I'm

definitely not doing the dishes today.”

Visiting Nana

Vulfgaar, still wearing his apron, set the plate with fried eggs in front of the empty seat next to Beleard and yelled into the corridor, “Yara, breakfast is ready!”

As no sounds of response, footsteps, or doors opening answered his call, he looked at Beleard, who was busy gobbling down his meal.

“Do you think she’s still mad at me? Or is she mad about something new now?”

“Wouldn’t know,” Beleard replied between bites. “But she probably took off already.”

“Took off? Where?”

“To see her grandmother. Today’s the anniversary.”

“Her grandmother?”

Beleard slowly looked up at him, halting his chewing.

“Oh, right.”

Vulfgaar disappeared through the kitchen door, only to return without his apron and with a plate containing his own breakfast.

“And she does that every year?” Vulf continued.

“Mhm.”

“On the exact same day?”

“Mhm.”

“Visiting the exact same place?”

“Obviously.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“Mhm.”

“If somebody found out, they could ambush her.”

“Mhm. They usually do.”

“*Usually?*”

“Mhm.”

“Alright. Clearly one of us here has lost our mind. Either I’m not understanding what you’re saying, or you’re saying that Yara deliberately walks into a trap once a year and you’re way too relaxed about that than you have any right to be.”

“It’s no big deal. Usually, I keep a lookout while she spends a few minutes with her grandmother. She went ahead to pick some flowers on the way there. Says they need to be fresh and hand-picked, otherwise it doesn’t count. And I catch up with her quickly with my portals. No big deal.”

“It’s dangerous. An unnecessary risk.”

Beleard kept chewing. “It’s important to her.”

“It’ll get you caught.”

“Hasn’t so far,” Beleard shrugged again. “Are you going to eat these?” he pointed at what was supposed to be Yara’s plate.

Vulfgaar shook his head and rubbed his temples in frustration. Beleard moved Yara’s plate onto his empty one and dug into the fried eggs.

“Actually,” he said with a full mouth, “I was wondering if you could cover for me today.”

“Cover for you?”

“Yeah. The new tome of *The Villainess Is My Reincarnated Cat* is releasing, and I

was hoping to grab it before it sells out. So if you could be on the lookout while I visit the shops, that'd be great."

"Why would I-"

"You still owe me for saving you from that mushroom last week."

"I could've handled it on my own!"

"Could you also handle what Yara'd do to you once she found out you exploded her favourite sentient mushroom?"

Vulfgaar pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned.

Not much later, Beleard stepped through one of his portals with Vulfgaar following him closely before the hole in space closed noiselessly behind them. They found themselves in the woods, in a place wholly unfamiliar to Vulfgaar.

"She must've gone ahead," Beleard said, looking around. "It's just that way," he pointed towards a barely visible path snaking uphill through the thickets, "you can't miss it."

"So what do I do?"

"Just keep a lookout. Nothing more, nothing less. I'll come pick the two of you up when I'm done. It shouldn't take too long." With that, he disappeared through another portal of his.

Vulfgaar conjured a concealment spell, just to be on the safe side. He'd never been fully at ease in forests. There were too many blind spots, too many ways of approaching undetected, too many tiny things going on everywhere at the same time for comfort. Although having lived there for several months now, he'd gotten used to it. He'd learned how to move without leaving obvious traces and without making too much noise. But safe was safe, there was no reason to take unnecessary risks.

The woods and thickets of the deciduous forest became less and less dense as he trodded on. Soon enough, he reached what looked like a meadow. But the headstones standing tall in the grass betrayed that the locals had repurposed the clearing for their deceased. Judging by the state of some of the stones, it had been used this way for quite a while. Smoke rising behind treetops in the distance told Vulfgaar that a village was nearby, a mere few minutes of walk on the muddy path leading away from the other side of the graveyard.

Vulfgaar remained hidden in the shade of the woods as he scoured the open cemetery for Yara. The clearing was by no means large and he had a decent oversight over it, but so would any ambushers, he worried. Nevertheless, it took him a moment to spot her. She was sitting on the ground by a stone on the far side of the centre on her own.

Yara was hugging her knees and speaking softly, her back turned towards him. A bouquet of wildflowers lay in front of her next to a lit candle. Vulfgaar thought she looked smaller than her usual self as if the headstone towering before her had somehow shrunk her. He couldn't make out the words she was saying, but it appeared that she kept talking and talking.

And then Vulf heard a twig snap close by.

He cursed internally and began casting the strongest concealment spell he knew.

"Vulfgaar?"

Yara stood behind him, her clenched fists ready to strike and engulfed in her flames, now dwindling as she recognized him.

"Oh, hi," he turned around. Releasing his spell, three floating lifeless bodies shrouded in camouflaged hoods dropped onto the ground with a silent thud. "Sorry, I tried to keep this quiet to not perturb you. Guess I messed up a bit."

"Yeah, the lightning strikes were a dead giveaway."

"That wasn't me. That was this one, I think," he pointed at one of the bodies on the ground. "Wait, did you hear those lightning strikes?"

"Was I supposed not to?"

"My concealment spell should've covered them. Maybe they went out of range? I'll have to investigate and tweak it when we get back."

"Is that all of them?" Yara looked around.

"I think so."

"Where's Beleard?"

"Away. He said he'll be here soon."

"What are you doing here, then?"

"He asked me to be the lookout today in his stead."

"That's... oddly nice of you," Yara's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I owed him."

"Ah, figures. Come on, then."

"Come on, what?"

"You're here already. You're meeting Nana."

"But-"

"Oh, hush," she grabbed him by his arm and pulled him along as she stepped briskly back towards the graveyard. "No objections. You're meeting Nana."

Holding on to his arm, Yara beelined to the centre of the graveyard and then towards the stone where she had been sitting before. Nobody else was in sight. Out in the open, the bright sunshine warmed their faces. The sounds of insects buzzing and crickets chirping mixed with the smell of moss and the wax coming off the candles placed before most graves.

They were humble gravestones, cut simply and straightforwardly. There were no massive monuments, sarcophagi, or statues anywhere, nor anything else Vulfgaar would've been familiar with, suggesting any nobility or wealth had never taken any interest in it as their final resting place. Some markers were even wooden, brittle and decaying for having withstood the elements out in the open for years.

"Hi, Nana, I'm back," Yara said once they reached the grave. "And I brought a friend. This is Vulfgaar. He lives with us. He's a bit of a jerk, but tolerable sometimes. And he thinks he's really good with magic."

Yara sat down in the grass and moss underneath them. "Vulf, this is my grandmother. She raised me and looked after Beleard for a while back when we were still kids. Be nice and say hi."

Vulfgaar gave her a questioning look but saw nothing but stern sincerity on her. "Hi," he finally stammered and waved awkwardly.

"Now sit down, you're sticking out like a sore thumb."

Vulf obeyed wordlessly and sat down next to her. The big headstone in front of him stared him down coldly. He felt himself shrink. Traces of swiped fingertips in the dirt, leaves, and gravel betrayed that Yara had cleaned the stone while she was there. Vulf awkwardly hugged his knees, letting the silence become dense and heavy. The engraving on the stone also looked cleaner than on the surrounding stones. It read "Sylphie Darren." No dates, no years.

"So... how long..." Vulfgaar began hesitantly, having become uncomfortable enough with the lack of conversation.

"It's been five years."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

Vulfgaar sought more words, unsure what would be suitable or appropriate, or even whether to say anything at all. Perhaps the moment called for silence, even an uneasy one.

"I can wait elsewhere if you prefer," he suggested.

"Don't be silly. You can't meet Nana if you're elsewhere."

"Sorry. I'm just not sure what to say or do. I know funeral etiquette. I'm not aware of visitation etiquette. Maybe there's something about it Urefort's Treatise on Social Etiquette that I've foolishly missed."

"It's all books with you, isn't it," Yara smirked.

"Not all. But they're very useful for nearly everything."

"I didn't learn from books at all. Didn't need to. Nana taught me everything I know. From potions and magic to gardening and housekeeping. She taught me the way she was taught," Yara tucked a waft of her hair behind her ear. "Wizardry schools were not a thing in her time. Basically unheard of, especially out here, so far out of the cities. Her mom taught her, and she taught me."

"She must've been a formidable wizard."

"She was incredible. I once watched her brew a healing potion with only hops, malt, and yeast."

"Isn't that... isn't that just beer?"

"You'd think, wouldn't you. But she was amazing. Well-respected, too. She never moved to the cities, even though she could've made a fortune with her potions. She maintained that she preferred the woods. That she preferred being close to the plants she used in her brews. But I think she stayed because skilled wizards are rare out in the countryside. People desperately needed a knowledgeable healer. They came riding for days to seek her help. So she stayed. Her entire life."

"No wonder people liked her."

"I don't know about 'liked'. But they definitely feared and respected her. She could make anyone hold their tongue with just a look. Once she stopped a twenty-person brawl in the tavern without saying a single word or lifting a single finger. They all took their hats off when they talked to her. Or when she entered a room. And they'd

leave small presents at her door. Foodstuff, mostly. Little signs of appreciation. And she was always Miss Darren. Never Sylphie, never The Wizard, never The Witch. Always Miss Darren. Miss Darren this, Miss Darren that. Call Miss Darren, the horse is ill. Call Miss Darren, Frudka broke her leg. Call Miss Darren, Kahla is giving birth."

"Sounds very respectable, indeed, if the people put that much trust and gratitude at her feet."

Vulfgaar flicked his wrist through the air and drew symbols with his fingers. A moment later, he had conjured a sparkling, shiny, small white flower in his hand and placed it next to Yara's big bouquet of wildflowers. "I'm sure I would've loved to meet her."

"She probably would've given you a hard time," Yara flashed a malicious smile. "A big fancy city mage with his big fancy degrees and schools who can't even make his own conditioner."

"I can, you know that. Yours are just much much better. Why do you insist on making me admit that?"

"Because it's fun!" Yara grinned at him. "Is that the same spell you used for the tiara you made me?" she pointed at Vulfgaar's flower.

"No," he shook his head. "Those were enchanted. It's much harder to create new objects from scratch instead of duplicating existing ones. I couldn't figure out how to combine a creation spell with a perpetual motion and floating spell for the petals. But a duplication spell on existing ones worked. Add a decay freeze spell to keep them looking fresh, and there you have it."

"You're... You're so... Ugh." Yara's fingers curled into tense claws.

"What? What did I do now?"

"You kinda ruined it now!"

"How?"

“By explaining exactly how it works, you dork. You could’ve just said ‘no.’”

“But you asked!”

“I know! Argh!” She threw her hands into the air.

Yara looked at her Nana’s name on the gravestone and clenched her jaw and fists.

“Close your eyes,” she finally growled.

“What? Why?”

“Just do it,” she hissed.

“Are you going to hit me?”

“I am if you don’t close your eyes right now.”

“Fine,” Vulfgaar gave in. “There. Happy?”

“Yes! Now shut up for a second.”

She could see him roll his eyes even though they were closed. Yara looked pleadingly at the headstone in front of her, but soon gave up, lowering her head and crossing her arms.

“Nana always wanted me to become a respectable wizard like her. And a respectable person. Shut up,” she halted him in his tracks as soon as she noticed his mouth twisting into the irritating smirk that only meant he was about to say something he thought very clever. “Let me finish.”

She ran her hands through her hair. “So I guess this is me trying. I know that I never really thanked you for the tiara you made me. I want you to know that it was a lovely present. I like it very much,” she mumbled sheepishly. “And thanks for keeping a lookout today. Coming here means very much to me. So there, thank you.”

“Can I talk now?”

“Not yet.”

Yara wavered and shook her arms, struggling with herself. Then she briefly ran her hands through her hair again, exhaled, and leaned over to plant a quick kiss on his cheek.

Surprised, Vulfgaar opened his eyes to find himself looking at Yara's glistening brown ones just beside him, closer than he ever remembered seeing her, a faint blush gracing her freckled cheeks.

"I mean it. Thank you," she whispered.

"You're... welcome..." he stammered softly with burning cheeks, running his fingertips over the spot where her lips had just left. He didn't dare move a muscle, he didn't dare let go of the warm gaze directed at him. Yara didn't back away either. He didn't understand why she wouldn't, but he didn't mind, nor did he question it. On the contrary, he didn't want her to go, at least not just yet. She was close enough for him to sense the pleasant warmth of her breath on his skin. He wondered whether her cheeks would feel as soft and beautiful under his touch as they looked.

"Am I interrupting?" Beleard said, standing behind them. "Do you want me to come back later?"

Yara's face flushed radiantly red even before she turned around.

"How long have you been here?" she roared, jumping onto her feet.

"Just a few moments."

"Let's go, then!" Yara stomped off towards the forest.

Vulfgaar looked at Beleard with perplexity written all over his face as plain as day.

Beleard shrugged. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah..." Vulf got up and followed them into the woods, the poor gears in his head still rattling and grinding away, doing their best to rationalize what had just happened.