

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 pitysomes waste.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It could be if you wanted to."

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

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

"Do I 'ave ta?"

"Pleeeease?"

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

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

"That sounds boresome."

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

"Then choose."

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

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

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

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

“No, I don’t.”

“Then drink thy penalty.”

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

“Why, because tha’s losing already?”

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

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

“No, but-”

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

“Yes, but-”

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

“But-”

“Or does tha yield to me already?”

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

“Aye. Some fine herbs in there.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dynnemar’s nae a twink!”

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

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

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

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

“Tell me.”

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

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

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

“Definitely a better setting than the other one.”

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

“I’ll take your word for it.”

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

“Truth.”

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

“What?”

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

“Oh, come on, Cio!”

“Tha doesn’t know, does tha?”

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

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

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

“There ain’t?”

“No!”

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

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

” ’tis truly a boresome game then.”

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

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

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

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

“Because I thought it could be fun?”

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

“No,” Allison averted her eyes.

“Then answer fullwise.”

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

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

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

Cio nodded.

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

“Has tha more to tell?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Good.”

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

“Truth.”

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

“Tha wants to know all my secrets?”

“You have secrets?”

"Of course. Tha doesn't?"

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

Cio stiffened.

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

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

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

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

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

"This game lost its attraction rapidwise."

Allison drank, looking quietly at Cio.

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

"And why is that?"

Cio shot her an angry look.

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

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

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

"Aye."

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

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

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

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

"Truth."

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

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

"Whassat?"

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

"Aye. Open it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is my tongue really only adequate?"

"Th-

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

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

"Okay. Good." Allison drank.

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

"Fine. But be nice."

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

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

" 'tis the game, tha has to!"

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

"Nay."

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

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

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

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

"This?" Allison raised her drink.

"Aye."

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

"Then do it."

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

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

“Are tha trying to get me completewise drunken?”

“Little old me? I would never.”

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

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

“Are tha- Are tha mimicking me?”

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

“Tha little shitwomble!”

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

“Stop it this instant!”

“Nay.”

“Tha scorelamp racknuggin!”

“Tha scorelamp racknuggin!”

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

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

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

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

“Make me,” Allison grinned.

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

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

“Nay.”

“Does that mean you yield to me?”

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

“Spoilsport.”

“So, now what?”

“Now I get another turn.”

“That’s the rules?”

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

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

“I mean, really.”

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

“Cio, be serious,” Allison laughed.

“I am.”

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

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

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

“Tha has kept a journal?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I have.”

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

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

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

“Tha’s pushing thy luck, meadowsmell.”

“Mhm,” Allison hummed confidently.

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

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

Cio blew a raspberry on Allison’s neck.

“That means I win.”

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

“There is now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A-ha! Tha admits defeat!”

“I didn’t say that! It’s just...”

“All I hear is a coward’s clucking.”

“You’re insane.”

“And winning.”

“Fine! Watch me!”

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

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

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

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

“You’re gonna get us caught!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why us? 'twas thy deed to be done! I'm innocent!"

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

"Slow down!" Cio wheezed. "I can't keep up with tha pulling me like this!"

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

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

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

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

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

Allison skipped into the shop.

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

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

"I guess. But now my shirt is soaked with beer. And I'm out of drinks. Again."

"'twas a fine thing to see thy strength developed. Tha's doing well."

"Why, thank you!" Allison curtsied clumsily.

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

“Are you suggesting-”

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

“Here?”

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

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

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

“Cio!”

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

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

Cio let her head drop onto Allison’s shoulder. “Aye. Eventually.”

“But not yet?”

“Does tha want to leave?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Then not yet.”

Allison looked over the countless tiny little lights flickering in the distance and smoked. “Thanks for tonight,” she said. “I had fun.”

“Nae mention it.”

“I wonder how much of it we’ll remember,” Allison said and drank some more.

“Most, I’d wager.”

“You think?”

Cio nodded.

“And what about me?”

“Tha too.”

“No, me. Will you remember me?”

“Of course, I’ll remember thee. What’s tha squaking about?”

“You said you forgot. Once things don’t matter anymore, you forget them. Like your first kiss. Remember?”

“Oh, Allison,” Cio’s voice was steeped with concern. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t do this to thyself.”

“Do what?”

“This. Ask this.”

“Why? I want to know.”

“Does tha?”

“Yes?”

“Which answer, then, would tha prefer? Which one won’t hurt thee?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

” ’tis?”

“Yeah?”

“Those-a-ways only misery lies, worryhare. Either one you pick.”

“If there’s misery’s each way, why does it matter which one I pick?”

Cio flicked her cigarette away, staring into the distance. “So tell me, then. Which one.”

“I’d want to be remembered, obviously.”

“Why?” Cio said tiredly.

“What do you mean, why?”

“Just that. Why.”

“Well... I don’t know! I’ll be dead someday, I guess? It’d be nice to know that some part of me would remain. That I mattered. At least at some point. To someone. Like I existed at all in the first place.”

“And what’ll tha do once I’m gone too?”

“Dunno. Nothing, I guess.”

“Aye. The wheel keeps turning, Allison. All waves flatten with time, no matter how tallwise you made the sea rise to begin with.”

“I know. But still. It’d be a comforting thought.”

“There’s nae comfort in beating waves to rise.”

"There's no comfort in being dead and forgotten, either."

"Aye. I suppose so." Cio dropped back and lay on the stone roof.

"So?" Allison pushed.

"So?"

"You haven't said yet. Do you think you'll remember me, once I'm long gone?"

"Perhaps," Cio sighed. "Perhaps. Only time can tell. But I don't think I'll forget thee easily. Tha doesn't simply forget breaking into the vault of Yre. Not even for the second time."

"Is *that* how you'll remember me? For the heist?"

"Not a nice feeling, is it, honeynose. To have thy life known solely for thy violence and robbery."

"I guess not," Allison said bitterly. She swallowed whatever wine remained and dropped the bottle on the street below, watching it fall and burst on the cobblestones. At first, it fell slowly, but by the end, she could barely make out its contours. If it weren't for the sounds of glass breaking, she wouldn't have been sure the bottle had fallen at all.

"Maybe I just want to be loved," she mumbled. "I don't know." Then she let herself drop backwards too and lay next to Cio.

Cio flicked her tail over Allison's leg.

"I know that sentiment."

"It's shit, isn't it."

"Sometimes." Cio snuggled into her. They lay on the hard cold stone roof in silence for a while.

"You were right," Allison finally said. "I shouldn't have asked. Now the mood's all in the gutter. And the wine is gone. Why is the wine always gone?"

” ’cause we drank it all.”

“Oh yeah, right.” She turned her head towards Cio. “Should we go get more?”

“Nay, nae for me. I’m done, good and proper.”

“That’s probably wise. I don’t feel like getting up.”

Shortly before Allison dozed off with Cio tightly in her arms, silent but heavy footsteps approached them. Neither of the two even attempted to look up or move.

“You’ll contract an illness if you sleep here, Allison,” White Chain said, towering above them. “You’re not adequately equipped to spend a night on the stones.”

Allison opened her eyes. “Oh, hey, White Chain! Look, Cio, White Chain’s here!”

“Pah,” Cio growled.

“Wanna have a drink with us? You’ll have to go fetch the drinks, though. We’re all out and we don’t feel like getting up.”

“I can see that,” White Chain said.

“How did you even find us?”

“I followed you ever since you stormed out of our home.”

“The entire night?”

“Yes.”

“So when that guy-”

“Yes. Your stance was pitifully sloppy, student. We’ll have to work on that tomorrow.”

“And then when we-”

“I gave you your privacy,” White Chain looked away. “Even if you didn’t appear keen on too much of it in the first place.”

“Hah! Stoneyarse’s a pervert. Who woulda thunk!” Cio sniggered.

“You were behaving very strangely at home. I was worried.”

“You hear, that, Cio? She was worried. I told you she’s a softie!”

“Pah.”

“A stoney but a softie.”

“Stoney I’ll give thee.”

“I thought something was wrong,” White Chain knelt down next to them. “So imagine my surprise when I gathered that all that was was you partaking in too much drink.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Allison chortled.

“That was not wise, Allison. Nor restrained.”

“I know, I know. Sorry.”

“Well have to have a long chat about that tomorrow, student.”

“Oh no.” All colour vanished from Allison’s face.

“Yes, we will.”

“Not that,” Allison jerked up and scrambled towards the roof’s edge, where she threw up, the vomit spreading through the air in a majestic arch as it fell onto the streets.

“Ha! I win!” Cio cackled and raised her arms in victory.

“Magnificent,” White Chain rolled her eyes.

“The final bit of the wine may have been a bit too much,” Allison wiped her mouth.

“Mhm,” White Chain glared at her with her arms crossed.

Allison let herself drop onto the roof again.

“We should get going, now,” White Chain said.

“Yeah, I’m not going anywhere for a bit. I just need a quick nap and I’ll be back on my feet. Just five minutes. Ten, tops.”

White Chain rubbed her temples. “You can’t be serious.”

“Just five. Five minutes. I promise.” Allison snuggled into Cio.

White Chain approached her and lifted both her and Cio onto her shoulders. Allison slumped like a sack of potatoes, while Cio stretched herself like a cat hung to dry.

“Wheee! All aboard the White Chain train!” the sack of potatoes hollered.

“Do not call me that,” said White Chain.

“And now we’re taking the White Chain Express back home. Because she was worried about us. Isn’t that sweet?”

“Aye, I guess.” Cio swayed lazily back and forth with every step White Chain took.

“We love you too, White Chain!” The sack of potatoes tried to hug her but struggled to get a firm grip on the angel’s back.

“Pah,” muttered Cio.

“Pah,” agreed White Chain and carried them homewards into the rising dawn.