

Kill Six Billion Demons Fanfiction

AthenasLilOwl

Contents

Allison/Cio Fanfics 1

 Snowfall 3

 Broken, Beat & Scarred 7

 Like a Fiddle 13

 In Death - Is Life 23

 Two Lost Souls Swimming In A Fish Bowl 29

 Devil Hooch Blues 37

Liturgy Fanfics 65

 Aesma and the Beetle 67

 Prim Walks The Road 71

 Chapter 1 - The Faster Way 71

 Chapter 2 - Primaurast 80

 Chapter 3 - The Dead City 87

 Het's Lines 95

 Het and the Cherry Tree 109

 The Hunter and the Yelenoshena 113

 Ryam's Last Student 121

Allison/Cio Fanfics

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... 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, plentysome,” 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 enoughtsome. 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.

Liturgy Fanfics

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 Primaurast (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 Primaurast 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 Primaurast 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 vela 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 ashen-smearred 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.