

Lily Flower

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Lily Flower

by [Phosphell](#)

Summary

Seeking the fleeting shadows of his old friend, Pure Vanilla joins the cookies of darkness. Unknown to him, they are a group of ragtag outcasts and damaged people, held together by mirrors and faded strings. His presence just happened to be the tipping point.

Everything begins to fall apart.

White Lily: Origins

Chapter Notes

White Lily fucks up her school, her friends, her life, and then the world. In that order.

TW: beheading a child

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Once upon a time, the world had burned down. Opposing forces faced each other, a divide between them that could not be fixed. Five cookies stood at the edge of a broken hall, small pieces of the formerly grand building crumbling around them. The wrecked remains of the Vanilla castle rained down upon the land below the clouds, crushing the cities in its path and leaving a trail of decimation as the winds blew. The group halted at the broken edge, where the castle opened to thin air, able to go no farther.

The Dark Enchantress hovered in front of them, her large form dwarfed by a cake summons. The creature dripped frosting, red and white trails falling from its body. Faint shiny innards could be seen among the twisting velvet. The abomination, with its multiple red wings, malformed face, and numerous serrated teeth could have terrified any sensible person, but the group before it remained determined.

If they failed to stop the Dark Enchantress's reign, then nowhere would be safe. Their kingdoms' lands would be torched to the crust and their citizens torn to pieces.

The cake summon swung one arm at the figures below. The creature smelling of berries stopped it with a shield, feet skidding across the floors from the force. The dark one swung, his bitter yet invigorating power slicing through the limb. Another arm burst forth from the melting body and stitched itself together as flames launched from the candelabrum upon its head, burning the cookies below. White light covered them, healing from the sweet one, and they attacked once again. A savory figure flitted around its head, striking the candles off with complete precision.

It paid no heed to the mage situated at the very back of the group. The lily flowers upon its head smelled like nothing at all.

Slowly, the summon began to be overwhelmed by the combined forces of these small creatures. A shield rammed into it with powerful blunt force. Large slices bleeding bitter poison flowed from its body. Golden arrows pierced from above. Two flower-bearing scepters crossed, boosting the whole group. The cookies in the back supported the front fighters, healing fatal wounds again and again. The separate attacks piled up, the damage sustained eventually becoming too great for the rotted magic weaving its body together. The cake abomination collapsed with a great wail, cracks appearing along its form.

As the summon shattered entirely, it saw its mistress, stabbed through the chest, the bottom end of a sunflower sliding smoothly straight through her body and then out the other side. From the eye of the sunflower, a brilliant white, the darkness.

The minion was no more.

Rewind.

Let's start from the beginning. Remembering is easier when you think in linear fashion.

In the beginning, there were the witches.

They had fashioned cookiekind out of dough and flour, water and all varieties of flavorful spices. Each cookie was given their special ingredients, both physical and metaphorical, specially constructed in the oven of their beloved creators. None were the same as another. The cookies took their uniqueness as proof that they had a purpose in the world, a guiding light. Everyone deserved a place in Earthbred, or so the mantra of the weak and helpless proclaimed.

Cookies were blessed with life. They found themselves there, simply existing one day out of nothing, no memory besides a faint warmth of fire in their bodies and a personality composed of the elements they had been crafted with. Eventually, that flavor will develop and mature, affected by their environments. They gain depth and complexity in their dough, but they will never forget that soft warmth of new creation. They treasure their lives, so they also love those who created them.

And the witches were worshipped as kindly deities, ingrained into history and myth as the epitome of holiness and grace.

What a load of bullshit.

Now focus on a specific point in time. There, that's the memory I seek.

Once upon a time, there was a school. Young cookies everywhere were enrolled in this school at the suggestions and machinations of their parents, to learn the basics of cookie anatomy, alchemy, magic, mathematics, and every other conceivable course one could imagine. The appeal for attending was clear. The Institute had the largest collection of knowledge in the world, organized impeccably by the resident bookkeeper. Rabid cookies attempted to secure positions as teachers, just to look upon the grand library. As a result of the constant influx of overly desperate academics, the academy maintained high-quality education and staff.

The beauty of the school can not be understated either. Lush gardens full of nightshade and viguiera flowers bracketed the school grounds. The Institute itself sported stained glass windows overlooking the outside world and toches made from blue will-o-wisp. An observatory sat on the edge of the grounds, and a mysterious staircase broke away from the telescope overlook that was rumored to lead to the stars.

It was only natural for someone like her to reside in such a beautiful place. Though her foul and corrupted form would no longer feel at home within the abandoned recesses of the academy, it suited its purpose in her life. White Lily loved her school, and the Dark Enchantress cared little. She did, however, see the worth that her former self ascribed to all the academy represented, and understood that.

The young girl, of course, had no such hindsight. She used the school as a means to an end. Only later, what little of the mage's residue that still pulsed in the enchantress's shriveled heart could realize what fond memories she made there.

White Lily did not have many friends in the institute. She had a naturally reclusive nature, but that was not the only reason. She had little interest in forming friendships among the other students. It may sound horrible, but they just weren't on the same level as her. Her intellect, ambition, and interests rarely aligned with other children, and trying to connect with no foundation would be

ultimately a pointless and tiresome endeavor. The professors, too, had trouble making heads or tails out of her, and eventually resigned to leaving her alone since she still scored top marks.

This multitude of factors ensured that she could experiment undisturbed; teachers liked her well enough, and students sought to be her yet did not approach her. She stood as a cold, unreachable idol to the rest of the school, a physical embodiment of the Institute's success and prestige. A genius beyond her years, set apart from the rest of their kind, destined for greatness even in childhood.

Thanks to this reputation, she could get away with a lot more than her peers. This included skipping classes to pursue her own research. This ultimately led to her near-complete isolation from all the other people within the school.

Well, there was a single other student who managed to worm his way into her heart.

"Why do choose to stay with me?" she inquired.

"It's boring without you. I'd rather spend time with my best friend than stay in the classroom," he replied mischievously.

How did she manage to get the honor of being his best friend? The boy had no sense, choosing to hang out with a loner even though he had so many friends and admirers. He was somewhat of a hypocrite, she told him, for acting like such a studious and loving person and then casting the others away just for her. He laughed, then lightly agreed.

Even so, she felt a bit of happiness.

Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics, Literature. All that makes the world in the physical sense, the place of cookies within Earthbread.

They decided to study advanced material together. Both found the curriculum lacking for their level, and tried to rectify their boredom with material beyond their years. White Lily found that linking specific topics to conversations and jokes that Pure Vanilla made helped when it came to retaining information, and worked far more effectively than rote memorization. It seemed friends could be handy after all

Alchemy, Runes, Sorcery. White and black magic. The Speculative Origin of Cookiekind. Cold emanating from the dark side of the moon, forbidden arcane practices they shared in secret.

White Lily's hypothesis, that "evil magic" did not exist, was proven. Sure, more dangerous spells existed, but the intent of the caster determined true morality. The spells had no more evil than a sword, a cold and indiscriminate weapon in the hands of its wielder. If her friend could use such magic, it could not be inherently bad. To ban an entire branch of magic due to its potential for power was nothing less than the height of foolishness.

Pure Vanilla smiled beatifically. He, too, seemed happy at the magic flowing around his fingers. She gazed at him and felt justified in breaking the laws set before them. Striving to discover Earthbread's truths was not evil.

She thought that the forbidden nature of Dark moon magic had been revealed to them. Elated at the realization of the "truth" purposely hidden away from them, White Lily wished to pursue deeper mysteries. She picked up the book they read together, the speculation on cookiekind. The cookie that had written this text collected common notions that people had about their creators, opinions that generally leaned toward positive experiences. With no evidence, the Institute treated these

opinions as fact, drilling the wonder of the witches in the students' brains.

The brilliant girl questioned her teachings. She would not be the first to do so, but she was different than her doubtful predecessors.

Normal people would not pry into the matters of Gods. Who would even know where to begin?

"Pure Vanilla, I think we should try to understand how cookies are created."

Normal people would not dare breach the sacredness of creating or destroying the soul.

"I think that's a fascinating subject. I agree."

They sought out information like beasts desperate for water, working with the same passion that they shared when learning magic. She gathered ingredients and her friend smuggled books out of the library, poring over them as if to find the secrets of life. Well, then again, life was exactly what they were researching.

They experimented many times, sneaking into laboratories and using the dangerous instruments as a makeshift oven. Their first tests were little more than burnt mounds of dough. As her friend collected and translated more ancient recipes, a picture began to form. Lists of the approximate recipe had been spread among the books, and they averaged and calculated the averages until they had a good idea of the ingredients for a single cookie.

The experiments started to appear uncanny, and if White Lily didn't look too close, she could deceive herself into believing that the forms lying in front of her were just sleeping.

Farther and farther in. The bodies they had baked soon looked identical to living cookies, but they either broke or melted. They had followed the recipes to the milligram, so what could have gone wrong? Were the old texts incorrect about the baking process? No, that couldn't be. There was something missing. But what?

White Lily pondered this question relentlessly, until one night, the answer came to her in a spark of enlightenment.

"Soul jam!" she cried, vibrating with excitement the next day as she presented her idea. "Soul jam is the only ingredient we are missing." Across from her, Pure Vanilla frowned.

"There's no place we can get soul jam, not without hurting someone else."

"Who's to say that taking soul jam would hurt someone? You don't know that," she spoke beseechingly, "It has never been done before. Plus, people lose jam all the time when they are injured, and a quick healing fixes them up instantly." Her friend opened his mouth to object, but she barreled on. "Think of all the good we can do with this research if it is completed."

"Cookies aren't always fully healed, White Lily. Maybe bodies can be fixed, but cracks can pervade the mind and soul. That might just be a result of the violent nature of their injuries rather than missing jam, but still, I can't get behind doing this."

She huffed in frustration.

He shifted nervously. "Where would you even find a suitable person, anyway? Blueberry Institute is filled with bookworm teachers and inexperienced students, none of whom have particular battle prowess. They aren't any outstanding candidates."

“The headmaster is a strong mage.” A dusty image of the school’s founder lay crooked in the glass dome. The image was slightly faded from age and neglect.

“You’re...really considering it?”

She nodded. His small sacrifice would be collateral in the ever-progressing advancement of magic and science, a scant price for the greater good.

“This isn’t a good idea.” For once, the boy was dead serious. “I’m not helping you take someone’s soul.”

White Lily didn’t reply. Soul jam was the one thing that they hadn’t included in their blueprints, and she felt beyond certain that it was the final ingredient. They were so close to the truth. If Pure Vanilla refused to progress with the experiment, she would do it herself.

And that she did. She bought flowers laced with a sleeping potion into the headmaster’s office, making an offhanded comment about the blossom’s sweet smell. She then waited for a few minutes, then nudged the door open to find the man unconscious at his desk. She extracted some of his jam with a syringe, then gave him a healing potion she kept on hand. No one will ever suspect a thing, and the headmaster will wake in a few minutes thinking he had just been daydreaming. It would be in character, too.

That day, she snuck out into the secret garden. She had baked a cookie beforehand and inconspicuously dragged the body through the school. She had managed to heave it into the glass dome with great effort.

It was time. Carefully, she injected the jam deep into the empty body, hopeful. *May the witches-no, may I bring life into you*, she prayed

The dough breathed once, and she felt the same ecstasy, the joy of a secret unearthed and a forbidden spell cast. She created life itself!

It then wailed like an infant. She startled at the shrill cry. Putting her hands over the cookie’s mouth, she made a shushing noise. She couldn’t be caught like this. Under her, the new cookie kept struggling. She should have made it smaller; the baby cookie had been fashioned at an average size, bulkier than her. It was going to break free and cry again.

“Shut up!” she snarled pressing harder on the baby. A large crack echoed around the glass dome, and the struggling stopped. White Lily removed her hands haltingly, stunned. Its neck had snapped clean through.

Ah, she thought in faint disappointment, *I must have kept the oven on for too long*.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: The Viguiera flower resembles a yellow daisy, and is also known as the golden eye flower. I found this fitting, considering episodes 6 and 7’s imagery

Dark Enchantress: Origins

Chapter Notes

TW: visual psychosis, corpses, body horror, graphic depictions of being burned alive

This is the longest singular chapter I have ever written and it's for goddamn cookie run
I'm gonna fucking cry-

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's a body. I just killed someone. She blinked and shook her head, as if the action would dispel the fog that settled around her brain. No, it doesn't count. It was just an experiment. Her hands were stained with the baby's jam, the headmaster's jam. It dripped lethargically from her palms, slowly sinking into her dough as if trying to burrow into her soul.

A corpse lay prone before her.

What was she supposed to do?

Something shuffled in the distance. Snapping out of her stupor, White Lily became aware of just how incriminating her position was. She was practically straddling a corpse of a newly baked cookie, its neck separated from its head, and stray jam splattered across the room. Anyone who came in would assume the absolute worst.

The body had to go.

She quickly contemplated a list of options. She had to work quickly: If anyone found the scene, the jam may be tested and linked back to the headmaster, and he could possibly reveal their actions. Little could be worse than some form of law enforcement discovering Pure Vanilla and her use of forbidden magic.

Burning it wouldn't work. It would create a foul smell, and may attract unwanted passersby. Plus, the corpse was more likely to char than to disintegrate entirely. Tossing it into the river wouldn't suffice either, since cookies float on water and she had no way to weigh it down. She just had to hide it and hope no one discovers the body.

With the help of her magic, she gouged out a pit halfway under the ground of a nearby viguiera bush, dragging the body and dumping it in the hole. She pushed all the dirt into place, then cast a small growth spell so that grass covered the upended soil. Small flower buds sprouted from the ground, no doubt feeding on the jam. White Lily cringed, but let them be. She got a towel from the gardening shed and meticulously washed away the blood splatters, cleaning the rag in the river near the school entrance.

She returned to the glass dome and collapsed on the floor. The rag was haphazardly thrown in a corner. White Lily curled into a ball, head in her knees. She didn't feel like going back to class. Pretending to go about her day in a normal capacity felt too far beyond her reach.

She stayed in the secret garden for hours. The brightness of the day gave way to dusk, then night. Eventually, someone stepped into the private garden. She tensed, wondering if a student, teacher,

or the headmaster had found jam strewn near the river, or somewhere she had missed cleaning.

Pure Vanilla stepped into the secret garden. She sighed in relief. *It was just him.*

“The headmaster collapsed today. Did you go through with the procedure after all?” He did not really phrase it as a question, but as an assertion of fact. She realized with a jolt that he was truly disappointed in her. His mood made her feel slimy. He hadn’t ever regarded her with disappointment before. She nodded silently.

He sighed. “Well, did it work?”

She thought of the cries of the baby cookie, the overly crisp dough beneath her hands, and the resounding *snap* when its neck tore from its body.

“No.”

He seemed to accept her answer. “I’m relieved. To be honest, I’m not sure what we would have done if such a method worked.”

“I guess so,” she said, “It would be a problem if it were alive, huh. Lots of negative implications.” White Lily paused. “The headmaster, is he alright?”

The disapproval on Pure Vanilla’s face faded, and his white flower visibly relaxed. “I don’t know. We could tail him for a while, check up on him. Since you have already taken his soul jam, we might as well document any side effects.”

She gave him a tired smile in agreement. If she had anything to say about it, he would never find out about the baby cookie. It wasn’t a living thing, only exhibiting signs of life because of its stolen jam, but she couldn’t help but worry if discarding it would negatively affect their headmaster.

So began their stalking.

The headmaster arrived the next day, obviously unwell. He had to lean against the wall sometimes, often on the edge of fainting. The two children exchanged concerned glances, writing down the obvious signs of weakness. Despite the insistence of the teachers that he stay home and rest, the headmaster simply waved them off and continued working.

The duo tailed him as he went about his day. The man spent some time working with the school’s administration, procuring new books, looking over potential students, and other mundane tasks. Around the afternoon, he left his office. He returned an hour later, panting from exertion. Then he went back to doing normal activities, before retiring once classes have concluded. They watched him repeat this schedule over most of the next week. Unfortunately, his health did not improve, but he became noticeably worse at a certain point in the day.

Every day, the man would disappear for around an hour. She had always assumed he just ate lunch in his office since it happened around the middle of the day. However, he left the grounds entirely, unlocking and locking the observatory and going up the mysterious stairs.

“No wonder he’s always so winded,” Pure Vanilla whispered, “climbing those stairs when he’s already in this state. I’m shocked he hadn’t fainted standing up.”

“What lies above those stairs, anyway? It has to be important for him to walk that much every day.” She hesitated, recalling the last time she had tried to find out the truth, before asking, “Should we see? Whatever’s up there could be harmful.”

“We can check,” he affirmed.

With the headmaster’s soul-sickness, they only had to wait a few hours before he fell asleep at his desk. Pure Vanilla snuck into his room and pinched his keys. He went back to the garden where she waited, handing them to her.

“Should we go together?”

“I’ll do it alone.” The headmaster would surely notice his keys missing, and she did not wish for him to connect the incident with Pure Vanilla. She had been the one to take his jam and reduce him to a trembling wreck. Her friend shouldn’t have to bear this burden as well.

“Are you sure?”

“I insist. Go back to class, okay?”

He acquiesced, leaving to participate in a class too easy for him. White Lily hurried to the observatory gate, unlocking the barrier and closing it behind her. She walked up the glass candy steps, noting the slow increase in magical energy. It was a long walk, at least twenty minutes, and glancing from the side of the steps she could see the tiny academy building, which looked like a toy from this height. The stairs lacked a railing, and she felt absurdly grateful that the headmaster did not fall due to exhaustion. Even she was getting winded after the endless climbing.

As if sensing her thought, the end came into view. A small floating platform appeared at the end, gently floating. She hopped from the stairs onto the platform, and it bobbed softly under her weight. The curious student approached the center of the platform, gasping at the object in the center.

A large blue crystal in the shape of a moon glimmered in the starlight, encompassed on all sides by magical bindings. It practically radiated power, and White Lily was entranced.

This is what the headmaster had been traveling to every day? Such wonderful magic, why was it hidden way so high above their school? The headmaster, with all his power, had no reason to hide this from others.

Should I tell Pure Vanilla?

He may ask her to give up and leave the crystal to the adults, but White Lily disliked that course of action. The crystal was wholly new to her, and just giving up knowledge so close to her grasp went against everything she stood for. Besides, she would only have one chance. The headmaster would likely keep track of his keys carefully after this, and she did not know if the teachers also had the same magic dispelling key. If she left, then she could not return.

Screw that. Her curiosity prevailed, and she welcomed it.

It did not occur to her that the headmaster could have been protecting the crystal, rather than hoarding it to himself.

She placed a hand upon the crystal, letting forbidden magic flow into her palms. Under the call of her magic, cold and efficient, the bindings gave way. Glowing cracks spiraled outward from her touch, and the crystal shattered.

The seal cracked, and the gates to hell opened, and all the vices of Pandora’s box were set free. White Lily drew in a sharp breath as twisting shadows appeared from beyond the rift, monsters unseen by this world swarming forward. They poured out from the portal in a screeching wave. She

ducked as some of the monsters swooped for her, but before they came close, a beam of light magic hit them from behind.

The headmaster had arrived. He had been slightly late for his daily routine. The man swayed about listlessly, as if dreaming. One of his eyes came to rest upon her, unfocused but unwavering from its position. She could see the moment he recognized her.

“White Lily? What are you doing here?!” She opened her mouth, preparing to lie, but the headmaster spoke again. “It doesn’t matter now, it’s too dangerous to stay.” She could see that he questioned her presence and the open rift, but decided to put her safety above answers. She felt a twinge of guilt at his ashen face. It was her fault that he was suffering.

He waved a hand at the Institute. “Go, warn the other teachers, tell them to evacuate the other students. And...tell them that the rift had opened.”

He pushed her away from the portal and shoed her down a few flights of stairs. She looked back, shocked, but the professor had already returned to the open rift. He had taken out a scythe, glistening rock candy which reflected starlight. “Protect...” the man murmured, as if to himself. “I have to protect the students.”

She ran. She was greeted by Pure Vanilla at the door, panicking.

“Everyone could see the flash of red light and the creatures pour from the sky. The professors are trying to organize us, but most people are in an uproar and some students have already run away.” he summarized, before hugging her fiercely. “Oh Lily, I thought you had been hurt! What happened?”

“Now we know,” she whispered hauntingly.

“White Lily?” He sounded concerned, but she refused to meet his eyes.

“Now we know what lay beyond the gate.”

Pure Vanilla fell into stricken silence.

“Come on.” She pulled him forward, tone still flat. “I need to warn the teachers.”

They pushed through the pandemonium, finding each teacher and informing them of what happened. The weaker cookies rallied up the children, while the rest hung back to help fight against the creatures from the rift. White Lily and Pure Vanilla held hands as they marched out of the school, near tears. Her friend tried his best to reassure her, saying how she couldn’t have known, that this was not their fault, but his platitudes rang empty. The fear and regret in his glazed eyes shone plainly as day. She pulled her hand from his and fled, leaving him alone in their garden. She never looked back, but what his expression could have been at that moment haunted her waking thoughts.

She had gone too far. There was no returning, not after she had doomed the school. White Lily threw herself deeper into her experiments, pursuing the intricacies of dark moon magic on her own. She had to continue, had to change the world, had to make sure that the headmaster and teachers’ lives didn’t go to waste. She was doing this for them. She wasn’t evil!

Finding the truth used to be a joy, but she could no longer feel happy at discovering the world before her. It wasn’t a dream, but a necessity now. What else could someone so tainted do, but carry out their sentence?

Years go by, and she had become a hermit, living alone on the edge of civilization, a mockery of her school days. The only thing that broke through endless months of monotonous research were solo expeditions she took to the school. She needed to procure more materials, and the school *was* the foremost collection of knowledge in the world before she had ruined everything.

The first time she returned to the Institute, it had been a warzone, swarming with monsters and corrupted cookie magic.

She saw the silhouette of the headmaster, still patrolling the hallways. For a moment, she felt profound relief, the guilt of his blood absolved from her hands. She called out to him.

The swing of his scythe nearly killed her.

The cookies that had stayed to fight off the monsters she released had been twisted by the magic from beyond the rift. Their bodies collapsed and reformed, their dough expanding, their heads shattering into a million pieces among clouds of magic that made their faces appear like a void filled with like stars.

It hadn't been apparent then, but on her next expedition, the true physical changes began to take hold. None of the teachers recognized her, indiscriminately attacking anyone who stepped into the school. They were shells of their former selves. Nothing resembled the people they had once been, naught but an echo of their dying resolve.

Protect. Protect. Protect.

She avoided returning to Blueberry Institute often. There was no telling how much rift magic exposure would corrupt her, and she did not wish to see the guardians wandering the abandoned classrooms. Their shattered forms had burned themselves into her memories, pervading her sleep. When she went outside, they seemed to waver in the shadows, watching her. She almost expected someone to find and judge her for her crimes, torturing her so she would suffer just as much as those broken *things* clinging to her school.

White Lily cut herself off from people completely, pacing about the few rooms in her house until the browns and creams blurred together into splotches of motion, like cookies dancing in the wallpaper. In some distant part of her mind, she recounted an old conversation.

I dislike being a healer, Pure Vanilla told her, Healers could never fix as much as they need to.

What do you mean? Healers make sure that a soldier can keep fighting without rest. They are the energy source that maintains an army, like a self-correcting machine.

Self-correcting? he sighed, healing is more like taping a crack on a leaking bottle of syrup. The bottle can function, but there's still a crack and now and bacteria in the syrup that will rot from within.

What is the bacteria an analogy for? Insanity?

Perhaps. It can also represent trauma, psychosis, and the inability to function in a peaceful environment. Even more mundane situations, like isolation and the buildup of many small situations, can cause it to fester.

She giggled in the shifting walls. Could she be going insane? The shadows weren't supposed to move like that, no, it was just a trick of the imagination. White Lily ran a hand through her hair shakily. Yes, she just needed some fresh air untainted by the darkness. A bright place, without shadows that dance in the corner of her vision.

If only she could fly, high above the clouds where shadows will not exist. It doesn't matter if she had to chase the sun until she died from exhaustion, she would be free from those shards of dough, dancing, hovering, falling like dying stars.

How funny it would be if she was going insane and realizing it too? Would losing her mind be like a nice walk in the forest? You stroll about on a pleasant path, going a bit farther every day, until suddenly one day you are off the trail and the forest towers above you and you do not know how to find your way back. Would losing your mind be a bitter struggle, like fighting a hoard of wolves, bleeding and crumbling, or would you cease to exist without a sound? What would remain in your body, but a raving, seizing substitute for life that starves to death because it forgets to swallow?

She suddenly felt a stab of fear. She didn't want to die surrounded by chemical fumes and badly scribbled notes. It was too cold here, and if her life were snuffed out in this little cabin, no one would find her in years. Nothing would be left by then but dust and peeling paper and the scent of dried potions permeated by the faintest vanilla.

White Lily snapped to consciousness. Her house did not smell like vanilla. Where was that sweet scent coming from? She scrambled up from where she had been, running to the door. Her hand hesitated before touching the knob, but she did not need to turn. When she looked down, a letter laid there, having been slipped under the door, the clean parchment signed with a familiar signature.

She ripped apart the envelope, smearing ink all over the message within.

"A coronation...?"

The message was an invitation to the coronation of Pure Vanilla as the king of the Vanilla kingdom. The letter was formal and professional, lacking in warmth, but it had arrived on her doorstep. That must have taken personalized magic; she basically exiled herself from the world.

Oily strands of hair fell in front of her face as she read through the letter, she brushed it out of her face, and it fell again. Distantly, she realized how much of a disastrous mess she had become. She would have to cut some of it when she went outside.

When she went outside? *No, I shouldn't. Someone will recognize me, they'll come for me. They'll kill me, why shouldn't they, after what I did-* She shut down the spiral of her thoughts with great prejudice.

The walls have stopped dancing.

"I have a reason," she said firmly, her voice scratchy and hoarse from lack of use. She spoke again, more clearly. "I'll go."

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The Vanilla kingdom floated above the clouds. The sun shone on the city, and while there were shadows, it didn't overwhelm her. The scent of vanilla wafting in the crisp air brought her to earth when her mind wandered away. She nearly cried when she comprehended that the warm smell had been what pulled mind her back from the brink.

Pure Vanilla had become a king. He looked good in his priest-like robes. They suited him, enhancing his warm demeanor and presence. His subjects loved him too. As the priest placed the crown on his head, the crowd in the stands cheered without restraint, proclaiming their new king. Watching her old friend bow at the altar, she felt a hollowness in her chest, as though he had

stepped past a line she couldn't follow, leaving her forever.

It was probably the happiest moment in his life. He was surrounded by his friends and subjects, but he had looked directly at her, his smile reserved for her alone.

White Lily felt like a fraud.

They hadn't seen each other since childhood. Despite being so loved and adored, why did he still seek her out? She couldn't call him a hypocrite. He served his subjects faithfully, an all-loving king, pure as his namesake. No, she was the hypocrite. She shouldn't have come to his coronation.

And yet, she did. Disgusting sentiment. The next time he sent her a letter, she came again, trailing after him like some hound, starved for attention. Again and again.

More years pass. Pure Vanilla had gained a group of close friends and confidants. He had been mingling among the royalty of other kingdoms and became close with the variety of personalities among them. Although he had many friends back at the Institute, she had not seen him so comfortable with cookies other than her. He introduced them happily, and White Lily closely inspected them, the people who managed to reach Pure Vanilla's heart.

She quickly understood how they grew close.

Hollyberry was passionate in all she did, whether in battle or in everyday paperwork. She loved her friends dearly, often nearly (literally) smothering them in affection. Pure Vanilla called her a wine connoisseur, but white Lily thought that he was being too kind in his description. She cared little for the quality of wine, just delighting in being a happy drunk. Of everyone, she had the most approachable aura, and her citizens would often greet and make small talk with her. She listened to them carefully and memorized the littlest details, a trait that made people feel seen. Brave and just, she was the very embodiment of a hero.

Dark Cacao acted most reserved among the group. He was an honest man, she could tell at a glance, not suited to politics nor trickery, more of a warrior than the others. He reacted awkwardly to gifts and bristled from excess. His mannerisms were suited to a powerful soldier or general rather than a king. She would call him unfit for a throne, if not for his incredible protectiveness over his kingdom and the way his subjects heeded his commands with awe and reverence. He rarely initiated touch, but appreciated Hollyberry's hugs, Golden Cheese's random touchiness, and Pure Vanilla's gentle brushes.

Golden Cheese enjoyed the finer things in life, surrounding herself with beauty and opulence. She was an avid perfectionist, due in part to her germaphobic tendencies. However, she saw something within the world's luxuries that the rest of them couldn't and tried her very best to share it. Hollyberry fawned over the pristine gift baskets that found their way to her patio, filled to the brim with sweet juice and assortments of cheese, and told White Lily not to be overwhelmed when she received similar gifts.

*They are all wonderful companions.* She was happy for Pure Vanilla. He built relationships with good people.

*Do I deserve to be among them?*

She did not have to ponder for long. Despite being the only non-royal in the group, they accepted her presence without issues. They listened to her and heeded her opinions. Every time Pure Vanilla gathered with them, he would invite her as well, and she slowly became used to their personalities and group dynamic.

During one of their gatherings, it dawned on her that they were friends. *I wonder exactly when I knew?*

Dark Cacao (the victim) was covered in over a gallon of pink glitter, near tears. Hollyberry and Golden Cheese (the escalators) were engaged in a fistfight, while Pure Vanilla (the instigator) tried in vain to comfort the bitter king.

Yeah, they were definitely friends. If the kings and queens had done this around anyone else, their reputations would be ruined forever. White Lily (blackmail recorder) could cite over a dozen examples that would have been national incidents had the royals' respective citizens found out. She laughed at the two queens knocking each other out. When was the last time she had laughed aloud?

What wonderful characters. She would be content to spend a lifetime with them.

Unfortunately, they had kingdoms to run. Her friends spent most of the year in their castles, swamped with paperwork. During these periods, White Lily wallowed in her house, going through the same motions she had perfected in her isolated years. When the walls started to blur, she traveled to the Vanilla kingdom in disguise to clear her head.

On rare occasions, they would adventure together to discover new land and solve problems. These adventures were the highlight of her life. She maintained that listening to her friends bicker like children was the best kind of ambiance.

Pure Vanilla only stuck to healing light magic, and she stuck to her support nature magic. They were so much stronger than the others imagined, but it was just another secret kept. Perhaps that cold magic was evil after all.

For this specific adventure, they had been dispatched to provide healing to a village that had its water supply poisoned. The two pomegranate sisters greeting them said that although the poison's source had been removed, but too many people in the village needed aided recovery for them to heal alone. Pure Vanilla went to the medical hall to help. She aided him in taking care of the sick, but her mind drifted elsewhere.

On the way to the village, in a small desert bordering the forest, she had passed a structure she had only seen in books. The rumored holy cake tower, reaching hundreds of platters into the air. Perhaps the elusive witches may be there.

She placed a wet towel on an ailing man's head, murmuring a blessing for wellness.

Suddenly, she felt a squirming sensation, as if a jelly worm crawled down her back.

White Lily snapped her head around. From the corner of the house, a young cookie with priestess's robes stared at her. The cookie then swept away silently, leaving the tent. She blinked, confused.

*What was that about?*

Healing the village progressed flawlessly. By the next sunrise, all of the poisoned cookies were well on their way to a full recovery, and the sisters waved them goodbye.

They journeyed back through the desert, camping during nighttime. White Lily had taken night watch so she could see the tower in the distance, glowing like a beacon during the night.

Around the tower could be the answers to questions she harbored for most of her life.

She wished to go, but her friends would be concerned if she left out of the blue.

The problem solved itself. While she was pondering how to give them the slip, something flashed from a nearby sand dune. Quietly, the mage crept away from the tents to check on the mysterious flash. A young cookie had been flashing a mirror to get her attention. The mage recognized her immediately.

The pomegranate priestess she had seen earlier followed them. Confused, White Lily scrutinized her. Upon closer inspection, she noticed that the young cookie's dress had been torn by the elements, her exposed skin marred by cuts from scorpions and goblin attacks, and one bun completely fallen out of its tie. She was obviously exhausted. More striking than her state was her eyes.

They barely shone, like the eyes of a corpse. She knew what that looked like, and the priestess's dead eyes resembled the fish they had caught for dinner. Even Pure Vanilla, who was completely blind, expressed more visually than this girl.

Unsettled, she readied her staff in case she needed to attack.

"You wish to investigate the truth of this world?"

She startled. *How did she know?*

The pomegranate cookie pointed over at their campsite, and White Lily's gaze followed. Over the edge of the dune, her own visage sat, carefully surveying its surroundings. She turned back to the priestess, questioning.

"I can stall them. Go, and remember what I've done for you."

White Lily wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. As disturbing as she found the cookie, the priestess obviously was no warrior, and her interest seemed to be directed at her alone. The strange cookie most likely wouldn't lead her friends into a trap. The body double that she had created of White Lily was very realistic as well, it had the same idiosyncrasies and posture. They wouldn't know the difference.

"Thank you." The priestess appeared almost surprised at her gratitude, but accepted it nonetheless.

She set off without supplies on her back. The holy cake tower was so close by, that she could almost taste the pure sweetness of powdered sugar and the piles of unrolled dough.

She did not regret leaving her friends. At no point did she consider that they could've gone to the tower together. Her anticipation took over, and she hurried in the direction of the beautiful platter, a wide smile gracing her face.

*Why were cookies created?*

She couldn't say when, but this question morphed over time. From her early school days, she had wondered why cookies were brought into Earthbread. That innocent curiosity died a quick death at the academy's fall. Sometime during her isolation, the subject of her inquiries focused on a singular person.

*Why was I created?*

If every cookie's uniqueness could be attributed to their ingredients, then they must be created for a specific purpose. Every cookie has their place in the world, so therefore their life had meaning through divine purpose. *Right?*

She needed to know that all her years she spent bitterly alone had some purpose. That she hadn't wasted her life.

White Lily scurried toward the tower, distantly registering celebratory noises. She saw the massive forms of the witches, laughing as they moved about, passing ingredients around. The nearest witch held up a newly baked cookie, cutely decorated and browned to perfection-

And bit its head off.

She skidded to a stop, nearly tripping over her own feet.

*What..?*

The witch made a grotesque expression as they swallowed. Dissatisfied at the cookie's taste, they sat it back out, pieces of the cookie flying with spittle. They regarded the remaining torso in their hand before nonchalantly tossing it to the side. White Lily flinched as it broke to smithereens on impact, a tiny piece of it skidding in front of her.

This was surely not real.

She backed away from the broken remains, running into a hidden crevice in the tower. She climbed up, softly shuffling about so that none of the witches would perceive her. White Lily dragged herself up the trays until she was at a good height to see everything. What a sight!

Witches of all different shapes were celebrating. They rolled dough and layered cakes, working en masse to produce a feast. Trays of cookies were extracted and eaten. Unbaked trays quickly replaced their spot in the tower. The bakery churned, and new cookies barely had time to open their eyes before the witches' teeth tore them apart.

The cookies were smiling. Why were they smiling?

White Lily covered her mouth as she watched the witch chew. This was really not the place to throw up.

Something whimpered.

A small cookie was right next to her, watching the same spectacle. She had stepped out from behind the goblets on their level. The girl was trembling, but made no sound.

They exchanged eye contact and the girl turned back toward the grisly sight.

"What are you doing?" White Lily hissed. "Run!"

The girl continued shaking but did not move. It occurred to the mage that she was too terrified. She reached over and grabbed the child's hand, hoping to drag her out of plain sight. It was too late. A clawed hand grabbed the girl, catching White Lily in the process.

They were both tossed into the cauldron.

*This is the truth I had sought all along. The secret to life.*

The little girl dissolved in front of her eyes. She had been reaching out to White Lily as if the mage could save her.

On the shelf, a forgotten staff wilted.



*How utterly meaningless!*

White Lily had not felt the initial burn. She had been in shock, but it was only a second delay. The liquid seared against her skin, and she screamed, but more liquid entered her throat. She snapped her mouth shut, but resisting made no difference. Melting was inevitable. She watched as her legs boiled and crumbled into the mixture. Her vision seemed to flatten as part of her head joined the melting pot of the dead.

*But...*

What a pointless existence. She spent all her life learning the secrets of magic, but had yet to apply them. Her curiosity led to dissolve in the bottom of a witch's cauldron. She will die alone, her life cut short. There was still so much in the world she wanted to do, so much to experience. She wanted to try one of Golden Cheese's infamous baskets, lose in Hollyberry's drinking competitions, join the Make Dark Cacao Laugh group. She wished to see Pure Vanilla again, his angelic smile and hidden mischievous streak. If only he were here with her.

*I want to live...*

The liquid tasted sweet.

A monster rose from the primordial soup, far larger than any singular cookie. She was the amalgamation of all the lives tossed into the cauldron, warped half-living cookies consumed by a singular consciousness.

The Dark Enchantress clawed her way out of the boiling liquid amidst gasps and cries. Witches screamed and fled as they were lifted off their feet by powerful magic, spells woven together from a lifetime of research. A dead staff flew into the monster's grasp, useful beyond the grave.

*These are my gods?* She sneered at the heaving, ugly creatures, as they screeched in an incomprehensible language. *No, I don't accept that.*

Plants broke through the ground, ensnaring witches and plunging roots through them, new life growing where they wasted space. Light and dark magic flooded the space, twisting in tandem, the cumulative reactions they caused with each other far stronger than they would be alone. Witches wailed as their bodies were replaced with sugar. Unable to sustain flesh and blood, the sugar crumbled and the witches crumbled with them. Cold, efficient magic stopped hearts and burst blood vessels.

She threw her hand into the air. Normally, large crystals were catalysts for opening rifts in the world, but the dark enchantress was powerful to the point where tools did not matter. Magic crystallized at her will, dense enough to substitute. She waved and the crystals burst, opening doors to new possibilities.

Creatures stuck within the burning fires of the ovens came through the rifts, ready to do her bidding. Cake monsters and summons crawled out of the depths of hell as she cackled. She flew above them, freer than she had ever been.

The Dark Enchantress hated the truth. She hated the fact that she was born to be eaten, to die. She refused to accept her fate; this time, she will create her own truth and the world must bend to accommodate.

Guilt no longer chained her down, starlight no longer haunted her every move. White Lily had finally given up, fading along with the scores of others in that cauldron. What monster took her

place feared not the darkness, the forbidden nature of magic. What could compare to the horrible reality she had seen?

The Dark Enchantress was worse than the fallen heroine's nightmares. She embraced the darkness, for she was darkness itself.

"Come, my monsters, my dear abominations!" she cried, pointing her dead staff at the fleeing creatures. "Tonight, we have a witch hunt!"

And the shadows danced, no longer smothered by light.

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Pure Vanilla cried when he stabbed her. Tears flowed down his face as the flower dug into her flesh.

It was a bit of a surprise. She thought he had renounced dark magic forever. She felt a twinge of satisfaction that she alone caused him to use his moon magic, nonsensical as it was.

No matter. Being shackled only served as a temporary setback. She would not be killed so easily. It only took the inescapable grasp of natural erosion to set in, and she would be free. Sleeping, the Dark Enchantress lie preserved as the world crumbled from her aftermath. Decades passed and a false peace settled over the world, like a cotton lamb ready for the slaughter. Everything would already be prepared.

The forces of the dark were gathered together, drafted by a little pomegranate priestess with dead-fish eyes.

The Dark Enchantress took a seat upon her corrupted throne, powerful beyond measure. She attacked vulnerable kingdoms and straggling witches with ruthless efficiency, and all of Earthbread trembled before her, attempting to escape her clutches with futile effort. Nothing remained of her ignoble past. White Lily was gone for good.

A knock pulled her out of her reverie. She could hear Licorice cookie's muffled voice from behind the tinted red doors.

"Master!" He had a proud inflection. As usual, the reaper had likely come to beg for a chance to prove himself. "May I enter the conference room?"

Well, no harm in having an extra hand doing grunt work. "Come in."

"Thank you!" The reaper cried, forgetting to address her proper title in his excitement. The abnormal slip-up caught her attention. Normally, the cunning necromancer took every opportunity to suck up to her and get in her good graces, but for him to miss a chance? Something big must have happened.

Licorice barged into the room, dragging a ragged figure behind him.

Pure Vanilla Cookie?

(Claps hands together) My first corruption arc, how did I do?

White Lily going stir-crazy being cooped up was a nod to Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Literature kids will understand.

Besides PVC, the other ancients won't show up outside of memories. The glitter incident will be further explained though! :)

Dark Choco: Pillar of Faith

Chapter Notes

I feel as though all the ancients decided to pitch in raising each others' (Cacao and Hollyberry's) kids

TW: Dark Choco's fantastic self-hatred

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Swing, slash, stab.

An old training dummy recoiled from the force of his wooden sword, bouncing wildly on its stand like a bobblehead.

Dark Choco cookie readied his grip on the sword, preparing to strike again. He had been at this for the better part of an hour and was starting to pant from the effort. Even so, the sourness in his arms gave him some satisfaction. Training in the Dark Cacao kingdom was similar to this: soldiers would repeat the same simple few motions to infinity until they near drop out of exhaustion. They would perfect the basics, and then build on top of them instinctually. While practicing the same three moves was admittedly boring, he took it as an opportunity to tune out the world around him.

It's depressing, but training was the most pleasant part of the day.

"Dark Choco cookie."

He swung, knocking the dummy back again. It had quite a bit of wear and tear, a fact that he felt proud of. A worn dummy demonstrated a warrior's strength, and he alone used the dummy. No one else in the Cookies of Darkness was a physical fighter except for Red Velvet, whom Dark Choco has never seen in this room.

He can look at the dummy and see that he accomplished something.

"Dark Choco Cookie!"

He threw the sword at the voice in surprise. Pomegranate Cookie dodged the haphazard toss, face scrunching as she took in his form.

"About time you finally noticed something outside of your head. Sometimes I really wonder if the Strawberry Jam sword damaged more than it should've."

"Why are you here?" he asked hoarsely, bristling at the jab.

"Our master has called a meeting. As it is, you're probably going to be late, but unfortunately, she has asked for everyone to be present." She sighed, as though fetching him was a great burden. "Put on a shirt."

Pomegranate left, spending no more time in his presence than she had to.

He meandered for a bit while dressing himself, dreading the meeting to come. Rarely ever did their

meetings ever need everyone present. It must be something important, and what the Dark Enchantress found important rarely boded well for the world.

He cleaned the training area and slung on his cloak. Glittering red gems embedded in the walls glowed as he passed, lighting up the halls. The corrupted sugar particles made the voice in his head writhe about, and he walked faster to avoid it.

As he entered the room, several cookies glanced over, then returned their attention to someone sitting at the table.

The massive form of the Dark Enchantress occupied one end of the table. There was no chair for her; she kneeled on the ground. Still, she loomed over everyone at the table. On one side, Strawberry Crepe, Licorice, and Poison mushroom cookie sat. He took the empty seat between the reaper and child mechanic. Across from them were Pomegranate, Red Velvet, and a new face.

Dark Choco recognized him immediately. While the cookie's face was matted with dust and his eyes were covered by dirty bandages, the cream hue of his hair was undeniable. He radiated a comforting yet timeless aura that captured the attention of everyone at the table.

What on Earthbread was Pure Vanilla cookie doing in their castle?

"I have gathered you all here to announce that we have a cookie joining our cause."

Joining? This must be some kind of plot to overthrow the cookies of darkness. What other explanation could there be?

He cared little for the dominion of Earthbread, and any other machinations that their group had. If Pure Vanilla were to ask for his aid in the plot, he would gladly give it. He gestured at the eye peeking from his bandaged staff, but the healer paid him no heed. Maybe it was a different cookie?

No, He wouldn't make such a mistake. The Vanillan king had disappeared after the fall of his kingdom, but his body had never been found. Dark Choco had wondered if he was dead but dismissed the thought.

Licorice waved proudly. "This is Healer cookie! I was the one who found him."

Healer cookie?

He supposed it was better if the other cookies had no idea of the king's identity. Yet, The Dark enchantress undoubtedly knew. Judging by the scowl on Pomegranate's face, she at least suspected him too.

He might be panicking, just a little.

"He approached me as I was coming back from feeding the worms! The Jelly bears had pushed me into the river and he fished me back up. Not that I needed his help, of course, but he was a very effective healer."

The Dark Enchantress tilted her head. "You let Jelly bears get the better of you?"

"No, I mean, I wasn't hurt at all." Licorice stuttered out, "Just a minor inconvenience."

The sorceress turned toward Pure Vanilla.

"He inhaled quite a substantial amount of water. I had to manually extract it from his lungs."

“Wow, thanks so much,” the reaper huffed. “I can really feel the love.”

“Literally nobody cares,” Strawberry Crepe muttered, just loud enough for Licorice, and subsequently Dark Choco (who was regretting sitting between them) to hear.

He was almost glad for the Dark Enchantress’s presence. He was not keen on being in the middle of a fight, nor wasting his time watching Licorice lose to a child. In the presence of their master, no one dared to step beyond mere insults.

He could see the healer softly giggling, and barely manage to stifle a scandalized look in his direction.

“As I was saying,” the reaper huffed, “Healer cookie is very skilled in his craft. I doubt there are any better than him in all the kingdoms. He would be an invaluable asset and trustworthy member.”

For once, his boasting is accurate. If only he realized who he brought into the heart of their base.

The irony was palpable.

“Master, I do wonder if he is truly up to Licorice’s expectations.” Pomegranate stood up. “I would never question the wisdom of your choices, but Licorice is often prone to exaggeration. Our new recruit may not be honest about his loyalty to our cause.” She raised her mirror, ready to tear the healer’s mind apart and analyze every straying thought. Dark Choco tensed in his seat.

“No need.”

“Master?”

“I have spoken to him myself. His devotion is of no concern.”

Dark Choco felt somewhat surprised that the sorceress dismissed her from scrying Pure Vanilla’s mind. Though none were so cruel as his own, the priestess has spelled everyone in the room at least once.

The priestess was almost distressed, and it was such an alien emotion on her face that Dark Choco felt nervous. Perhaps she also suspected Pure Vanilla of plotting. The prince personally felt more disturbed by his keeper’s out-of-character decisions. The Dark Enchantress was intelligent and very meticulous, and she had no reason to deny Pomegranate’s request.

“I have already discussed several matters with Healer cookie in advance and ascertained that he will work for the cookies of darkness. Healer cookie, do you pledge yourself to serve me and my cause until death and beyond?”

“Yes, Master.” No hesitation. The words dripped from his lips like honey.

Was she really so sure of his loyalty?

“Treat him with respect and listen to him as second only to me.” He could practically hear Pomegranate’s teeth grinding. She had been the sorceress’s right hand and filled the same position. “Do not attempt to harm him. We did not have a healing-based cookie until now, so he *is* a precious resource.”

No, that couldn’t be. Pure Vanilla would never truly follow his kingdom’s destroyer. Then why would she put so much trust in him? Even Dark Cocoa, who wasn’t a cunning man, realized the

folly of showing a potential enemy all her troops. Tactically, she should just have assigned the healer to two loyal cookies, such as Licorice and Pomegranate cookie.

“As for your latest mission, Red Velvet...”

Perhaps she just wanted to relish the fact that Pure Vanilla was now her subordinate. But somehow, that didn't seem right.

The questions haunted him throughout the rest of the meeting.

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Once upon a time, there was a prince.

His father had been the king, a powerful warrior and founder of the kingdom. The old king had slain two dragons upon the snowy peaks and built a kingdom upon their backs, and that small but sturdy town had blossomed into a nation, known for its bitter taste and perseverance against all odds.

The light of resolution, or so they called him.

Dark Choco heard the legends about him, eyes shining. His father was a hero! His whole childhood, he heard the stories, devoting each and every legend to memory. The prince wanted to be just as great and strong as his father.

(Dark Cacao, who only called him “boy” and rarely spared him a passing glance.)

Nothing deterred Dark Choco. The foolish prince was unsatisfied with his strength, and the pace of his growth. He became obsessed with becoming stronger, trying pathetically to drag himself from his father's shadow, but failed time and again. Imagine how happy he felt when the cursed Strawberry Jam sword appeared before him! If only he stayed his hand, imagine what he could have been, who he could have become through his own merit.

Stupid, greedy, malicious monster.

He reached for the stars and found only the space in between.

A crown shattered upon the hard ground. Blood seeped from his sword. A kingdom crumbled inward.

The foolish creature slinked away from his broken kingdom. He wandered aimlessly, unsure of where to go and what to do, content to waste away in the dreary forests.

He was found by a pomegranate priestess with dead eyes. She gave him a reason to keep living, a “savior” who lightened the burden of the curse. The Dark Enchantress was powerful enough to calm the sword's whispering, to quiet the parasitic tendrils that had invaded his mind. She offered him a deal: his sanity, paid through a lifetime of servitude. He agreed.

And yet, he still wished to reach for the stars. Though his kingdom had exiled him, others just might receive him, be willing to forgive him. He thought about Golden Cheese and Hollyberry and Pure Vanilla, the kind cookies who had taken care of him in his youth. They were good people. They would forgive him, right? Dark Choco was a monster, a useless thing, a man that brought only pain to the people he cared about. He deserved to be in his master's wicked clutches, a tool existing only to carry out her glorious purpose, bringing destruction to innocent people. A life of suffering was far crueler than death. This way, he could come close to repenting for all he had

done.

And yet, among the cookies of darkness, he was the only one who wished for the light.

*Please find me, save me.*

Pomegranate knew his wish. She was the most perceptive of the cookies, and utterly, fanatically devoted to the Dark Enchantress. He lacked cause, so she punished him for it. She trapped him within nightmarish visions until he wailed and screamed and retched, past that point when even the other cookies cringed away and pleaded for her to stop.

On those days, he would lock himself in his room and cry for his father and mother and sometimes for the other kings and queens.

And now, one of the figures in his desperate wishes sat across from him, so close but farther away than ever.

In some way, he felt glad he could be near someone he cared about. That relieved joy, however, had been tainted by their situation. Dark Choco had imagined their meeting as a child would have: either with Pure Vanilla appearing to him out of nowhere and taking him away from this wretched castle or on opposite sides of a battle where he would be struck down by soldiers protecting their kingdoms. Both situations appealed to him, the naive prince and the exiled monster. He hoped for a happy storybook ending where the princess is rescued and the dragon slain, though Dark Choco couldn't discern which of these characters he played.

The ancients had been something he could place his faith in, proof that there was still good left in the world.

But Pure Vanilla had willingly joined the cookies of darkness. Never had the prince even conceived of this scenario. He simply didn't register that an ancient joining his master could have been an option. Their personalities would disallow it.

He couldn't recall the last time he had spoken with the healer. Would he really be the same person as the one in his memories?

Would Dark Choco be able to trust him?

Licorice stood up, snapping him out of his daze. He had been so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't realized the meeting was concluded. He quickly rose out of his seat, rushing as he caught up to the others.

Licorice gave him a condescending gaze, having seen him fumble. "Don't fumble so much around the dark enchantress. Is there anything going on in your head?"

He was one to talk about fumbling.

"I was just a bit startled," he said. "I didn't expect to see him again."

"You know Healer cookie?"

He immediately regretted his words. With how abrasive their collection of personalities was, Dark Choco vouching for him may be the opposite of helpful. Well, too late now. "We've met. He's a good healer."

The reaper obviously wasn't satisfied by this answer, but Dark Choco's curt tone and generally



unapproachability made it hard to ask.

“We’ve known each other for a couple of years,” the healer added. The prince stared at him, surprised. “I’d love to catch up when you’re free.”

“Ah...I currently don’t have anything.”

“Great!” the older cookie chirped.

The others weren’t invested enough to follow Dark Choco back to his room just to hear the memories the two chose to reminisce. The group split apart as everyone went their separate ways. Pure Vanilla followed him through the halls into his room, something bitterly sad on his face as he looked around.

*Right. This castle was once his.*

It must be horrible for him, to walk through his home and see how it's been broken and corrupted for the Dark Enchantress’s use. *I am a part of that now*, he thought, a stab of guilt settling in his chest. Dark Choco had no right to comfort the healer, so he remained silent. They entered the former prince’s room and he closed the door behind them.

“What are you-”

“Shh,” Pure Vanilla hushed him. He looked toward the door, then spoke loudly. “As much as I love to talk with you, I’d rather this conversation be private.”

There was a pause, and light footsteps receded from behind the door. Dark Choco realized with a jolt that the priestess had been trying to spy on them. He shivered slightly. Her powers, her words, it always felt so violating.

The healer waited for a moment before turning back to him. Dark Choco braced himself for what was to come.

“You’ve gotten so tall!”

*Heh?*

Pure Vanilla squished his cheeks, having to stand on his tip-toes to do so. “You’re as big as Dark Cacao now. The last time I saw you, you were only at my waist! Oh, where does the time go.”

Overwhelmed, he shied away from the touch. “Pure Vanilla-”

“Healer.”

“Healer cookie. What are you doing here? What happened to you? Is this some plot? Did you make a deal with the Dark Enchantress?”

Pure Vanilla held up a hand, stopping him in his tracks. “That’s a lot of loaded questions. I’ll answer them one by one, alright?” He nodded. “First off, following the destruction of this kingdom, I ended up with severe magical trauma and ended up losing my memories. For the last few years, I’ve been working in the Raisin village under the clouds until everything returned to me.”

"As for why, I came here to join the cookies of darkness. Licorice guided me into the clouds, then I had a discussion with her." He paused, a little guilty. “That’s it. There’s no plot or ulterior

motive.”

So he didn’t come to save him after all. Nevertheless, Dark Choco was vaguely disappointed, but he supposed that putting the kings and queens on a pedestal was his own fault.

“I don’t think you addressed my last question.”

“I made no deals with Dark Enchantress cookie.”

He relaxed slightly, reassured since Pure Vanilla gave his word.

The staff’s eye focused on him. “I believe you would have the more exciting story between us. What has happened that led to you joining her group?”

Dark Choco stood up. “I forget my duties. I’m actually quite busy at the moment.”

The healer pulled him back before he could flee. “Dark Choco,” he said sternly, “don’t just run away from the conversation.”

The prince jerked his cloak from his grip, nearly dragging the other man off his feet. “Not running,” he said in a rough voice, picking up his sword and rushing to the door.

“I won’t judge.” The prince froze. “Whatever drove you to this, it wasn’t your fault. You are...a kind and wonderful boy.”

“Things change,” he spoke distantly. He couldn’t bear to hear such sweet lies. Hoping that he was anything other than a terrible man would be denying the truth. “Pure Vanilla, do you care about my father?”

“Of course I do. Why?”

“If you have any regard for him as a king or as a person, then don’t be kind to me.” It hurt, to ask this of his old caretaker, but it must be said. “How I ended up here, it is entirely my fault.”

The healer seemed at a loss.

He sheathed his sword, absolutely over having emotions. “Anyway, the other cookies know you are in my room. Someone will bring clothes and assign you a room. New people aren’t really my job.”

“Wait!”

The prince paused at the door. He looked over his shoulder. Pure Vanilla was smiling kindly.

“Whatever happened, I’m glad to see you. Never doubt that, Dark Choco cookie.”

“I’m glad to see you too.” The words were true but somehow they rang hollow. Dark Choco cookie felt a cold dread settle in his gut as the older man’s soft expression, identical to the kind, paternal figure in his youth. How had the other cookie retained such a sweet smile when the world had burned around them? Had he worn the same smile when he purposefully sought out the Dark Enchantress, something that even a monster as corrupt as himself did not do?

“I’m happy,” he repeated quietly, the words dissipating into the air. “Aren’t I?”

And so, another pillar of his faith crumbled to ash.

## Chapter End Notes

Pure Vanilla POV next!

Have a nice day, everyone ^^

# Pure Vanilla: Hypocrite

## Chapter Notes

no TW, I think?? Pure Vanilla has a conversation, cleans his room, and angsts.

In case y'all haven't noticed, I really like PV. His whole personality is so very huggable. I want to squish him like Hollyberry did (cuteness aggression lel). I didn't make the Dark Enchantress huge to vicariously live through the eeee of holding a smol person in my palms, totally not.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I can’t believe I got saddled with the new guy.” Licorice complained. “Really! Everyone showed up at this meeting, but somehow I’m still the one doing the dirty work.” He had been the one who ended up showing Pure Vanilla around his former castle, likely pushed by one of the other cookies. The cookie of darkness dragged him around the halls, not recognizing the healer’s apparent ability to navigate the winding corridors.

Pure Vanilla's staff gave his “guide” a look. He was *right here*. “Well, you are the one who recruited me. They probably believe you know best when it comes to my talents.”

He felt a sense of amusement as the reaper puffed up like a peacock. It was so easy to make him happy. He probably didn’t get complimented much. Pure Vanilla noticed that none of the other cookies seemed to have much respect for Licorice.

“Well, of course. I found you, after all.”

He was actually the one who found the reaper. He had been trying to flee all reminders of his previous life, and had come across Licorice bragging about the Dark Enchantress’s new brilliant schemes to his small mushroom companion. After following them for a while, Licorice was ganged up on by a group of enraged jelly bears. While usually very passive creatures, they have the capability to be cruel when threatened. And the cookie had spoken very loudly to the candy worms around the area about his plans for the bear village, causing enough of a ruckus that a bear had overheard him.

The rest was history.

“This is the central hall! Ignore the broken statues, no one has bothered to clean them up so there are some sharp pieces lying around.” He kicked the broken head of a statue lying on the side of the hall. Pure Vanilla winced as his likeness crumbled into a few more pieces.

“So,” he ventured. “What is it like serving the Dark Enchantress?”

“Wonderful!” came the too-bright reply. “Our Mistress is the most powerful sorceress in the world. She brings us plenty of books and allows us to work on achieving her grand vision of Earthbread.”

*There’s no way he truly feels that way. His answer was too automated to be genuine.* “Is that all?”

“Yes. You’ll be able to see her greatness in time. We are the chosen! We deserve to be revered as

her mistress's right-hands."

The reaper's usage of 'we' flowed smoothly into the conversation. It was more unconscious than a deliberate attempt at manipulation, and the blonde felt almost endeared at how quickly he included him in his daydreams of grandeur. The topic of conversation, though, quickly dimmed any smidge of positive emotion he experienced.

Licorice did not dare speak negatively of White Lily. He supposed he shouldn't do so either- she was technically his superior and surely would not overlook insubordination. Even so, the situation grated on his heart. They were once friends. The distance created by Pure Vanilla's lack of power drove him farther away from her, and every unfamiliar gesture and cold smile of hers tore at his nerves. Would her jam still have that faint flowery scent?

When he called her his master, the title burned at his tongue like acid.

Well, if the other man won't speak about his boss, perhaps the other cookies of darkness would work.

"And what about your companions? Do they also deserve their positions?"

His face immediately scrunched. "Euch. Absolutely not. They all have defective personalities."

The healer stamped down his urge to defend Cacao's child. "What makes them so terrible?"

"Would you like a list?" He watched in disbelief as Licorice took a whole journal out of his robes, flipping through the pages. He was handed a torn sheet he and tilted his flower to it, but Licorice started narrating everything on the paper, making it useless.

"Pomegranate is everything bad in the world. She always bosses everyone around and acts so superior to the rest of us. Red Velvet cares for nothing but his dogs. Dark Choco is kind of slow, and he doesn't talk to anyone. Strawberry Crepe is loud and annoying, but at least they don't tend to spend time in the castle."

"And what of Poison Mushroom cookie?"

He paused. "Poison Mushroom is a good kid."

He chuckled. "At least you aren't alone in her future."

"Yeah, say what you want about him, but the kid's not bad."

"...Why do you hold such negative opinions about Dark Choco anyway?"

A flash of guilt crossed the other's face, quickly followed by disgust. "Right, you two apparently know each other. What's up with that anyway?"

"It was a long time ago. The Dark Choco cookie you are familiar with is far removed from me."

The reaper squirmed, as though talking bad about the dark cookie to a former acquaintance made him uncomfortable. He hesitated before replying. "He's a doormat. He listens to the Dark Enchantress without question- which is not a bad thing!" he added quickly. "His nature extends to Pomegranate too, that's what sucks. She'll hurt him and he'll still do what she says. It's pathetic. Avoid getting between those two if you to enjoy your time here."

*Not likely.* Seeing his destroyed castle did not qualify as a good time, and he had already decided to

do something about Dark Choco cookie's situation. "Does Pomegranate dislike him?"

"Absolutely despises him. I'm not even sure why." Pure Vanilla opened his mouth, but Licorice cut him off. "No, I know why. What I don't understand is the reason she takes everything so far."

He was almost afraid to ask. "What exactly does she do to him?"

"Her torture is entirely mental. I don't know what he sees, but the screams" The reaper shivered. "They're unpleasant."

He stiffened. How long had this been happening? Dark Choco cookie isn't someone who just lays down and takes a beating. The child would fight back. Had he been hurt so much he had just given up? A righteous fury started to burn in him. White Lily would not take well to the death of her servant, but anything short of that could fly. Pure Vanilla will try his best to protect his friend's son, damn the consequences.

"Our mistress allows her to use her powers on us, though thankfully he's the only one she targets."

"The Dark enchantress may change the order if I ask." If not, he had more drastic actions on the table, though those plans may not be necessary. His talk with her before the meeting echoed in his mind. She was willing to make some...exceptions when it came to Pure Vanilla. Though he would rather not offer her anything, if it came down to protecting Dark Choco, he would give up far more than a few locks of his hair.

The reaper was giving him a considering look, warier than he had been previously.

"Licorice cookie?"

"Why are you here? Someone like you shouldn't be part of the cookies of darkness."

The healer was thrown. "Sorry, I don't understand. Was I not being a good enough recruit?"

"No, it's-" He cleared his throat. "Forget it."

They spent the rest of the tour mostly in silence. The necromancer occasionally introduced some room or another, and Pure Vanilla nodded as though he was following along. Eventually they came to the end of a hall (*servant's quarters*, he thought absently) and Licorice pointed him to a room. His guide disappeared for a moment as he acquainted himself with his quarters. It had a simple bed and bathroom, broken mirrors and filthy floors from years of abandonment.

It was small, but far more than any denizen of Raisin village possessed. He loved soft things, and the dirty pillows squished pleasantly in his arms. He sneezed as a wave of dust floated from his movements.

*I might as well do something about all this grime.* He cringed at the incredible filth around him, setting his mind to making it somewhat livable. The blonde took some of his spare bandages and covered his nose and mouth. He fished a rag from a drawer and soaked it, then began wiping the floors. *This room is about to get the best deep clean of its existence!*

At some point, Licorice came in with a spare set of clothes. He took one look at the healer's fully bandaged face and called him a mummy, but Pure Vanilla ignored him, too caught up in his chore to mind.

For the next several hours, he wiped the floors and mirrors, washed down the blankets, smacked dirt from the curtains, and prayed that the castle's unmaintained plumbing could take the amount

of disgusting water he forced through it. Finally, as the walls began to glow with new vitality and his hands started to bloat from all the moisture, he allowed himself a break and a change of clothes.

Pure Vanilla sat on the dusty mattress, sighed, then flopped onto his back. He picked up the robe that had been delivered. He held the red fabric up to the light, its colors mirroring the Dark Enchantress's black and red. *Did she choose these colors purposefully?* He shook his head, dismissing the thought. Though he wished to see any connection between her and White Lily, attention wasn't enough to prove that she had spared any compassion for their previous friendship. Plus, the idea that the sorceress crafted these clothes to fit, as one would do for a doll, disturbed him.

He rubbed the cloth on his cheek, needing the comfort even if it came from the enemy. The red robes crinkled in his grasp.

They were soft, at least.

"I am...a wretch." he breathed. The old king had returned to his castle, come home to nothing but the lonely silence, a once-great city long bereft of its citizens. Raisin cookie had practically begged him to stay and help in the town, saying how it would fall apart without a healer to help after wafflebot attacks. He had hesitated, acknowledging the truth of her words, but had gone anyway. When memories returned, he had wanted to run from the castle in the sky, every sight of it a reminder of how he had failed his kingdom, his people, and his friends.

*And here I am, somehow failing myself. I, who had chosen the dark for her...*

In a peaceful forest, a reaper had invoked the name of the Dark Enchantress. And he had come crawling back, like some worm blindly struggling for any nutrients on the cold ground.

Black Raisin cookie will never forgive him, and Pure Vanilla did not think he deserved any forgiveness if she offered.

He discarded his ragged robes and changed the dirty bandages over his face for new ones. His reflection in the bathroom sink peered back at him. The old king was no more. In his place stood a clean and presentable-looking man in simple scarlet robes, frown marring his delicate features.

His staff was placed facedown for the rest of the day, much to its annoyance.

~~~~~

Pure Vanilla shifted around the sheetless mattress, trying to fall asleep. Night had descended upon the desolate kingdom, taking with it what noise the sparse bird or rat made. Unfortunately, being in his castle, once a place he associated with comfort and joy, made him prone to thinking thoughts he had previously kept under lock and key.

The healer knew he was a hypocrite. Sure, he tried to be a generally good person, but ultimately no one could deny their true nature. Hence, he once again inserted himself into a situation completely out of his depth. Joining the cookies of darkness was such a terrible idea, but he no longer had any advisors to stop him from making bad decisions. He acted like some kind of martyr in front of his friends, just to end up here.

Ancients were granted incredible power by their soul gems, given by the witches themselves. They were lauded as heroes, even worshipped as if they were gods. He tried to disavow this excessive subservience to some extent. However, It came in handy to be viewed in such a light, especially when trying to create allies among the kingdoms and smaller villages. Sometimes even his friends

would treat him as a fundamental representation of good, the guide they look for in their moral values. He felt flattered and moved by their faith, but also a lingering shame as if he had lied to them. The Pure Vanilla they loved was a fake that can not truly exist. No matter how hard he tried to be the perfect king, a perfect friend, his mistakes and imperfections constantly dragged on his psyche. He wasn't good enough to have their trust. He wasn't good enough to deserve their love.

White Lily's situation proved as much.

He had pinpointed the moment they drifted apart as children. The day the Blueberry Institute had crumbled, she had looked so haunted. Empty, as though the world had suddenly stopped existing for her. The young girl had run from the consequences of what they did, and for years, decades, they had no contact. He tried to send her letters but could never find where she lived. He resorted to spelling the letters when that proved ineffective.

On the day of his coronation, she had arrived, in a dark hood and heavy bags under her eyes. Pure Vanilla was surprised- he had never truly given up on her, and yet the fact that she stood before him gave him a sense of joy that surpassed even the priest's scepter upon his shoulder and the weight of a crown upon his head.

The quiet woman was much different from her younger self that Pure Vanilla remembered. They had both changed since their time at the school. While the child had been ambitious and filled with wonder, a coy genius unparalleled in her thirst for knowledge, the woman was much more passive, so to speak. She did not flaunt her hard-earned magic, nor strove for any breakthrough in his sight. White Lily seemed to act content in her situation like a dog choosing to sit in a cage because it felt safer. Her actions belied a quiet desperation.

He wished to question her about where she had gone, what happened to her, but recalled her distraught emptiness and kept silent. If he had pried harder, told her that she had a shoulder to lean on, everything could have turned out differently. He wished he could turn back time and tell her it's okay. He also sought the revival of his kingdom, but stopping the Dark Enchantress took precedent. With her there, nothing could be built that wouldn't immediately be razed to ash.

Most of all, he just wanted to see White Lily again.

Even if it meant surrendering to the enemy.

Really, Pure Vanilla? Golden cheese scoffed. *I thought you had more of a spine than to just give up.*

What about all the people who rely on you? Hollyberry scowled in disappointment.

To endure against all the world, that is strength. Dark Cacao stood with his back against him.

You're a hypocrite, a liar, a two-faced bastard. I don't understand why the other kids hang from your robes. But even so...you are the better one among us. A white-haired ghost whispered, head on her knees, alone but for the quiet chittering of garden insects.

He shook away their echoes. He would not regret his decision. Of all the ancients, he had the best chance to sway the Dark Enchantress from her path. They had been together since childhood. The Dark Enchantress may not be his oldest friend, but he would not give up. Whatever caused her to change in form must have been incredibly powerful, enough to stifle portions of her personality or override it entirely. Even so, she had White Lily's memories. She must be buried deep somewhere, he was sure. If he can make the sorceress's lofty ambitions falter, whatever they may be, then it would all be worth it. Earthbread can take a breath of air and experience peace for the first in a long

time.

If all it required was his own life, he would gladly pay that price.

But what about the others? He should at least send Hollyberry and Dark Cacao a letter so they know he is alive. He needed to fix up his kingdom as well. The cookies of raisin village needed a safe place to live, but with the wafflebots being sent from this castle, they will continue to suffer. That was another checkbox on his list: decommission or reprogram the machines so they would not be able to harm the villagers. Witches knew that Black Raisin cookie needed the reprieve.

Pure Vanilla hoped that he would be able to make that change. Perhaps he could indirectly push the resident mechanic to change the bots' orders? It was difficult to tell whether the authority the Dark Enchantress granted him was genuine.

...What did she do with his hair? He suspected some kind of spell. Many of the most powerful influence and control spells needed parts of a cookie's body or jam to work. He had taken a few snips, deeming it an insignificant price. That may come back to bite him. Would she control him to hurt others? Would the former White Lily kill him?

Wasn't giving up his life once enough? He had lost everything, his friends, his kingdom, his own identity. The healer didn't know if he could survive going through that again.

He smothered himself with his pillow, hoping that the lack of air would force him into sleeping. It failed to work.

Pure Vanilla spent the night tossing and turning, unable to sink fully into unconsciousness. He eventually gave up, hoping that simply closing his eyes would suffice for actual rest. After an indeterminable amount of time, light appeared in slits of windows, signaling dawn. His seeing flower perked up at the sun from within its covering, possessing none of his exhaustion.

A knock sounded on his door and he shoved his face into the pillow with a groan. After a few seconds, the person knocked again, louder than before.

"I'm up!" He trudged out of his bed in the same red robes as yesterday, wrinkled by all his tossing about. Pure Vanilla slammed the door open. Red Velvet stood before him, pristine and alert in the early morning. He squinted dazedly at the general.

"For your first assignment, you'll be with me."

Chapter End Notes

Cookies go to therapy challenge (gone wrong) (gone sexual) (You'll never believe what they admitted to) (!!!)

The whole republic arc is so freakin good if I had come to the game later I would have probably written about that. Even so, PVC is a pretty sweet guy so its hard to pick :)

Pure Vanilla: The Cake Tower Trio (1)

Chapter Summary

Pure Vanilla (not really trying to hide his identity) + Red Velvet (never interacted with people at length) + Dark Choco (emotional constipation) = this chapter.

No TW, I think.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He descended the stairs to find Red Velvet and Dark Choco bickering.

“What seems to be the problem here?” he asked.

The general directed a scowl at him. “Your old friend doesn’t believe in my ability to protect you.”

Pure Vanilla turned to Dark Choco. “Is this true?”

“No.” He waited for the bitter prince to say his piece, but no further explanation came.

“He insists on coming to the cake tower despite never showing any interest in cake hounds before” Red Velvet cookie stated. “Why else could that be, other than my apparent incompetence?”

The warrior crossed his arms and looked away, content to give him the silent treatment.

Pure Vanilla, on the other hand, was quite pleased. He recalled that the cake tower was a little ways from his floating city. It stood as a lone structure in an acrid desert, and he had passed it on several occasions. This was an excellent opportunity to drag the prince away from Pomegranate and the Dark Enchantress. If Dark Choco comes along by his own will, even better.

“Perhaps Dark Choco cookie simply wants to keep me company. After all, I am not familiar with anyone else here. Have you considered that?” The expression on the man’s face showed that he genuinely did not think of that. Was his friend’s son really so antisocial? From childhood, the prince’s personality had been quite outgoing, a marked difference from his father. Pure Vanilla had even teased Dark Cacao about such. “Either way, is it a detriment to bringing him along?”

‘I suppose not.’ he replied.

“You won’t be in any trouble from leaving, would you?” The healer asked his “friend” and received a shake of the head. “Wonderful, then we can be a group of three.”

The General was not so agreeable to being followed by a large surly shadow, but he was outnumbered. He buckled under the healer’s satisfied smile and the warrior’s resolve, resigning himself to get along with two people rather than one. This was why he preferred to work alone.

Pure Vanilla packed some provisions as the other two hung around uncomfortably, standing a noticeable distance from each other. He could tell at a glance that those two rarely spend time together and apparently had no idea how to interact with each other. Instead, they watched him

pack, too caught up in the awkward half-standoff to help. He found it rather amusing, how hard they tried to avoid the other's gaze. Serves them right for letting him make all the preparations. The healer tied up his bindle neatly, hanging it from his staff. He could practically sense the dirty look it gave him, and he whispered an apology and placated it with descriptions of the good desert sun.

He tossed it over his shoulder. "Is everyone ready to set off?" The question was only slightly pointed. Neither of the fighters protested, so he walked out of the castle. The two fighters soon flanked him as they set off from the barren wastelands under his former kingdom. The healer felt a twinge of remorse at the sight of dead trees and dusty candy cracking under his shoes. He really needed to shut down those wafflebots when possible. There was no telling how long Black Raisin could hold the fort.

At some point, Dark Choco pulled him away. They lagged behind the general and he took the moment to whisper, "Red Velvet is responsible for by far the largest portion of our forces. He is dangerous and I can not speak for his character. It is not about his ability to defend you as much as his willingness to"

"Should the need arise, I am capable of defending myself." Though he took his words to heart, Pure Vanilla was not threatened by the general. His wariness for the other cookies of darkness was mainly composed of the Dark Enchantress's regard for them. In strength, he outclassed the others by far. He may not be physically domineering, but that weakness had been more than accounted for by his magical abilities.

"Besides, I would never harm anyone under mother's command!" came yelling from the front. Was the cake-hybrid capable of hearing them from over there? How fascinating.

Dark Choco cringed at being caught. He retreated from Pure Vanilla's personal space since there was no more purpose in whispering.

"Mother?" the healer inquired, "The Dark Enchantress?"

"She raised me since I was a child."

"I'm so sorry," the bitter prince said. Red Velvet glared at him in silence.

It must be quite the experience to be the son of The Dark Enchantress. He did not envy the cake hybrid. Barring whatever emotional scarring was sure to come of that, he felt a burning curiosity at just what his life entailed: both his relationships and his physical attributes. Pure Vanilla had no idea that cake and cookie were compatible substances. It would be as if a tree suddenly subsisted on oxygen and adenosine triphosphate.

They may not have been able to create artificial life in the Blueberry Institute, but he had no idea if White Lily pursued such experiments after their school collapsed. For all he knew, she could have been the one to induce the general's cake traits. Red Velvet's arm was the most obvious mutation, but not the sole effect of his unique mixture. He possessed an extremely sharp sense of hearing and heterochromia. They had that trait in common, but he had an inkling that one of the hybrid's eyes was cake in origin. He wanted to pick the general apart and study him. With his consent, of course.

As though sensing his intent, the man shivered slightly.

They had lunch in a peaceful forest glade several hours away. Pure Vanilla unfolded his bindle into a makeshift picnic blanket, and the trio all shared his package of star candy. He made them exercise basic etiquette such as saying "please" and "thank you" when they received their meal.

His friend's son muttered something about old people as the healer beamed his signature warm smile and he handed the man his rations. Despite his somewhat exaggerated annoyance, the prince was visibly more relaxed since he had left the vicinity of the castle. Even Red Velvet had unconsciously picked up on the pleasant mood, his marching steps losing their rigidity.

It was nice, to travel again. During his reign as king, he rarely had the opportunity. Afterward, he had been wandering looking for any survivors in the wreckage while also ignorant of his identity. That didn't really lend itself to a good time. The sun was warm on his face and the faint rustling of water could be heard from the wilderness. A bird chirped above his head and he stopped walking to take it all in.

"Hurry up!" he was jolted out of his reverie by Red Velvet's command.

"The scenery is beautiful," he said mildly. "It's nice to enjoy the world around you every so often."

"Aren't you blind? I doubt the view behind those bandages is very special."

"There's no need to be rude about it."

He huffed and stomped over. Pure Vanilla held his staff as he was picked up by the scruff of his robe and deposited over the general's shoulder. As they passed Dark Choco, he saw the prince do a double take, then give him the most exhausted and incredulous look he had ever seen on another cookie.

Pure Vanilla flushed in embarrassment. Hollyberry and Dark Cacao often carried the smaller members of the group, though their fashion was more dignified than being lugged around like a sack. Thankfully, he had discovered a time-tested phrase to get them to stop.

Red Velvet felt an elbow nudge into his head. "Can't we go a little faster?"

The general dropped him.

For the next day or so, they trekked toward the cake tower on foot. As the trees cleared out for fine sand and hot wind, enemies started appearing from the woodwork. At first, they were small jelly worms, which the warriors simply stepped on or kicked away. As the landscape became more hostile, the monsters became stronger. At the first appearance of a sugar lion among the creatures, Red Velvet pushed Pure Vanilla behind them protectively and instructed him to heal them. The healer complied, doing his job dutifully just as any loyal follower of the Dark Enchantress should. As they faced the enemies, he analyzed their fighting styles and gained insight into their abilities.

Red Velvet used both his arm and cutting knife in battle. He pulled enemies closer with his cake arm and quickly cut them with his blade, targeting the weakest enemies first and then moving upward as their numbers dropped off. His cake claws were a weapon by itself, but his effective use of the knife with them made for a deadly combination.

One lion swiped him across his chest and Pure Vanilla healed him instantly. A glowing shield surrounded the general as he laughed, spinning on his feet to deliver a powerful blow with his cake arm. "I feel so energized! Is this what it's like to have a healer on the team?"

"Pomegranate has nothing on him." Dark Choco bragged, also riding the high of being free from pain. He swung his sword in a familiar way, slamming the massive thing into the ground and forcing the monsters back in a wave of dark red electricity. His stance bore a great resemblance to his father, and Pure Vanilla studied him with pride and nostalgia.

That little boy had become strong.

He kept to the center of their formation, making sure they didn't sustain any severe injuries, reacquainting himself with the adrenaline of battle. The two quickly cleared the rest of the creatures with his aid, and they managed to get a reprieve between the battles. They took a moment to catch their breath, and Red Velvet sat down on the sand. His previous exhaustion combined with the aftereffects of healing created a sort of strange brew of weary jitteriness, and Pure Vanilla had to listen to his leg bounce for the next few minutes.

Unfortunately, A group of lions and scorpions had sensed them, putting aside their differences to attack the intruders in their midst. *If only people could get along so well*, the healer mourned, *there wouldn't be a problem left in Earthbread to solve*.

"Another wave, on our right." the general called, and they turned to meet them. The wide array of monsters ran straight for the group, and they surged to meet them. Dark Choco swung first, tripping many of the enemies as his energy lit the air around them. When they were suffering from the effects of his initial attack, Red Velvet sprinted forward, hacking at them with his jagged knife. Pure Vanilla cast a shield as the creatures shook themselves and swiped at the trio.

"So many!" The bitter king grunted. His companion raised her own shield, preparing to defend the healer from behind as he focused on supporting them. The healer split his powers between them, making sure both his friends have enough help to pull through.

When he blessed them, they took the chance to strike. Dark Cacao swung his sword, pushing back his enemies in a wave of dark energy. On the other side, Hollyberry slammed her shield, stunning them. She rushed ahead, bashing away at the creatures as Pure Vanilla made them stronger, faster, and healed their wounds.

He took another step, keeping to the middle of their faithfully proven formation, their steps dancing in rhythm.

She rushed forward again, throwing aside the monster beside him as-

A scorpion leaped for the healer.

"Look out!" the general yelled. Pure Vanilla leaped back and cast a spell, setting the creature on fire. It screeched and ran in circles, legs spasming for a bit before crumbling. The blonde stared at its crisp remains, shaken.

P- Healer! Are you uninjured?" Dark Choco momentarily appeared in front of him, concerned, before swiping a sugar lion on his other side.

"I'm fine." He put a hand to his head, trying to regain his bearings. He had fallen into familiar habits on the battlefield, deferring to second-nature movements rather than staying mentally present. For a moment, he was back with his old friends as close as family. Pure Vanilla slipped between them, a moral leader and healer among the five, feeding the self-correcting machine with a perfect smile on his face.

But that reality no longer exists, isn't that right? Because of your failure.

"I'm glad you are unhurt," Red Velvet yelled. "But we are being swarmed. Keep the healing coming!"

He raised his staff, imbuing the general with his power. The cuts on his cake arm faded to scars and then disappeared entirely.

No one could hold him to a perfect standard anymore. No one was left alive to do so. And yet, even

without anyone left to judge him, he had been performing for an invisible audience. Black magic, spells drawn from the dark sides of the moon, powerful offensive attacks, they all had been hidden to upkeep his identity as a pure, near messianic figure. The habit of hiding his own magic had pervaded even his current situation.

The revelation made him shudder. He had been lying even without someone left to bear witness. How disgusting.

Another part of him rejoiced, thought it was smothered by guilt. He was no longer Pure Vanilla, king of a prosperous kingdom. Healer, a nameless nobody, had no reason to uphold some grand ideal. He could fight rather than simply tend wounds. He could be mischievous without justification, imperfect without criticism.

It was freeing.

(He felt happy that everyone was dead and gone. What a horrible thought. And yet-)

With a whisper and a swing of his staff, the monsters around them flickered and burst into flames, cold and efficient magic tearing the life from their bodies. Red Velvet lowered his sword, watching them burn with a truly disturbed expression. It only lasted for a second, but long enough for the healer to catch.

“Are you alright? Does this type of magic bother you?”

The general gathered his wits and responded. “I don’t mind, it’s useful for traversing through the desert. Such great power from a healer was just unexpected.”

Pure Vanilla frowned. Perhaps he shouldn’t have used his abilities just because he comprehended that he can. Most healers did not possess such offensive capabilities and the general was right to be startled or suspicious. Then again, he hadn’t made any great effort to change his appearance or hide his identity besides going by an alias since subterfuge wasn’t his goal.

He only needed one of the cookies of darkness to lead him to The Dark Enchantress, and said goal had been accomplished. Thus, he could be as suspicious as he wanted without repercussion. It’s not as though she would banish him even if the other cookies mention his unusual powers. She already knew exactly who he was.

Oh, how wonderful! This was a chance to exercise his freedom. Perhaps it was a little petty, but he felt the urge to show off his abilities, to both his companions and to himself. He smiled at the general, ready to needle his first victim.

“Red Velvet, did you believe that I couldn’t defend myself?”

“I must admit that I did not,” he responded sheepishly.

Pure Vanilla giggled. “you have much to learn about healers, starting with why we are a soldier’s worst fear.” Another wave of enemies crested a nearby sand dune. “Let me show you how an elder does it!” The healer rolled up his sleeves and hurried ahead into a barrage of monsters, leaving them both in the dust.

“An elder?” the general murmured, “He can’t possibly be older than me.” He spent a moment squinting at the sand, as though in deep contemplation, before turning to his traveling companion, stricken.

“Dark Choco, am I...aging badly?”

“No, it’s just one of Healer cookie’s traits.” the prince said sympathetically.

A massive explosion sounded in the distance. They both snapped over to see tongues of powerful white fire flowing over the desert, as smoothly as the wind blows. Whatever monsters that may have been left in the desert no longer posed an issue.

“He really didn’t need your help.” Red Velvet was both awed and a bit terrified.

“I’m realizing.”

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“There it is. The glorious cake tower.”

The wrapped flower blinked as Pure Vanilla surveyed the familiar jam-red structure. The tower erupted from the ground, sharp platters reaching for the heavens. In the light of dusk, it cast long stretching shadows across the shifting sand.

“It feels cursed.” Dark Choco uttered.

“It likely is, but you’ll acclimate.”

The desert was the last place where he had seen White Lily. Something bad had definitely occurred here and Pure Vanilla would bet that the cake tower had something to do with it. The whole spire radiated an oppressive air, the kind that shortened one’s breath and created a lightheaded sensation. They let Red Velvet take the lead since this was technically his territory. As they approached the base of the structure, shadows slinked around them, flashes of red fur and white teeth. Pure Vanilla held up his staff, ready to strike at any moment. Although the cake creatures were technically allies now, he had never had any friendly encounters with them and therefore exercised healthy caution.

“Don’t worry, they won’t attack while I am present.” the general reassured them.

“Is there any way to ensure our protection in general?” he asked. “I’d rather not be mauled if we accidentally separate.”

“It would help if my scent were stronger.” Without permission, Pure Vanilla felt a clawed arm pat him down and something wet touch his head. He nearly whacked the general out of shock but restrained himself. His flower would have been very cross had he used it as a blunt weapon.

“There, that’ll work.”

“Thank you, but some forewarning would be appreciated.” Pure Vanilla touched his spit-stained hair, slightly off-put. *He’s like a dog.*

The cake hybrid turned to his other companion.

“Absolutely not,” the prince snarled, putting some distance between them.

“You’ll be feeding my pets, then.”

The space Dark Choco left between them was unfortunately compromised as more hounds crowded around them, baying and falling over each other for their commander’s attention.

Pure Vanilla moved closer to the others, leery of the dogs' gnashing teeth. Though he was able to heal, he tried to avoid unnecessary pain. These creatures were of the same make as those horrific cake summons that destroyed his castle so many years earlier.

The general kept them at arm's length, swerving this way and that to address every single hound.

"Hello, Cream!" Something on their right howled. "Swirl and Meringue, how are you guys!" Twin yelps from a pair of dual-colored dogs. A massive cake thing blocked their way, and the general sank his arms into its fur, petting it roughly. "Good evening, Lard."

A head rose from the massive pile and bobbed, before sinking back to the ground. They had to walk around Lard to get onto the first platter.

As they climbed the stairs, Red Velvet addressed him. "Healer, you can get some rest tonight. We'll begin the assignment next morning. There are rooms on the fourth platter but you can wander around if you wish."

Pure Vanilla nodded. He was not ready to settle down for the night. There was something he wished to do.

Once the general left, he made for the stairs again. He climbed up the platters one by one, over a dozen until he could get a good view of the entire area. When he reached a desired height, the healer cautiously approached the edge and shifted his staff over. From the platter, he could recognize the large shapes around the tower as large black pots, similar to the type used in alchemy. Were those pots used by the witches, and if so, what for?

Broken and rusted utensils lay scattered. In the distance, the warm glow of the ovens, the origin of cookiekind, burned, relentlessly baking more creatures to aid in the Dark Enchantresses. Hounds meandered around the area, settling down among white structures that jutted from the sand. Pure Vanilla studied the structures more closely. They appeared to be similar to white candy sticks but had a distinct curvy quality that separated them and clustered in large groups.

Maybe those unusual landforms could give him some clue about the cake tower. Anything could be hidden context for what happened to White Lily. The healer descended from the tower. He wanted to see them up close. As he reached the first floor of the platter, hounds surrounded him. He tensed, but they only sniffed him and then went away, seemingly content with smelling their master.

"Good dogs," he muttered, fingers crossed.

They cleared out of his path as he stepped in front of the structures. Up close, they were evidently not landforms at all.

*These are remains.* He recognized with a jolt. *But of what?* Neither cookies nor dragons left remains like this. The skull in front of him was shaped similarly to a cookie's head, but less round. A detachable piece hung from the bottom (the jaw, he recognized), and gaping holes where the living creature once had eyes. He stuck one arm through the holes.

He ran a hand over the smooth, white bones. Something inside him was screaming that this was deeply wrong, that he must stop touching the creature's remains, a visceral reaction that he's seen others display when they looked at jam and broken pieces. A curse, Dark Choco said. This must be where that ominous sensation came from.

This gut reaction, however, was offset by Pure Vanilla's own burning curiosity.



*Could this be...?*

A small blob of fluff headbutted the healer from behind the legs, causing him to jump. He broke from his trance, his hand leaving the smooth structure. The horrid feeling immediately went away. He looked down at the dog and it yipped. Pure Vanilla tilted his head.

It butted him again.

“Hello, are you trying to attack me?” he whispered, surprised by its softness. The dog was so small. Even the baby lambs he took care of stood taller than this puppy.

It opened its jaw and barked. Its tiny teeth were still quite blunt and it wagged its tail when the healer focused his attention on it. This dog wouldn't be able to hurt him if it tried. He squatted down to talk to the creature and its tail waved faster

It was quite cute.

“What are you doing here.” he cooed. “Are you lost? I can get Red Velvet.”

The dog seemed uninterested, instead running circles around the healer. It was about as far from a summon as a cake-borne could get. Nothing about it resembled those abominations of nature. In fact, the puppy evoked fuzzy warm feelings, with its big eyes and lolling tongue.

He held out an arm for it to sniff, hesitating. No matter how cute, the creature was a part of The Dark Enchantress's army. It may become a ruthless killer when it's older, even if its blunt teeth failed to break through crust. The puppy sniffed his fingers. Then it pushed its face into his waiting arm, squealing happily as it gave itself pets with the healer's unmoving palm. Pure Vanilla *melted*.

He pushed the dog over and gave it a belly scratch. What a soft and sweet thing! Unknown to him, he was smiling from ear to ear.

At the sound of footsteps, he quickly retracted his hand.

“Chiffon!”

The general hurried over and scooped up the cake creature in one hand. “How many times must I tell you,” he spoke at it slowly, “to stay in my quarters.” It panted happily at its owner, uncaring. Red Velvet sighed.

“This one doesn't look like it was made for fighting.” the blonde noted, standing up.

“All of our current ovens are geared for fighting dogs. However, they don't always come out as intended.” As if to emphasize the oven's erroneous tendencies, he waved at his cake arm.

Pure Vanilla, conversely, found the general's arm very interesting. “My apologies if this comes across as insensitive, but such a fusion of cake and cookie is truly miraculous. I would like to study it sometime.”

Red velvet made a strange face. “Next thing you'll be telling me what percent of my body is porous...” he muttered.

“Do you know?!” the healer exclaimed.

“No? Is that a question people usually ask strangers?”

“My apologies, I got excited at the prospect of information.”

Chiffon hopped from the general's arms, coming to paw at the healer's robes. Ignoring the gasp of betrayal, he picked up the puppy and sat down on the nearest confection, letting it rest in his lap. "So what are you here for?"

"The dogs need to be fed. I'm making Dark Choco do it, but he doesn't know where the dog food is."

He watched as the man hop into one of the cauldrons and come out with a large bag on his hip. Instead of getting off, he just sat on the rim, waiting. Dark Choco came from the platter the next minute, disgruntled at having to do menial chores. Pure Vanilla waved in greeting and he nodded back. He walked to the pot and the general tossed him the feed with instruction to tie it to himself lest the hounds make off with it. He did as commanded, tying the bag tightly around his waist.

Red Velvet grinned and put a hand to his mouth. He let out a loud, shrill whistle. Within a second the general bustle of the dogs went silent and they snapped to the source of the call.

All eyes trained on the bag of food currently latched to the bitter prince.

Pure Vanilla could see the moment his face fell. "Oh shi-"

He was absolutely bodied by Lard.

The cake hybrid dropped to the ground in the proceeding pandemonium, smugly satisfied with his petty revenge for the prince strong-arming his way into his assignment. He noticed Pure Vanilla's disapproval despite the cookie's bandages covering his face and shrugged. The healer sighed. He had to acknowledge the humor of the situation.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee~"

They looked over at the strange noise. Dark Choco had been buried under a pile of cake hounds, all lapping him and trying to burrow to get at the feed.

Pure Vanilla snorted into his fist. "Should we help him?"

"No need," the amused man replied. "He won't be crushed, my pets know how fragile cookies are. They do tend to swarm during meals, though. It wastes a lot of time so I usually throw stuff from the second-floor platter."

"I take that you just conveniently forgot to mention this?"

Dark Choco crawled out of the pile and broke into a run, dog food still attached to him. He was not fast enough.

"Oh no, what a terrible mistake." the general said dryly. He did not so much as spare the poor prince a glance.

Pure Vanilla watched the struggle persist for a few moments, enjoying the comical scene before him. The sight of an older, more apathetic Dark Choco lose his composure over being licked by a bunch of friendly dogs was hilarious for some reason.

He deposited Chiffon and stood up. "I think I've laughed enough at his expense." The prince came along on the journey because he wished to protect him, so he felt somewhat guilty for being amused.

"Alright, fine," Red Velvet huffed, still smiling. He walked over to the pile and drove the dogs

away with the blunt end of his sword. “Off, off.”

Pure Vanilla pulled the prince to his feet. One side of his hair was stuck to his face, courtesy of dog spit. *Now we both have spit in our hair.* His eyes were blown wide.

“I think I just saw heaven,” he whispered.

Red Velvet nearly tripped himself laughing.

The prince scowled at him. “You-! You did this on purpose, you half-baked spawn of-”

Pure Vanilla covered his mouth, mildly scandalized at the ensuing diatribe. Who taught him to cuss? He made sure to avoid vulgar language in the presence of people and Dark Cacao certainly was not so creative.

The healer divulged that he should have thrown the food from the second platter. Surprisingly, the prince wasn’t too upset to shirk his job entirely. He unlatched the bag and went back toward the direction of the platter, the hounds following him gleefully.

Pure Vanilla was left with Red Velvet. He spun around, buzzing with excitement. “So, about that arm-”

“No battle capabilities and no asking about how or why I got it.” the general acted rather exasperated with his enthusiasm. At least that wasn’t a hard denial. The healer paused to think of a question that was suitably personal. After a second, he felt secure in his query.

“Hypothetically, if you had the chance to replace it, would you?”

“I dislike thinking of such fantasies. It’s been a part of me as long as I remember.”

“Surely the thought has come up once or twice. Please, indulge me a bit?”

Red Velvet pondered whether he should answer. “Fine, but you must agree to a question I have.”

What did he have to lose? The healer accepted the terms.

“If my arm would be gone? I would be able to walk without tilting to one side or having my back and shoulder hurting. This accursed arm is too heavy for my body and drags down on my dough until it’s thin and often on the verge of cracking, and also messes up my balance so I often have to tilt to the side.”

That sounded beyond painful, and the hybrid must have had these problems for a long time. It served as both a weapon and a chronic condition.

“Perhaps I could walk into a bar and no one would question what or who I am. Children wouldn’t be terrified to approach me, and I wouldn’t be turned away for being part cake.” He smirked. “But then, this arm grants me the understanding of the struggles of what cake creatures face and those experiences have inspired me to a grander purpose. Without it, I do not know if mother would have saved me. In that aspect, it is a blessing.”

“It seems as though your life may have been radically different without it,” he said. “Speculating may be beyond you since that hypothetical is so far removed from your reality.”

“Exactly.” The cake hybrid appeared satisfied. “Now it’s my turn. You came for mother, right?”

“H-how did you come to that conclusion?” he stuttered in surprise.

“Nothing on your end, Healer, but the Dark Enchantress acted differently than usual. She didn’t even allow Pomegranate to touch your mind.” Something cruel twisted in his features. “One could almost call it sentiment.”

“You weren’t exempt from her scrying,” he realized, watching the general bristle. That definitely seemed like a sore spot. “Does she really treat me so kindly compared to others?”

“It was obvious to everyone. No one mentioned it since she is in the room, but they noticed the disparity. The priestess nearly burst a gasket.” He scoffed. “Sure, she also acted softer to Licorice when he first arrived, but her care was only surface-level. This is deeper and less conspicuous than that.”

“Licorice...he didn’t join for The Dark Enchantress, did he?”

“Only one other cookie is here out of loyalty to her.”

Pure Vanilla scrunched his nose, displeased at sharing a trait with Pomegranate. However, the other also clarified one fact: he did not stay with his mother for her sake. Why else could he be a part of The Cookies of Darkness? Did he fight against Earthbread because of ostracization, on behalf of his cakehounds, or for lack of better options?

“To be honest, I’m rather surprised that you would admit to not following The Dark Enchantress so closely. She always struck me as a sort of person worth sticking by.” The memory of flowers replaced the ghastly creature residing in his castle.

“Don’t get me wrong, I do care for her, but that is exactly why I am saying all of this. Mother finds you special, for some reason.” He pointed at the healer. “The status quo has changed. I’ve seen her change once before. If this turns out for the worse, I won’t forgive you.”

Pure Vanilla flinched. It was not his intent, to further strain whatever relationship Red Velvet had with his mother, yet the very fact that she spared him made the general discontent and garnered the other cookies’ interest. He came with the single-minded intent of bringing back White Lily, but seemed to have dragged in everyone else by proxy.

“I did come for The Dark Enchantress’s sake, or rather who she used to be. If you haven’t already guessed, we share some history. I wish to understand why she chose the path she did, and if possible, sway her from destroying cookiekind. If she will change for anyone, it will be me.” he laughed hollowly. “I am not bragging when I say so; we were the closest of friends. She loved me for the horrible, selfish person I was- am. I can save her from herself- can heal almost anything. Why would this be different?” his speech trailed into a question.

Red Velvet frowned at him as though he was something to be pitied. *Why? Stop looking at me like that. I am not someone weak or fragile or worth pitying.*

“I don’t understand the intricacies of everyone’s relations, but I’ll try to keep The Dark Enchantress from doing anything drastic. I don’t intend to hurt anyone, even indirectly.”

“Be careful. Starving and desperate dogs have a fierce bite.”

Who was the starving dog? Him or her?

“I appreciate the warning. And just as Dark Choco said, I’m sorry too.”

Like last time, the general remained silent.

## Chapter End Notes

Pure Vanilla and White Lily are canonically mad geniuses and I've gonna milk that forever. I'm so excited to finally get to the point where I can lay out my plans for this and also delve fully into PVC pipe's psychology.

Next: Cake Tower Trio pt 2.

## Pure Vanilla: The Cake Tower Trio (2)

### Chapter Notes

TW: Brief mentions of euthanization + hand-wavey medical things

Man is school busy. Thanks for waiting so long, y'all can have a twice-as-long chapter in return. I am trying my best to make every single character complex (like a madman-yes, even ones like poison mushroom) so the word count has been dragging itself. Have fun!

Fun fact: Pure Vanilla and the Dark Enchantress are the only ones who add "cookie" after saying a character's name. It's an old people thing here.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

His first memory was of a burning fire.

He gained consciousness, awoken by the crying of monsters. He felt a hint of annoyance at being interrupted from a deep, peaceful sleep, then faint shock upon the sight of something twisting around him. As the glowing tendrils curled around his body, he felt a searing sensation, that the prickling, biting feeling was bad. The child retreated from it, instead seeking the faint slits of light that didn't hurt to touch or look at.

He clawed with his misshapen body, scraping against the bars of the oven. The cake creatures were too large and bulky, but the child had only an arm. He was tiny enough to squeeze away. But once out of the fire, he froze. His newly formed body was still soft and he could only walk so far. Where was he supposed to go? He knew nothing of the world. Though the baking ovens were terrible, it was all he had. Accepting death came naturally, when he was baked into it.

Upon the platter, in the shadows behind an alcove, an angel watched. Red Velvet had never seen another cookie before. She was larger than him, he could tell, but not by much. On a closer glance, another small girl hovered next to her. The white figure turned to the kid and they had some kind of conversation.

He felt a stab of jealousy. Why couldn't it be him there, with the angel? The child expected to die, yet with the simple presence of a new figure, still and quiet just beyond the horizon, even something as trivial as the presence of another he yearned for more than he possessed. He did not wish to go into the cruel night alone.

He looked back at the creatures from within the oven. They were beastly things of dripping creme with red undertones. They screamed and bayed at the bars trapping them, at him for daring to escape, at the world for being borne into it. Young as he was, the half-cookie could tell he differed from them. He wished desperately for the company of something of his kind, like that white-haired angel on the platter. But she was too far away.

He slipped back into the bars, trembling in pain at the searing heat. A cake hound was clawing at the bars, farther from the fire than the others. The child hugged its fluffy hind leg and the monster let him, too intent upon breaking the oven to pay the pest any mind.

This was all he could get. At least the monsters would die with him. He watched the ghostly figure grab the smaller one's hand, trying to hide. They were too late. One of the hulking creators had noticed their scampering and headed their way. He gasped as its grizzled claws snapped them from their alcove, tossing the pair into the boiling liquid.

He buried his face into the beast's sizzling fur. It was as if the sight had truly solidified his fate. He would end up the same as the other cakes and cookies, in boiling stew or roaring flame.

*Clang*

He jerked up in surprise.

*Drip, drip. Clang.*

Something large dragged its upper body from the pot. Two horns sat upon their head, glowing liquid dripping from gleaming white hair. With a gasp, the child recognized that his angel had survived.

But she had *changed*.

Whatever had crawled out of that cauldron was larger, crueler. She had laughed as she rained carnage upon her creators, and he watched in awe. To his young mind, The Dark Enchantress was a hero, beating up the bad people who would bake and eat him. Glowing portals appeared in the oven as she created crystals and then shattered them, and the things trapped within, including him, ran free.

The witches fell to the ground, the pure, malevolent intent of her magic searing into their bodies like acid, melting them until only bone survived. And even the bone would hold the remains of her power, curses imprinted upon them for eternity. She wrought desolation and laughed while doing it, cold and strong and beautiful.

He decided to show himself. Her slitted red eyes focused on him in surprise. Then she smiled.

Many years into the future, Red Velvet would question whether or not it was a good thing. Whether he would have had a better life if he had just run away before the Dark Enchantress could reach out and croon.

But the child was just happy to be held.

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Pure Vanilla got up early that morning. Throughout the night, he had been haunted by the implications of what Red Velvet said. He really hoped that restless nights would not be a normal occurrence after joining the cookies of darkness, which had better amenities than Raisin village, but unfortunately the fluffy sheets did nil to calm his anxious thoughts. The healer resigned himself to sleeping poorly in the village and his castle.

He crawled out of the bed, taking the blankets with him, and promptly decided to raid the general's storage. After rummaging through endless boxes of dog feed and the occasional squeaky toy, he discovered a small case of appliances and edible food. It included the holy grail of kings: Coffee. The grounded kind, to be exact.

"Thank the witches," he sighed happily.

He lit a small fire under a water beaker. After studying the cups with some revulsion, he cleaned

them with a spell and tore a pack of bean powder into the cutest mug. A slow sprinkle and stir of boiling water, and the brew was complete. He blew on the mixture slightly to cool it. It tasted stale, but was still decent coffee.

Satisfied, the healer went on his way. He thought to watch the sunrise. Until the general assigned him to a task, he had nothing else to do. Might as well enjoy the beauty of nature while he had the chance. Pure Vanilla strolled to the edge of the fourth platter, humming a light tune. He quieted at the faint sounds of movement from the edge. Someone had gotten up before him? He snuck toward the noise curiously.

He found Dark Choco, up and alert, practicing his sword forms. It was five a.m. and he was already shirtless. Pure Vanilla stifled his sigh.

First Red Velvet, and now him. Sure, Dark Cacao prided his soldiers on waking up at the crack of dawn but did that have to apply to his son as well? Surely not all of the cookies of darkness got up *this* early in the morning.

Even so, he could admire the discipline. As he spectated, the prince swung his sword about in a way that preceded his powerful lighting attack. One step to the side, and then down.

GOOOONG.

He jolted when the large sword slammed into the platter, causing the whole floor to tremble and reverberate in an ear-splitting fashion. He cringed and shoved his arms over the sides of his head. Dark Choco himself seemed shocked at the sound he caused, picking up his sword within seconds and looking around wildly. He finally saw the healer, who was sporting a truly amazing bedhead while dragging half his sheets with him.

“Uh- Good ni- good morning, Pure Vanilla.” He stuttered with all the grace of a teenager being caught exercising in their bedroom.

“Good morning.” Said healer took another sip from the chipped puppy mug.

“How long have you been watching me?”

“Long enough. Excellent arm strength, by the way. I doubt anyone else could slam a sword hard enough for the entire Hollyberry kingdom to hear.” He chuckled as the prince deflated in embarrassment.

“I didn’t think it would be so loud,” he said petulantly.

“Unfortunate.” Pure Vanilla was completely unsympathetic. “If Red Velvet wasn’t aware you were training earlier, he certainly is now.”

He buried his face in his hands with a groan.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about! Getting exercise is good for the body. There have been so many studies about the effects of a routine, such as better stamina, improved upper body strength, better endurance, and more.”

“Stop that.”

He took another sip of his coffee, savoring the taste. He placed it on the ground and folded his blankets. They were placed on a nearby cupcake. Pure Vanilla took his place in an open area close to the platter’s end, where the lands were unobstructed. His flower craned forward, trying to

provide its owner with the best possible view. He felt a surge of quiet affection at its effort, and made a greater effort to enjoy his “sight”.

After a moment, he heard Dark Choco settle beside him.

The sun sat on the horizon, tinting the whole desert in a way that made the sand appear like molten gold. The reflective metals burned brightly in the desert sun, casting wavering rays of light upon the large metal tower and across the backs of sleeping dogs.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

The prince stared at the rolling dunes as though he had never seen them before. “I guess... I rarely ever spend time looking at the scenery.”

“Have you been here before?”

“I have, but only once or twice. I dislike the cake tower. Something about it is deeply unsettling.” Dark Choco replied.

“I can see what you mean. There’s an inherent kind of sacrilege in turning the gods’ ovens into factories of war, not to mention the strange remains or malicious magic lingering around.” Pure Vanilla swung his legs over the edge. Although the dry and dusty breeze on the higher platter levels stung his dough, it was still more pleasant than the stagnant air at the base of the tower. He pointed at the bones buried in the sand. “Have you seen those white structures there? They don’t come from dragons or cookies, but they are definitely from a living creature.”

“Really? I had assumed it was a weird desert landform.” The prince scooted closer, peering over at the desert. “It’s so large, what could it be anyway?”

Pure Vanilla paused for a moment, then responded. “I imagine they might have been the witches.”

Dark Choco’s head practically snapped to him. “What? No, how could you think that?”

“I doubt there’s much else they could be. This place, the holy oven, the origin of so many cookies in the world were baked, had been long since abandoned. And there lie the remains of creatures unknown to cookiekind. It’s just the easiest conclusion to draw.”

“But if that were true, it would imply that someone on Earthbread has the power to kill a god. That gods can be killed in the first place. Would they be so special in the first place, if they are mortal beings like us?”

Pure Vanilla had always believed that every cookie should have a place upon Earthbread, not because they were created to do so, but because each of them was a person in their own right, unique and receptive to the world. Throughout his rather lengthy life, he found that, sans a few, people generally tended to be good. Whether the witches created them or not mattered little to him, except for their baking process. He couldn’t care less if they were gods or regular old cookies.

On the other hand, he and White Lily had tried so hard to discover the secret of life and failed. The two Institute students had never been able to create a real, living cookie, so maybe the witches were special after all.

He had simply lost interest in pursuing “life” after the school had shut down.

As for who killed the witches, Pure Vanilla also thought it obvious, but he wasn’t sure if he wanted to mention it to Dark Choco. The prince didn’t act like he was so fervent in his servitude to the

Dark Enchantress but he would get in trouble if- wait, did he even know that the sorceress used to be White Lily? He seemed reticent to talk about his inclusion into the cookies of darkness but otherwise had no qualms about giving him information. Oh. Oh no.

“I assumed that someone like you would put natural phenomena of the world on a more untouchable pedestal, like the kind who believe the witches are good and everyone deserves to live happily.”

“That stings a little, Chocoling.”

“I don’t mean it’s a bad thing, just different. I suppose that my memory of you wouldn’t be completely fitting, since it has been so long. And- don’t call me that!”

“Since you have brought up the past, I might as well do the same. Plus, Chocoling was such a cute nickname. Won’t you let me use it again?”

“The other cookies would lose their minds.”

“That wasn’t a rejection.”

“No!”

“Please? Selectively?”

“It has to be in private.”

“Public, as long as nobody’s listening.”

“Deal.”

How the hell should he break this information? Perhaps he could ask about his father first. It was definitely a sore topic, but Pure Vanilla truly wished to know how his old friend was doing.

“...Do you know how Dark Cacao cookie is doing?”

“He’s alive.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure of that before, so thank you.” It was difficult to be positive about such a wealth of information. At least the boy gave him something.

“I don’t know about the other ancients, unfortunately. They seemed to withdraw from existence after the Flour war.”

“I know the location of one other from our group.”

“Really?”

“Yes, right in our castle base.”

He blinked, uncomprehending. “You?”

Pure Vanilla sighed. He really didn’t want to say it. “White Lily is the Dark Enchantress.”

Dark Choco gaped. “You- you have got to be shitting me right? Please say this is a joke,” he begged.

The healer gave him a succinct shake of his head.

Dark Choco looked as though his world was falling apart. He couldn't blame him. Pure Vanilla had reacted much worse when he initially discovered the news. The prince drew in upon himself, as though he could protect himself from the world. "Why must everyone I admire end up this way? Father exiles me, you join the cookies of darkness, and it turns out that auntie was my Master for all this time? Is anything I believed in true?"

Dark Cacao did what? He bet that emotional expression-deficient cookie did so in an unplanned outburst, he was usually smarter than that. Tossing his problems (not that Chocoling was a problem) out of sight was out of the ordinary for his behavior. He hurt his son greatly, from what he had picked up thus far. "The next time we meet, I am going to have some words with that man," he whispered.

"Chocoling, I am not a perfect person. Not even a good one. And as much as it pains me to admit, Lily wasn't either. I don't understand what transformed her into the creature she is today, nor what drove her to incite the Flour War, but ultimately, that's not the reason for my return to the castle. I came here because of sentiment." he muttered the last word, as though it were something vile. "You are right to feel betrayed. Anything less would be too dismissive of yourself."

"It is a wonderful thing to admire others' qualities, to believe in them as people, but as for us- I guess you just drew an unlucky lot." It was a sad, utterly pathetic condolence, and the other man knew it too.

Dark Choco huffed, mouth twisting into a weary grin. "That does reassure me, that it's okay to feel this way. Because as much as I do care about you, I cannot bring myself to trust you."

"Ah. I see." The words twisted in his chest like a knife. For as justifiable as his feelings were, it truly hurt to process that the sweet little boy he had loved, had near treated like his child, would be leery of him. He pulled his knees closer to his body and hugged them.

The prince cringed. "Sorry."

"It's fine," he replied hollowly.

The conversation trailed into a heavy silence.

Red Velvet arrived a bit later to fetch him. He picked up on the uncomfortable tension in the air, but he didn't seem to care, gesturing for the healer to follow him. Pure Vanilla stood up and gave the dark prince a nod, then left with him. Dark Choco refocused on the remains and contemplated what had been revealed.

"Recently, a large batch of cake hounds had been baked." Red Velvet said, apparently unaware of how he trampled over the emotionally delicate situation. "The few days where they first leave the oven have the highest mortality rate." Pure Vanilla perked up, his professional healer experience slotting into place. "Mother told me that she needed more soldiers, and I thought it would be quicker to bring you along so that most of the puppies survive, rather than making more batches where so many pass away."

"What causes the cake hounds to pass away? If they are born with deformities then I can't provide any quick solutions." Healing worked by replacing the dough, jam, and ingredients that had been lost, based on the body's existing blueprint. If the blueprint came incorrect then the problem becomes far more complex.

“Don’t worry.” the general reassured, hound-like teeth glinting. “Mutants are very rare.”

How many ones like you have been created? He wondered.

The tower's base was filled with large ovens, the origin of cookiekind. Now, however, they had been converted into cakehound factories, pumping out hundreds of beastly soldiers for the Dark Enchantress's armies. These recently-baked hounds, untrained and not yet able to discern between friends and enemies, fought among themselves. The general swerved between the carnage with his trained dogs, separating the warring groups in displays of domineering power.

“Golly, this is quite violent.”

“If only you could have arrived a week ago. They are acting mellow in comparison,” He explained while prying two dogs apart teeth first with his bare hands.

Charge-types are something else.

The general pinned one cakehound to the ground, one arm under its neck and the other down the side of its ribs. It whined, bothered by the distraction. “Check it for injuries.”

Pure Vanilla dropped to a knee beside him and ran a quick scan. The dog came back relatively unharmed but for a few scratches on its nose. They disappeared without any effort on the healer’s end. “Done.”

Another soldier for the Dark Enchantress.

“You gave the Twik the worse end of the fight for sure” Red Velvet spoke to the dog. “Damn hope she doesn’t hold a grudge.”

The other hound spat at this one in frustration, but the general’s trained soldiers rebuffed it. He stepped past them, crouching in front of it. “C’mere girl.” The dog growled in annoyance but allowed him to hold it. On cue, Pure Vanilla checked for injuries. This time, the damage was more serious. “Several gaping wounds to the sponge, internal hemorrhage near the neck, and an unpleasant laceration on the flank.”

“Can all of that be healed?”

“Of course, though I will have to extract the frosting that had been pushed into the cuts. She may find it painful. Spelling her unconscious would be best.”

Red Velvet moved aside so he could get space, giving nonverbal permission for him to knock the hound out. It wasn’t necessary. With a wave of his hand, it slumped over in dreamless sleep.

Pure Vanilla slowly extracted small bits of hair from the wounds. Once clean, he used quick flashes of heat to disinfect the wound. He regrew the sponge last- it was the easiest part.

“I thought healing magic worked instantly.”

“It can, when wounds are light and new. Since some of these injuries have lasted for over a week, we should err on the side of caution.”

He nodded as the blue-tinted glow of his healing faded. The dog awoke with a whimper, calming when she saw the general. Free of pain, it acted much friendlier and tamer than before, though that didn’t stop her growling at the others.

“Let’s move on.”

One by one, they went through the injured dogs. Some of them bit and snarled, some whined, and some allowed them close without any protest. They all behaved much better after a round of healing, their mood much improved from week-old injuries being properly healed.

Pure Vanilla, who only experienced negative things from cake creatures (other than briefly meeting Chiffon) studied them with interest.

As they moved across the dunes, Red Velvet noticed a cakehound that appeared to be heavily injured. “Oh dear, Mallow is in a bad state.” he snapped his fingers and his guards prowled over to the hound lying on its side.

One of the more feral dogs prowling around used this as an opportunity to attack. The second that the general’s guard left his side, it lunged.

“Red Velvet cookie, look out!”

The dog went for the back of his neck, but only snagged a bundle of the general’s mane. Red Velvet was unbothered. He jerked his head, and the cake hound flew off. He took this in stride, using the opportunity to push the dog onto its side.

“Hair.” He gave the healer a thumbs-up. Pure Vanilla huffed.

The healer knelt beside this dog. It snapped and snarled at them both from its position. Its teeth had been broken into serrated edges, yet it continued to struggle and attempt to bite them. Pure Vanilla raised his staff, then hesitated. He had always known that the cake hounds he healed would become fodder for the Dark Enchantress’s war. The realization that what he was doing may directly lead to other cookies’ deaths only just hit him, though. This dog displayed nothing but savagery. It had attacked Red Velvet, the person who (from what he’s learned) cared about his dogs more than anything. It reminded him of those heartless, mindless summons that would consume his waking moments, even after his memories had been lost.

He saved the hounds from before because bits and pieces of their soul shone through, but as for this one...was there anything worth salvaging?

All he needed to do was put a bit more magic into this dog while healing, break the cap just slightly. The general wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.

“Healer? Is something wrong? I won’t let him bite, if that worries you.”

“Sorry for my absentmindedness.” He fixed the dog’s chipped teeth. What one Earthbread was he thinking? To use his magic like that...

They continued on with the healing, Pure Vanilla agonizing over the way he nearly euthanized the hound and Red Velvet none the wiser.

As he fixed the cakehound the soldiers had been protecting, he considered his perspective on cakehounds.

He may be Pure Vanilla, but the king did not take precedence. First and foremost, he was a healer. He must not turn away patients if they lay before him. Up close, the dogs obviously had their own feelings and personalities, even if they were not as advanced as cookies. Therefore, he should treat them as patients rather than pawns of her.

Mallow had been fully healed. Pure Vanilla stood, once again secure in his choice.

All of a sudden, one of the soldiers started baying. Alarmed, the general sprinted toward the sound, the blonde following closely behind. The cake hound was digging in a corner. Red Velvet dropped beside it and helped. They gasped as the sand parted to reveal matted fur.

“I must have missed this one in the original count,” he commented guiltily. The general gently brushed the sand off of it. This cake hound was tiny, almost half the size of its companions. It must have been bullied badly. As Red Velvet checked the puppy over. It barely squirmed in his grasp.

“Several large bites on the right hind leg, but thankfully not much else,” he noted. “This one’s a runt. She wouldn’t be much good in battle if she survives.”

“That doesn’t mean she should be in pain,” Pure Vanilla chided. He lifted the puppy out of the general’s arms and into his lap. The puppy yipped as the cool wash of healing washed over it, the bites fading away and frosting regrowing over skin. The puppy snuggled against him, and if he wasn’t already sitting, her cuteness would have bowled him over.

Red Velvet stared at him, mouth slightly open. “What? She deserves to live. Be a little kinder to your company.” The words were somewhat compensation for his earlier thoughts, but the dog *was* such a cuddly thing. All the good things in the world should be hers.

“I just made an offhanded comment about her battle prowess, it had nothing to do with whether I wished she could survive. I would’ve asked for her to be healed anyway.” Pure Vanilla finally discerned his expression: the general was marveling at him. “Thank you, for doing so without my prompting. You are a decent cookie.”

The praise made discomfort rise in his chest, but he didn’t want to say anything and ruin the hybrid’s joy. Red Velvet was smiling softly, a new expression that he hadn’t shown the healer beforehand. “It’s...just the right thing to do. Anyone else would have done the same.”

“I doubt it,” he said matter-of-factly. “If every person were like you, I wouldn’t need to be here at all.”

If everyone was like him, there would be bigger problems. Just one managed to unleash a homicidal sorceress upon Earthbread. He refrained from mentioning this aloud.

“You should name her.”

“What?” Pure Vanilla was thrown off “W-why?”

“She only survived because of you. I think it’s fitting”

He gently stroked a hand over the puppy now sleeping in his lap. Strangely enough, he felt glad he got to name the hound he saved; it was an honor.

The puppy was brown with a few white spots and it had large flopping ears, reminding him somewhat of a mushroom cap. He giggled as it awoke with a snuffle and gave it a fond scratch.

“Truffle cakehound.”

“So it will be.”

After checking over the last of the hounds, they returned to the tower to eat. Red Velvet dug through his meager supplies for a while until he sheepishly admitted to not having regular meals

and hunting every few days. He received a lecture about the dangers of lacking sugar in his body.

White Lily obviously neglected to teach her son about health. Everything he told him was fresh information. The hybrid left that talk with determination to find some meager scraps and a newfound wariness for his mortal frailty. He managed to dig up some old jellies from a barrel in a corner, much to Pure Vanilla's faint dismay at their state.

The healer, concerned over the jellies' freshness, cooked them over a fire. He split the food into three portions, leaving one for Dark Choco. The warrior will come to eat eventually. He snacked on his jellies and ignored the general's obvious observation to the best of his ability.

Come back to me. A voice echoed in his head. Pure Vanilla growled into his lunch.

Red Velvet froze, morsel halfway to his mouth. "What?"

"Apologies. Our master is calling me."

"Oh. You'll have to leave soon." He seemed rather disappointed.

The jellies were somehow less appetizing than before. He set the plate aside.

"Healer?"

"I'm going for a walk. There's no need to follow me, please just enjoy the meal."

He didn't wait for Red Velvet to respond. Pure Vanilla quickly descended the levels, cringing as the heavy air and ominous magic settled over him. He immediately remembered just how much better the higher platter levels were compared to the base of the tower.

He wanted to go off alone to calm down, but the irritating curse infecting the whole area made everything worse. Even he was beginning to feel unbearably jittery, when spastic energy had never been a part of his nature. The healer decided to stay rather than get any closer to the base. In his state of mind, that would be asking to do something stupid.

He felt a bit guilty for ditching Red Velvet so suddenly, but he couldn't stay there. Hearing the Dark Enchantress's voice in his brain was frightening during their first meeting, and the dissonance it caused hadn't improved whatsoever. He had to convince himself that the message wasn't just a byproduct of his mind, and after so many years of White Lily's echoes, suddenly hearing the real thing disturbed him greatly. It was as if the demon that spent years sitting upon your chest suddenly reached out and strangled you in your bed.

"Deep breaths, deep breaths," he mumbled, doing math equations in his head to draw his focus off of such bleak topics.

"...Euck..."

A dark figure climbed onto the level, movements erratic.

Pure Vanilla snapped out of reverie, his own suffering forgotten. "Dark Choco cookie, are you alright?!"

The prince wavered between him and away. He made a snap decision and stumbled over to the edge of the platter before dropping to his knees and throwing up. Pure Vanilla hurried over to support him. The healer pulled his shoulder-length hair out of his face, gently patting his back as the man continued to heave.

“Can I heal you?”

“No” he panted, “no more magic.”

He waited for the prince to recover slightly. When the color started to come back to his face, Pure Vanilla sat next to him and asked.

“What happened?”

“I touched the witches’ remains. The residual magic probably messed with her enchantments or something.” He slumped over to lie on his back. “Urgh, that felt awful.”

“You have active enchantments attached?” Though he spoke calmly, the healer was distressed. How had he forgotten to check the prince for magical interference? Dark Choco was proud and kind-hearted. The chances that he had been forced or controlled into joining the Dark Enchantress were actually quite high, and the healer should have taken that into account. The list of things he had to make up for was growing. “If they have forced anything upon you, I can attempt to undo the spells.” He raised his staff-

Dark Choco struck the staff out of his hand, sending it skidding off into the distance. Pure Vanilla froze as his world was plunged into darkness; the flower had gone past the range where he would be able to connect to it. He couldn’t tell where it went and briefly panicked.

After a second, he recalled that he could still use his magic, but before he cast the spell, Dark Choco brushed against him. “I’ll get it.” He halted the spell as the prince’s footsteps became fainter then louder again. An image flickered into his mind as they got closer. Pure Vanilla saw himself getting closer in third person, and reached out to take his beloved staff.

Dark Choco gave it back, hands shaking slightly. “Aren’t you upset?” he probed cautiously, as if awaiting some kind of punishment.

Pure Vanilla shook his head. “Not at all, this was my fault. I shouldn’t have scared you. Next time I’ll telegraph my movements.” He expected a retort that ‘he wasn’t scared!’ but nothing came.

“Healer, I should be clear about why I reacted this way.”

“But I thought you didn’t trust me? There’s no need to confess the reason if you’re uncomfortable.”

“I think...talking about why I am here is okay, if not how I joined. A few others know anyways.” The prince took a deep breath. “The enchantment that I had mentioned is constantly active. It acts as a barrier to protect me from a curse I had acquired, and in exchange, I serve the cookies of darkness. My life for my sanity.” He sneered. “It’s abhorrent, isn’t it? That monsters choose to live just to hurt others.”

Pure Vanilla was horrified.

It’s a selfish decision, I know, to join the cookie who had hurt you so much, that had caused the flour war...”

“Oh, Dark Choco...”

The prince abruptly went silent, awaiting judgment.

“Staying alive isn’t selfish. If the Dark Enchantress was your only option, then so be it.”

“It *is* wrong! Pure Vanilla, you don’t understand- I’ve killed people! I was cursed because of my lust for power. I’ve ruined my life, and now everything beloved to me- my Kingdom, my friends, the ancients- I can’t think of them without the memories being tainted by my **stupid fucking actions!**”

Dark Choco exhaled, stunned by his own outburst.

Pure Vanilla was equally shocked.

“I-I didn’t mean to scream at you...I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, it won’t happen again, I swear-” Dark Choco murmured, quickly driving himself into another frenzy.

“Shrooms have hallucinogenic properties.”

“Huh?” The prince broke from his spiral out of pure bafflement. “What?”

“Dark Choco, are you back with me?”

“Ah..yeah, I am.”

“Listen to me.” Pure Vanilla said gravely. “Whether you wanted power or not is irrelevant. Did you know about the consequences of... whatever caused the curse?”

“Of course not.”

“If not for the curse, would you serve the Dark Enchantress?”

“No...”

“I won’t pretend that these are good things, Chocoling, but they are not solely your fault. Claiming to be a monster would be an insult to true monsters- they hurt others without rhyme or reason, without any excuse of duress.”

The prince dragged a hand over his face and let out an exhausted bark. “I change my earlier statements. You are exactly the same man as you’ve always been.”

What does that mean, exactly?

"Pure Vanilla...I may not have faith in much of anything anymore but I don't- I don't want to live that way." His gaze burned intensely.

The prince wanted to believe in him. *Of course he did.* Once again, he experienced the urge to tell the boy that he wasn’t trustworthy and dependable, to dismiss the olive branch before him. He didn’t *want* this burden. He had just freed himself out of old-set expectations of perfection and goodness, and here someone was, imposing them again. But Dark Choco was pleading, in his way, because he had no one else to rely on. The thought *hurt*.

Chocoling was worth it. It may be another weight on his shoulders, but he would gladly bear it for him. “It’s okay,” he said tenderly, “I’ll try to be someone you can trust. I’ll protect you.”

The prince practically fell into his arms. He whispered small comforts as the boy made choked gurgling sounds, the dying remnants of repressed sobs. Pure Vanilla brushed one hand through his silken hair, a comforting gesture from long past.

I’ll protect you, so that you’ll never need to cry again.

Red Velvet was staring at them.

The healer continued hugging him. *Do you mind?* he mouthed. The general shook his head and kept staring. He then tried waving him off, which he seemed to understand. Red Velvet scooted backward behind a confection and smacked it loudly in the process.

The next instant Dark Choco was standing some distance away from him, eyes teary and face flushed in embarrassment.

“So these are the dangers of being unsugared?” the hybrid asked gravely.

“Wrong side effects, and even so they don’t occur this quickly-!”

After much fussing, the prince managed to sit on a soft surface and keep down a meal. Although he said he felt better than before, he was still obviously unwell. Unfortunately, Pure Vanilla needed to leave and return the Dark Enchantress’s summons. Due to the others’ illness and work, he elected to go by himself. Dark Choco was worried for him, but concurred that he could make the journey.

“Plus isn’t it better for you to remain? For your health?”

It took a second, then his eyes lit up.

“I see. I’ll stay here for the time being, and return to the castle once recovered. Unfortunately, that may take a *while*,” he stressed the last word at Red Velvet.

Pure Vanilla laughed. Chocoling was going to stay away from the Pomegranate cookie and The Dark Enchantress as long as he possibly could. Excellent! He could just wander off to where the cursed remnants of her magic doesn’t touch under the excuse of being sick and have the general vouch for his absence.

The point flew over Red Velvet’s head, but he agreed anyway. “Yes, of course. Can you make it back alone?” he addressed Pure Vanilla.

“I am quite alright. But what about the hounds? Does anyone need to be on standby so they don’t hurt each other?”

“Most of the injuries were caused when they were newly baked. At this point, I can deal with the aggression. No one should be grievously injured.”

“If there’s anything they need, feel free to contact me.”

He nodded, satisfied. “Safe travels...Healer. Come back anytime, Truffle will be waiting.”

“Goodbye, P- Healer cookie.”

“Farewell! Don’t murder each other while I’m gone.” He gave them a jolly wave and tossed his staff over his shoulder, venturing back out into the desert.

Once he left their sight, Dark Choco dragged his confused companion away. They needed to have a long conversation about what was to come.

The journey back was much quieter and faster than the first time around. Though the two cookies of darkness weren’t the most talkative of people, they had both conversed with the healer throughout their journey. He found that he slightly missed it- not just because it reminded him of the days of old, when he would adventure with his friends, but he found them both to be pleasant

company. Without them, hours passed by without anything of meaningful happening. The days blurred together.

There was one upside to being alone, though. Pure Vanilla could practice his darker spells without anyone spectating. There were no eyes on him so he could forego his masks entirely. Pity the creatures that would attack him; they met a painful end indeed.

The castle appeared in the distance. He strolled onto the old teleporter and in a blink, the ruined houses of the Vanilla kingdom rose around him. He bypassed the patrolling bots machines guarding the castle, ignoring the comforts of his room to report directly to her.

Pomegranate exited the meeting room just as he arrived. The priestess, upon noticing him, closed the double doors behind her. She positioned herself directly in front of them, blocking his way. “Why are you here?”

“Excuse me, I need to enter. Our master has asked for me.”

“Answer a query of mine first.”

He frowned.

“Healer, do you believe in fate?”

What sort of question was that? Whatever her intent, he supposed answering couldn’t do any harm.

“No, I believe that everyone has the power to make their own decisions. Fate is what a goal someone makes and achieves for themselves.”

She scoffed. “What a shame. I had expected better from someone so dear to her.” The priestess held her head high as she walked past, too proud to shoulder check him despite obviously wanting to.

Pure Vanilla watched her retreating back in confusion. What was her deal? He had obviously failed some kind of test, but she had asked such an open-ended question about a concept as abstract as fate. He recalled that the most skilled members of the pomegranate village were rumored to have the ability to see the future, but whether those rumors had any substance, he never confirmed. Perhaps that was the reason. He still failed to fathom what bearing Pomegranate cookie’s question had.

Are you here, my darling servant?

Pure Vanilla pushed the speculation aside. He had more pressing things to deal with.

The entrance to the meeting room loomed before him. He took a deep breath and pushed the doors open. The Dark Enchantress was kneeling on the ground where his seat used to be. She beckoned him forward with one hand and he complied obediently.

“How was the trip?” She smirked at him. “Was it fun? Did you reconnect with Dark Choco cookie? Oh, but I don’t see him here. Perhaps he wanted to avoid our discussion. I wouldn’t put it past him”

He cut to the point. “Why did you summon me?”

She giggled, the high sound unmatching with her monstrous frame. “Oh, don’t be a joy killer. I

thought you'd have questions.”

“What sort of questions?” He couldn't help but express suspicion.

“What happened in the cake tower? Are those skeletons of the witches?” She leaned forward, serrated teeth in a sweet grin. “Why did I start the Flour War?”

“I find it hard to believe you would give me the answers so freely without some sort of motive. “

“My motive...I suppose I do have one. It is simple. Pure Vanilla cookie, I want you to suffer.”

Chapter End Notes

Outtakes:

PV, trying his best not to be the therapy friend: I do not want to be vented to but it be that way sometimes

Dark Choco, with the threat of insanity hanging over his head: Does this make me emo? Maybe. Am I still gonna be edgy about it? Yes.

Red Velvet (Dark Enchantress named him btw), who heard the entire conversation between the two above- :0

Pure Vanilla: Meeting (1)

Chapter Notes

TW: emotional manipulation. Heads up, the Dark Enchantress is gonna act pretty creepy towards PV for parts of this fic. It may be interpreted sexually, but that's not really my intent. Either way, beware. It's light in this chapter but will get worse later on.

PV has a discussion with DE, hangs out with licorice, and gets caught being sus.

Also, if it isn't abundantly clear by now, DE is like;; very big sizewise.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pure Vanilla nearly tilted his head in bafflement. *Suffer?* There was no way she let him just waltz into the castle, interact with her followers, and then claim that she wanted to hurt him.

“If you truly wanted me to suffer, why haven’t you done anything yet?” He challenged, calling her bluff. If the Dark Enchantress wished it, she could wipe him off the face of Earthbred. Nothing stood in her way.

“Oh Pure Vanilla, you misunderstand. I am not some brute.” She picked him off the ground with one hand. He tensed, but she only moved him closer to her eye level. With the threat of imminent harm dismissed, he relaxed slightly, settling into a kneeling position on her palm. When he wasn’t in her presence, he had somehow forgotten how large the Dark Enchantress was. She could probably crumble him with a well-executed slap.

“I don’t wish undeserved harm onto any cookie. I just want you to suffer the same way I had,” the sorceress said.

“My people were innocent. Did they deserve to be wiped out? Did our friends ever treat you unfairly, that such devastation should be wrecked onto their kingdoms?”

“Of course not.” He couldn’t help but feel surprised. The Dark Enchantress was so far removed from her old self that she was almost like a boogeyman, but for her to admit that...

“The only reason I had fought at all was because the rest of the royals decided to oppose me, and you chose to lead their charge.” She sighed. “So many unnecessary casualties, by your own hand. I thought you loved me, Pure Vanilla. We used to be the oldest of friends.”

“Are we friends, Master?” he asked cuttingly.

“I certainly think we could be. I, personally, enjoyed the time we spent together.”

This was a blatant attempt at manipulation and he didn’t understand what the Dark Enchantress got out of it. He wasn’t going to bend to her will easily and she was too smart to be ignorant of that.

“So many memories,” she sighed. “Think of all the times we had skipped class to learn forbidden magic, or perfect the recipe for baking a cookie.”

“It never amounted to anything.”

Actually, that’s where you are incorrect.” there was a strange edge to her voice now, a tinge of sweetness like cloying honey. “Our experiments, our search for life- we had succeeded.”

“What?” He coughed hoarsely. “No, that’s not possible. Why had you- had the late White Lily kept this to herself? If the experiment succeeded, then we could have revolutionized healing as we know it! She would have told me, or said something at least.”

“Such flattering faith in her, but ultimately wasted. She wanted to spare you the horror.”

“Horror...” He thought about what that descriptor could entail. Although the school had been in a terrible state by the time the students had evacuated, it had little to do with their attempts to bake a cookie. They had stolen ingredients and probably committed some kind of blasphemy but had never hurt anyone. Well, no one except for-

“Are you insinuating that the inclusion of the headmaster’s jam made the recipe work?”

“Yes, but that is far from all. The school has become a haunted place. I’d rather you remain here with me- truly, there’s no need to see it yourself.”

Haunted? By what, exactly?

After the pandemonium they had caused, he had sworn to leave Blueberry Institute behind. His ambition and willingness to skirt the law had led to its downfall, and he resolved to be the kind of person he had only portrayed at school- a pure, perfect, selfless cookie. A fat lot of good that did. He regretted not returning to check the ruins. If Pure Vanilla had just faced his proverbial demons, he could have discovered the secrets that White Lily had apparently kept from him.

Granted, this only stood if the Dark Enchantress was not lying to him. Pure Vanilla wasn’t such a fool that he would believe her words at face value. He needed to verify the claims.

“If our experiment really did succeed...I would like to see proof of it myself.”

“Why so insistent?” She whispered, voice low. “I’m trying to spare you the grief.”

His ensuing silence spoke volumes.

She sighed. “Very well. You may leave for the institute within the next two days. Bring Licorice along as backup.”

He was somewhat surprised that she had allowed him free reign to go to their old school. He smiled. Maybe they were getting somewhere. “Thanks...White Lily.”

The hand around him tightened suddenly.

Pure Vanilla’s staff clattered to the ground as his arms were pinned forcefully against his sides. He choked for air and attempted to squirm from her grip. The bandages across his face came loose in the struggle, and with a quick spell from the sorceress, they fell to the ground in scraps.

She watched him struggle and wheeze in satisfaction before speaking. “Don’t forget your place. How should I be addressed?”

“D-Dark Enchantress.”

“Wrong.” He squeaked as the vice grip grew stronger. The flower on the tiles blinked rapidly as its

connection with its wielder flickered.

“Master!”

The crushing force disappeared as her hand uncurled. He keeled over, coughing.

“There, was that so hard? I doubt saying a single word should be that difficult, Pure Vanilla cookie. I always remembered you to be an excellent orator. All those heartwarming speeches... Oh, but that’s just part of the mask, hmm?”

Pure Vanilla gaped at her.

She peered at the king’s disheveled form. His glazed eyes were blown wide open in shock and fear. Cookies say that eyes are windows to the soul - for the healer, it was also an obvious weakness. Perhaps the king had realized this, after so many years, and sought to hide behind bandages.

What a shame. His blue and gold heterochromia had always been beautiful. So beautiful that even then, in their younger years, she had wished to take them for herself.

The Dark Enchantress laughed and the cookie in her palm flinched. “Well? Aren’t you going to ask about the cake tower and its witches?” she inquired sweetly, as though she had not just nearly crushed him.

“No- I-I want...” The healer, deeply rattled, wasn’t quite sure what to say. Would she use his questions as an excuse to hurt him? He was caught off guard by her actions and hesitated.

“We can save it for next time, then,” she interrupted, lowering him to the ground.

As he was let down, Pure Vanilla felt a brush past his head, almost like the wind. From his staff’s view, he could see a blonde fluffy tuft drift down. The dark Enchantress picked it up carefully, not about to lose a single strand.

“What was that for?” he accused, softly so as to not incite her.

“Mmm?” The Dark Enchantress just nudged his back, a clear signal to leave.

“Wait- y-you can’t just pretend that nothing happened.”

The dark Enchantress loomed over him. “Really, I didn’t see anything. You sound a bit unsure with that stutter.” She smiled, daring him to object. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

Pure Vanilla quailed a bit under her gaze. This wasn’t really an argument worth having. He did not want to be in her presence any longer anyway, so it was better to let it rest. He picked up his staff and left the room, releasing a breath as the double doors slammed closed behind him.

Silence.

Feeling less on edge now that she was out of sight, he gingerly used his flower to check the damage.

There was now a visible V of missing hair downwards from the side of his head. But vanity wasn’t what bothered Pure Vanilla so much. Nor was it Dark Enchantress possessing a piece of him, though the fact did cause him some general anxiety. Anything she wanted, she could have done with the lock he had given before. Gaining more of his crumbs would not change anything, since he already made the mistake of offering the first time.

It was a small, yet significant difference.

She didn't ask him to cut a lock of hair for her. She just took it herself.

He ruffled over the cut with his hands, but the missing piece did not disappear. It seemed the Dark Enchantress had taken a bit too much to easily fix. The thought made a sick sensation writhe in his chest. He shook his head roughly, trying to come back to his senses.

He needed to get out before he spirals.

Pure Vanilla quickly passed the familiar halls of his castle, the ruined state of the architecture blurring by as he went without acknowledging any of it. As he rushed past, a flash of white caught his attention. He backtracked, trying to figure out what he had brushed over in his previous ventures across the halls. Did something survive the years of neglect while he had been incapacitated?

Why, of all things...

A single white lily was still growing in his garden.

He turned away from the flower and hurried off. The sight of it just made him feel worse.

He opened the door to his quarters with more force than necessary, immediately going for the window. The healer opened the old, creaky panes and let the curtains fly out, taking a deep breath. Despite the castle being coated in dust from the battle so many years ago, the air outside was fresh. It had to be, considering that the kingdom sat among the clouds.

He lost track of time as he leaned over the windowsill, letting the clear smell of rain clouds clear his dough and his mind. When he finally felt calm again, he smiled. It looked like a normal smile, and he felt better- back to normal, or at least what constituted as normal.

The flower facing him blinked affectionately. He sighed and brushed its petals. "Sorry about the drop. I'll hold on tighter next time." It blinked again, and the healer thought it looked happier, too.

He re-tied the bandages around his face and set off to talk to Licorice and update him about traveling to the Blueberry Institute. He decided to investigate despite the Dark Enchantress's initial reservations, since he did not believe her to be telling the truth. Licorice had made a decent impression on him despite the other's grumpiness, so he was not upset at having him on the journey.

The reaper had told him where his room was during his tour, but Pure Vanilla would have been able to find out easily even without the introduction. The door was painted purple and had a sign on it that read: "Necromancer at work, do not enter (unless you are dead)".

"Licorice cookie?" he called, knocking on the door. Not hearing anything, he knocked again. The door swung open this time and the reaper slinked out of his pitch-black room.

"Welcome back!" He greeted him, "So the muscle of the group finally released you from their clutches, heh?"

"Actually, our master summoned me. I would have stayed a little longer if I could."

"I don't understand the appeal, but whatever floats your boat." he retreated from the doorway. "Come on in! It may be a bit of a mess, but it's not that bad."

“Your room is rather dark. May I create a light source?”

“Oh, no need for that, I’ve got just the thing. One second…” he slunk back into the shadow. After some rustling, a single purple candle flickered into view, only enough to illuminate the reaper’s face into harsh shadow. “There, that enough light for you?”

It wasn’t- he could only get a sense of the room’s approximate size.

“Thank you, though I think I’ll just make something of my own.” He tapped his staff to the ground and it shone, casting the whole room into warm light. Licorice looked offended.

“Ugh. I should have expected this from someone who wanted to stay in the hot desert.”

“We can’t all be nocturnal.” the healer said. Licorice huffed, appeased by his playful tone.

With the faint glow, Pure Vanilla could now scope around the room. It was quite the academic’s dream nest: crooked shelves nailed to walls and covered with fading books. Licorice had inscribed magic circles into every clean surface, and dark remnants of spellwork covered the marble sugar floors. Large cauldrons cluttered the corners and pages were scattered about, which he took special care to avoid stepping on.

The cookie of darkness tapped his scythe on a cauldron and a few minions popped out. They carried over a plate with pie, offering them to the healer. He was suddenly reminded of Red Velvet’s soldiers, but the little licorice summons were far less intimidating. Who knew all these cookies had such cute accomplices?

“My thanks.” he picked a slice from the stained china.

They returned to Licorice’s side, flanking him like tiny, pudgy bodyguards.

“So, what’s up?” the reaper asked.

“The Dark Enchantress has granted me permission to investigate an abandoned school nearby, in two days’ time, and suggested having you accompany me. Is that alright?”

“Sure, of course! Thanks for the heads up. Most of the others around here would just drag me off without warning.”

Pure Vanilla thought about Red Velvet and Chocoling. Yeah, he could imagine that. “I try for good manners,” he said lightheartedly.

The other stared at him for a moment, then pulled his dairy out from ratty robes. The healer sat there in bemusement as his name was quickly scratched into Licorice’s dairy. All pleasant things, he hoped.

The dairy was quickly hidden and Licorice came to sit by him cheerfully. It seemed a bit out of character for the dreary reaper, but who was he to begrudge him his joy?

“Honestly, I’m pretty glad you joined. There aren’t any other mages here, other than the Dark Enchantress, and it’s not like I can approach her so casually.” *Ah, so that’s why.*

“It must be difficult, being the only one who understands the restrictions of being a mage.”

He threw his hands in the air. “Exactly! You get it. Oh, Licorice, you’re so weak! Useless! I can’t believe jelly bears got the best of you. They wouldn’t have if I just had the time to cast anything.

It's impossible for most people to use magic without prep time."

Pure Vanilla patted him on the back. "Hmm...I can cast instantaneous spells," he mentioned sheepishly.

"And you chose to be a healer?!"

"I am quite good at it."

Licorice breathed deeply. He went to face a corner of the wall and let out a silent scream. Then he returned to the healer's side. "Okay. Everyone else is a genius in some way. I got it."

Pure Vanilla had to fight to keep from laughing. So dramatic. "The Dark Enchantress and I are special cases, don't try to compare yourself to us."

"Right, our Master." he stopped his pacing and turned all his attention to the healer. "What on earth is your relationship with her? Dark Choco straight up admitted to knowing you, but there's obviously..." he scrunched up his face and waved at the entirety of Pure Vanilla. "-something going on there. Who exactly is Healer cookie?"

Should he tell him? He had no great reason to hide his identity at this point, since everyone had already noticed that their master gave him special treatment. It will change how he is viewed by them, but White Lily would still allow him to stay around the castle. There were benefits to hiding the information, though, such as keeping the status quo. He did not wish to be treated with hostility. Plus, it was funny, and should he ever reveal that information, he could make the moment suitably dramatic.

Pure Vanilla made up his mind.

"It's a secret," he said, with much flair and mystique.

"I will find out eventually," Licorice threatened. "You are way too mysterious to not be narratively important."

"Err...what?"

"Mark my words, I will be the first to discover who you are!"

"Okay," Pure Vanilla huffed.

"Come on, at least show some outrage."

He showed absolutely no reaction, which made the reaper resort to even more dramatic exclamations. In all honesty, he was probably enjoying this too much. Licorice may be someone fun to banter with (and it was apparent that the reaper enjoyed the small talk as much as he did) but perhaps he shouldn't give the other an excuse to interact with him. He was supposed to keep his distance.

On the other hand, the reaper clearly didn't have some grand ulterior motive when hanging out with him, unlike many who approached him while he still ruled over his kingdom. He had no personal reason to dislike him, since Licorice was not a part of her entourage when she laid destruction on his people. In fact, he seemed rather harmless. Why should he deny himself company?

It was okay to enjoy this through the lie of his identity, for once.

Pure Vanilla knew he didn't look the type to keep terrible secrets. A slender healer with a sweet face did not generally raise suspicions, and most people would scoff at any insinuation that he was less than righteous. One time he had snuck a large inflatable ball into Holly's castle, got caught, confessed to the smuggling, and the guards still did not believe that he was responsible for the following day's incident. Now, however, being a part of the dark enchantress's forces offset his harmless image.

He wondered just what Licorice would come up with.

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It was a shame that Red Velvet and Licorice worked for the Dark Enchantress. He had lived for a long time and recognized monsters, but the two were far from it. Red Velvet held onto a code of honour that was plain to see, and Licorice reminded the healer of a student researcher more than anything else. In another life, he may have been able to count them as friends. In the current situation, unfortunately, becoming attached was dangerous. Though he did not want to view them as enemies, it might come down to that.

He scoffed. As if he hadn't started to feel some affection for them already. The healer would be hard-pressed to truly fight them, even out of necessity.

As he told Red Velvet, he didn't intend to hurt anyone. At this point, he may not even be able to harm the general or reaper. Pure Vanilla cursed his own bleeding heart. Two lives were far less valuable than all of Earthbread, but understanding that fact and applying it to the living cookies around him proved far more difficult.

At least there was something he could do for Raisen cookie's grace, without needing to confront these moral dilemmas. She had let him stay in the village when he appeared, even before he had offered his healing abilities. Stopping the wafflebots from attacking Raisen village was something he felt set on doing, and he still had a few days off before leaving for the Institute.

Pure Vanilla hung in an alley, observing the wafflebot patrols going by. By now, he had memorized their patterns, but he had another goal besides acquiring that information. He needed a way to find the mechanic's base, and find a way to stop the bots at their source.

As if on cue, one of the bots moved erratically, bearing familiar slashes. Raisen cookie's work, no doubt. It ignored the regular patrolling wafflebots, instead going about in a unique direction. Pure Vanilla followed behind, making sure not to appear on any of the patroller's radars.

The injured one slipped inside an open hangar. After a second of deliberation, He snuck after it.

Unlike the rest of the city, the hangar was relatively free from dust. The resident mechanic had kept it well-maintained.

He studied the room cautiously. Bench stations with various blueprints and small tools filled the entire room. One wall was decorated by larger power tools, another with charging ports and halfway dug-out machinery. A goliath lay on the floor. It was not in commission, but from the exposed wires and blueprints, someone had certainly been working on it. The healer felt grateful the goliath hadn't been fixed yet. He wasn't sure if the villagers could fight against this kind of construct.

His care paid off, as upon further inspection, there were several dull red lights blinking from inconspicuous corners of the room. The mechanic must have installed cameras.

Now how should he deal with those?

The healer cast a shield several feet away from each camera, creating a shimmering clear veil over the red sensors. After a second of contemplation, he angled each shield and made them reflective with a thin layer of still water. The solution wasn't ideal, but there wasn't much he could do. It would certainly be less suspicious than if all the cameras failed on the spot.

Sure that he would not be recognized at a glance, Pure Vanilla made his way to the bot.

The broken wafflebot hovered near a station, and he approached it carefully. It angled toward him, but did not attack. The bots had left him alone when he had returned from the cake tower. Perhaps the resident mechanic had programmed him into the code as well? He thought about that pink-haired vanillan kid with the strange headpiece. They haven't spoken to each other yet, so whether the bots have been altered for him was unknown. Or maybe...

"Do you recognize me?" he asked it, fruitlessly. The wafflebot did not react.

The healer reached up and took the bot's head, a red diamond that likely served as its control center. He pried open angular red plates from the head, revealing a mess of circuitry and wires.

Pure Vanilla shook the bot's diamond helplessly. He was not an engineer or mechanic, instead sticking to biological and magical arts. This was a problem, the exact kind of harebrained scheme that his advisors would throw tomatoes at him for. He had no clue how to reprogram the lancer. If he wished to cease the vanilla constructs from attacking Raisen village, he would have to break them outright, something the cookie running the bots would clearly notice.

He did not care much about upsetting them, but if they complain to the Dark Enchantress then she had an excuse to call him for another meeting. It may be cowardly, but the healer did not want to see her.

Though using magic would be easy considering the wealth of power at his fingertips, it was also the riskier option. As Licorice had mentioned, they were the only two mages in the city, and leaving any sort of magical signature would make him instantly suspect. At least with blunt force, he could claim that there was no definitive proof that he destroyed the bots. He studied the large power tools hanging from the wall. Those would do.

He reached for a particularly gnarly-looking drill. He tried to pull it from the wall, but it did not give. What, is there something attached to the tool? He couldn't see an attachment from the front. Pure Vanilla moved his staff under his arm and placed one foot against the wall. He grabbed the drill with both hands and pushed again the wall in an attempt to pry it off with force.

The electric lights overhead flashed red and a loud siren started screaming. Pure Vanilla tore his hand away from the tool, but it was too late. Glass panes rose from the floor and the ceiling, encasing him from all sides. The healer groaned in frustration and dispelled the shields. Those could be useful later on and he would not give away that advantage just yet.

He knocked on the glass. It reverberated strangely, and he concluded that they had been reinforced in some way.

*Should have just used magic.*

\*Beep\*

"Hehehe, now what do we have here? It's the Mistress's new toy, all alone!" the voice reverberated all around him. "Now why are they in my space without permission?"

“ ... ”

“Speak, weird man.”

“Please don’t refer to me as her toy. It’s quite demeaning.”

“Psh, whatever. The next title I think of will be worse.”

He’ll take it.

“So, what is your purpose for invading?”

Pure Vanilla knew better than to admit wanting to destroy the bots while in the mechanic’s territory. For a character such as the child, he supposes the best approach would be praise, with a bit of truth.

“I simply wished to see the marvels of your engineering, though admittedly that is not the only reason.”

“Well, obviously NOT. My brilliant security systems don’t activate at a mere look!” the voice from all around cut off, instead coming from the hangar entrance. Strawberry Crepe had arrived. “But if you wanted to inspect my private projects *oh so badly*, then I will do the same!”

They hovered in front of him, all smug smiles and admittedly amazing technology. The kid opened a holographic panel in front of him, which started scanning him.

Pure Vanilla leaned forward, genuinely curious. “What does this program do?”

“It shows me all there is to know, about anyone.” They grinned as statistics began to fill the screen, and to the healer’s mild embarrassment, they started reading aloud.

“Twenty percent butter, twenty-six percent sugar, fifteen percent kindness, three percent salt...” The hologram screen in front of them updated as they spoke, listing all of his ingredients. Strawberry cookie read off the ingredients one by one, keen to display their insight. As Pure Vanilla stood there awkwardly, the gadget errored, flashing a warning sign and beeping. Strawberry Crepe smacked it with his machine extensions. “Results inconclusive? No way, I wouldn’t make such a mistake.” They key-smashed something into their screen. “Initiate the program again.”

The scanner beeped again, and the kid shrieked.

“Ten percent pure vanilla extract?!”

Oh dear. He’s been found out.

The glass fell with a quick command. Strawberry Crepe cookie hopped in front of him, practically sparkling in excitement.

“Your majesty!”

Too bad for all of Licorice’s dramatics, he wasn’t the first to “discover” his identity.

In which I came back to change a part of the dialogue cause it felt too out of character. Sorry if you are a new reader, but PV's not gonna call him a virgin anymore

Pure Vanilla's mentioned crimes: 1.the glitter incident, 2. the ball incident

Also, I am grinning as I write PV and DE. Like a witch throwing shit into a cauldron, in the hopes of making the absolute most toxic (platonic?) relationship to ever fucking exist.

# Pure Vanilla: Mech and Magic

## Chapter Notes

I have no beta, so hopefully there aren't too many mistakes >\_<

Strawberry Crepe cookie: "Hey, ya want my backstory?" \*Shelter by Porter Robinson starts playing

My computer broke in the middle of this which is half of why it's so late. The other half is that this chapter is upwards 8k words. New record! I also found out how to add pictures to the text.

In which you all get to read about Pure Vanilla getting high. Don't do drugs kids. I'm writing about it cause I see Licorice as a nineteen-some-year-old who would hang out in dark corners and get absolutely blasted on weed.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pure Vanilla regarded the child mechanic. They looked at him in excitement, like he was a figure worthy of awe, or maybe an interesting specimen to dissect. He had trouble telling the difference. Either way, they knew his true identity. The fact did not greatly bother him, but he hadn't counted on anyone figuring it out so early.

How should he proceed?

They seemed happy to see him, going as far as to lower their defenses. The healer had no intent to be cruel to a child, and besides, they were clearly a descendent of his people. He would like to be on good terms with them. Any single cookie that survived the Flour war was his responsibility, since the kingdom has crumbled, in part, because of his failures.

He supposed that he should treat them with kindness.

"Well, since there isn't any point in hiding it, I should introduce myself. I am Pure Vanilla cookie, former ruler of the vanilla kingdom. It's a pleasure to meet you." He raised a hand.

The child mechanic took his hand in both of theirs and shook it enthusiastically. "Wow! This is my first conversation with you. I didn't think I would ever get the opportunity. Dad always praised you so much- 'Oh, Pure Vanilla is such a good man, he's such a nice king, he's so powerful it's awesome'- I really wanted to see what was so great. Well, maybe the outside is unassuming, but it could conceal something interesting. Or maybe not, hehe. My name is Strawberry Crepe, and I'm not a boy or girl!"

The healer blinked, taking a moment to process this absolute barrage of information. He brushed off the slight insult to his appearance and noted with some satisfaction that he had been referring to them correctly. Also, the mechanic's father was implied to have known him directly. Pure Vanilla thought about the people around him, and memories of a shorter, pink-haired, proud man quickly popped into his mind.

"Was your father the head of Research and Development?"

They grinned proudly. “Yep!”

The former R&D head was someone known for working to the bone, yet would take every weekend and holiday to spend time with his kid. Pure Vanilla was not that close to him, yet he would confidently attest to his character.

Strawberry Crepe cookie was alone in the castle. The thought made his heart sink.

“...do you know of his whereabouts?”

Their grin faded somewhat. “No, the last time I saw him was before the Flour War reached us. He brought me to an underground bunker and put me in a cryo-pod he built. He wasn’t there when I woke up.”

Another casualty, most likely.

“I don’t think he’s dead though!” the kid added in a hurry, “My Pop’s too stubborn to let a simple thing like war do him in.”

“I’m sure he’s capable of making it,” Pure Vanilla lied.

“Yeah! See, I’m not the only one who believes that.” The healer wilted a bit inside. “So, my liege, what are you doing here?”

That information was a little more personal. Although he had no compunctions against telling Dark Choco, this kid did not need to know the complex relationship he had with the Dark Enchantress.

“Uh, that’s not a good face. Let’s change the subject.”

“What about you, Strawberry Crepe cookie?” Pure Vanilla initiated, “The rest of the cookies of darkness don’t seem to have any experience in magi-technology, so I assume that the wafflebots are solely accredited to you?”

“Correct!”

“That’s amazing. Even in the kingdom’s prime, a whole team was dedicated to upkeep the bots.”

The child puffed up proudly. “I can work twenty-four-seven and do it all by myself.”

So they were a workaholic. He knew those kinds of people well, and although he didn’t believe that he could stop them (it’s quite difficult to break out of the habit of burning the midnight candle), he could check up once a day with food to make sure that Strawberry Crepe has food and drink.

“I hope you can put in some time of day to rest.”

“Well maybe I could, if they don’t get broken so much,” they huffed.

“Really? That’s unfortunate. Is something attacking them?” Pure Vanilla asked, guiding the conversation. Now they were getting somewhere.

“There are some cookies underneath my city that keep fighting my bots whenever they patrol. It’s annoying. I bet they are made of boring ingredients.”

“Have you perhaps considered...not sending the wafflebots to them?”



“No. They are way too close to us and pose an active threat.

“I somehow doubt that. Have you encountered them in person, or just keep sending bots their way?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it does. You can’t be attacking innocent people on the basis of an imaginary threat!”

“What’s this about?” they asked suspiciously. “You’re pushing the topic. What, are the cookies under the clouds your friends or something?”

Pure Vanilla decided to be honest. Though he found the child’s words toward him to be rather callous and geared to hurt, Crepe did not strike him as someone who liked to harm others, at least not in the way that the wafflebots had wrecked upon Raisin village. They may have caused the Raisin people pain, but Crepe was still a kid with the capacity to learn.

“If I’m being honest, yes. I resided in the village under the city for a while. They live there, Strawberry Crepe, and don’t have the resources to move. They spend more time defending against your wafflebots in what appear to be unnecessary scuffles than bettering their own lives.”

The child was at a bit of a loss.

“There’s only one proficient fighter among them,” the healer pushed, “and she only seeks to protect the village’s residents. They are no threat to us.”

“But if I had made their lives so miserable...what if they try to get revenge? I can’t just suddenly stop sending bots.” They seemed shaken. Perhaps they had never registered the village as people, but rather as enemies to fight. With Pure Vanilla suddenly forcing reality on them, they had no choice but to accommodate.

“I’ll ask them not to use the teleporter into the city, so don’t be afraid. There’s no need to meet them in person”

“What, are you going to throw them a letter from above and have them receive it like some divine prophecy?” they sneered.

“If that were the case, we need a prophet,” he noted.

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“Are...are you sure this will work?” Strawberry Crepe regarded him as though he were mad.

“The village’s guardian won’t attack it on the spot. She’ll try to figure out what’s going on first.”

“Sure she will.” They said sarcastically.

The wafflebot beeped. Its diamond was wrapped (to the best of Pure Vanilla’s ability) with bandages, and it sported the ragged robe he used to wear as a scarf. All in all, it looked like it was trying to emulate him, badly.

“No offense, your majesty,” Crepe cookie said in full offense, “but this feels stupid.”

“It may be silly, but I think this could work. If they are approached by a non-hostile wafflebot wearing my robes, then they’ll believe I’m behind it.”

“And maybe the village guardian will think you died reincarnated into it,” they retorted. “Can’t we just call them? I haven’t installed that technology into the wafflebots but it shouldn’t take more than a week.

“The Raisin villagers are mostly young and illiterate. I’m not sure if they have seen that kind of technology and how they would react. You could work on implementing it, but I don’t think we should start off by introducing something they are unfamiliar with. We could save audio and video calls for later.” He started to pen his letter while the child hovered over his shoulder.

“I don’t like this plan. My poor bot might get damaged!”

“If all goes well that won’t be a concern anymore.”

The child was still discontent. “If they’re so illiterate then why send a letter?” they nitpicked.

“I said ‘most’, not all. Raisin cookie can read. Besides, I’m not discounting your opinion. Implementing video calling into this bot is a wonderful idea.”

They preened. “Ehehe, I’m pretty genius, aren’t I?”

Pure Vanilla agreed lightly. He added a note that said the wafflebot may be equipped with the ability to send and receive calls in the future. He explained what a video call was in simple terms and politely requested her to parrot the information to the others.

He was very glad that Strawberry Crepe chose to stop the attacks. The healer had genuinely not expected the interaction to go so positively in his favor, nor how easy it would be to deal with the wafflebot problem. Crepe’s apparent admiration (hero-worship) of him certainly contributed, but he wasn’t going to reach into the gift-wolf’s mouth. An easy solution had been reached, and Raisin village was all the better for it.

They would send the dressed wafflebot down to the village, along with a letter from ‘Healer cookie’ reassuring them that it would not be harmful and to deter them from entering the flying city. The bot had all its intruder and fighting protocols disabled, with only orders to aid the people in anything they commanded. After a week, its instructions are to return to the hangar. They will assess if it has been damaged and proceed from there.

The mechanic had refused to leave any of their bots in the village permanently because they didn’t want to “abandon” them. They also did not trust that the villagers would keep from breaking it (Pure Vanilla conceded that it was a possibility). They had debated the issue back and forth, before eventually settling on an agreement. One week’s worth of grace period, then Strawberry Crepe would have the right to resend patrols based on what happens to the wafflebot. The healer agreed. He had faith that Raisin and the villagers would treat it well. They were quite the compassionate group.

“One bad scratch on my creation and I won’t hold back, got it? I don’t intend for my bots to become the resident punching bags.” They tried to appear stern, but Pure Vanilla could still tell they were unsure about wrecking the village further.

“Thank you, truly. This means a great deal to me.” He smiled at them.

“Ugh- hmpf. It’s no problem,” Strawberry Crepe trailed off, embarrassed.

They walked the bot to the edge of the city. When it floated above the magic teleporter at the end of the road, Strawberry Crepe seemed like they wanted to accompany it. Instead, the child simply went up to the bot and placed a hand on its hull.

“Good luck.”

They stepped back and the wafflebot disappeared into the light.

They were rather despondent on the way back. Pure Vanilla tried to cheer them up by offering to make lunch. They quickly perked up at the prospect of cooked food, especially at the fact that their king was making it for them. This declaration caused Pure Vanilla to stutter that he wasn't exactly much of a king anymore, but the child kept using his royal titles anyway. He gave up on trying to correct them after a bit. The royal address was leagues above being referred to as the Dark Enchantress's toy anyway.

He diced some jellies and boiled them, before serving them with a side of cream. Strawberry Crepe dug in with such gusto that he had to remind them to breathe.

Now that he thought about it, he should call Licorice. He had made more than enough for two people, and that cookie was also the type to miss meals. He was quite gaunt, so he could do a regular eating schedule. Nobody's sugar was dropping past the average in his presence.

“I'll be back in a minute,” he told the mechanic.

He returned to the castle and knocked on Licorice's door. The other man seemed unhappy to be disturbed, but his negativity faded the moment he saw who was at his door.

“Have you had anything to eat today? I've made lunch and have more than enough for us.”

“I haven't actually. I'd love to join.”

The reaper followed him to the fountain, extra peppy for being included. He led him to the fountain in the square, where he had set up pots and plates. He waved to Strawberry Crepe, who happily returned the gesture. Their face fell the second they saw Licorice. The healer suddenly recalled the barbed insults they would throw at Licorice during their first group meeting.

Pure Vanilla got the impending sense that he had made a mistake.

“Why is he here?”

He tilted his head. “What's wrong with Licorice?”

“Yeah, what's wrong with me?” The reaper parroted, with significantly more annoyance.

“Of all the cookies here, Licorice is by far the most irritating. His presence itself can drive people crazy!”

“How interesting, because I can say the same thing about you.”

Pure Vanilla slowly filled another plate from his pot. In their squabble, they stopped paying attention to him.

Normally, any adult who participates in an argument with a child was usually in the wrong since they decided to sink to that level. In this case, however, he got the inkling that Strawberry Crepe was an equal contributor. They were intelligent and their mech arms would be destructive in a fight. Pure Vanilla wouldn't hesitate to separate the two if Crepe was afraid of the reaper (no matter the reason or lack thereof), but they showed no fear, only derision.

“I still remain unaware of what exactly I have done to receive such treatment,” Licorice huffed.

“Other than being loud and stupid?”

“You little-!”

He set the plate in front of Licorice with more force than necessary. “Please, eat.”

They progressed with the meal, the other two bickering all the while. Pure Vanilla was torn between being amused at the personal insults thrown around and looking towards the heavens for patience. *At least they aren't engaging in a full-out fight*, he thought with desperate positivity. *But I should have brought Licorice his portion separately.*

Some of the notions that Strawberry Crepe expressed did touch a nerve, as Pure Vanilla was also a mage unsuited to taking physical hits. However, he decided that as the third party who liked them both, he won't take a side. As someone who also possessed a natural curiosity about the others' capabilities, he had a somewhat devious idea that could quell whatever schism Licorice and Crepe had for a time.

“My magic is superior to anything technology can even hope to achieve. There's a reason that even in this day, tech is a more comprehensible field!”

That was just factually wrong.

“Well if magic is that great, tell me what color the second brick on the castle's grand staircase is. Don't remember? That's because machine memory is perfect, unlike your unreliable mind.”

“Okay.” Pure Vanilla cleared his throat. “It's clear that both of you have gripes about the worth of each other's abilities.” They remembered his existence and were primed and ready to complain about the other to him. “So how about this?” He interrupted the incoming rant, “I'll set up contests that target specific skills, and whoever wins will get the right to brag?”

They contemplated the offer. Here was a chance to prove their point to a spectator that they have a vested interest in befriending and stick it to the other. In the end, neither wanted to back out and seem like they couldn't stand behind their words.

“I can agree to that since it's clear who will win the competition,” Licorice said.

“Our track record says it will be me.”

Test 1: Speed

For the first test, Pure Vanilla gave them the challenge of circling around the castle. The cookie who completes the task the quickest will take the point. The mechanic gave him a timer to use for the race, which he started upon its beginning.

Strawberry Crepe pressed a button on their arm extensions, and the machines flipped to reveal actual honest-to-god rocket launchers.

“Bye slowpoke!” They called to Licorice, then blasted off. The reaper quickly followed by levitating around the towers, but he could not match the speed of the mechanic's propulsions. The child swerved expertly in the air and came to a controlled landing. They touched the timer, which stopped at three minutes. Licorice took twice the time to return to the starting position.

Test 2: Strength

For the second test, he had set up two straw dummies in an empty area and decreed that whoever

can do the most damage in one strike would be the winner. The moment he clapped his hands, the two instantly attacked. The reaper sent bolts of purple lightning upon his target, while the mechanic opened one arm to reveal a small cannon mechanism. Both dummies were incinerated into a pile of ashes.

Pure Vanilla said that in hindsight the dummies were far too fragile. He had them fire at more difficult targets, including a solid boulder, a piece of Crepe's reinforced glass, and his own shields. Each time, the duo's damage proved to be near equal, despite the creative uses of their powers.

The healer kicked a few small pebbles around. Nothing much was left of the original boulder. "It's a tie."

Test 3: Endurance

"Haha, another point for moi."

"Hold on, I'm not the one taking the endurance test," Licorice smirked. He put a hand to the ground and summoned a giant licorice beast from the ground. It was larger and bulkier than the child's arms, and obviously meant to take hits.

"What? That's totally cheating!" They turned toward the healer in outrage.

"It is a part of his abilities."

"Then it should be in my right to bring wafflebots," they complained. Despite the grumbling, Strawberry Crepe did accept competing against the summon, because they could understand the difference between the long-term creation of their robots and licorice's summons, which only take a minute or two.

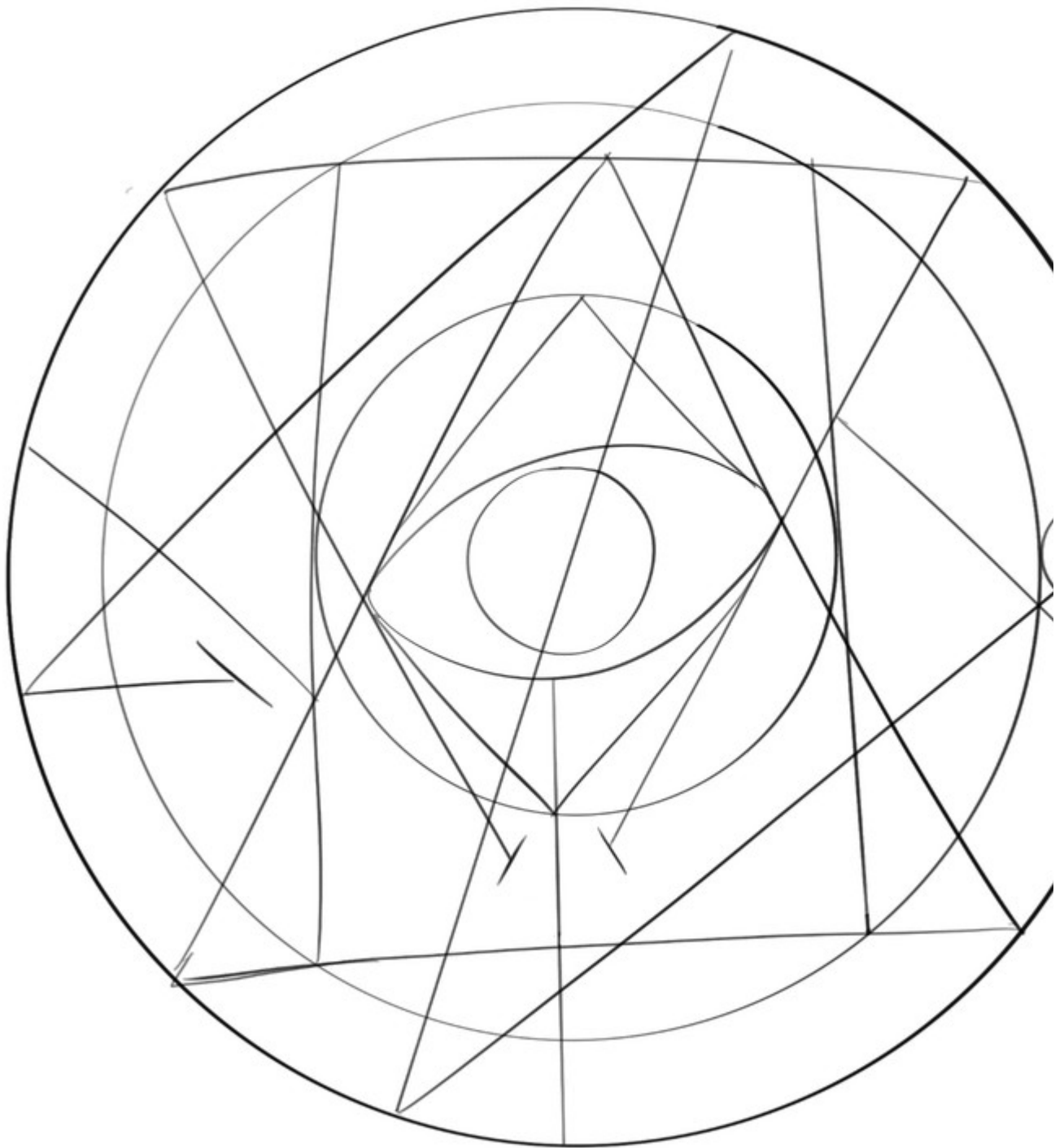
It did not stop the kid from screeching when the beast held up against attacks that broke their shield.

Test 4: Puzzle Solving

Pure Vanilla had originally envisioned additional tests after this one, but because there was a tie, he cut them out entirely. They were easily biased one way or the other regardless; Licorice would have taken the point for efficiency since his summons could work on tasks simultaneously and Strawberry Crepe the point for accuracy since they would be able to calculate the angle of their attacks to near perfection.

He was the most excited about this particular competition, which focused almost completely on intellectual capability rather than the physical and magical. And when it came down to it, these two cookies prided themselves on their minds. They would take this challenge seriously and make it a worthwhile finale.

The goal was to find the use of a magic circle. However, there were a few factors that set the test apart from a regular teaching example in a school.



This circle was quite special: Pure Vanilla believed that he might be the only cookie who was taught how about it. The spell was quite advanced as well. Its inherently mercurial nature meant that he couldn't cast it instantly like a common elemental spell. Souls were notoriously difficult to deal with and were considered among the darkest of magics, though he was sure that creature would never teach him anything harmful.

In all aspects, this particular secret was rather benign. He was rather looking forward to how well the two could interpret it.

"For this round, the goal is to discover the use of a magic circle. Now, before I get any objections-" he gestured Crepe over, "Strawberry Crepe cookie will receive a hint due to their lack of

experience in magic theory.”

They skipped up to him and he leaned closer. “Search for topics about transformation, of the body or the mind. Both lead to the answer,” he whispered. Crepe nodded to show that they heard his words.

The hint wasn’t as useful as it may seem. Licorice would be able to see what books the child searched out and deduce what he told them. Both of them have a unique advantage as well, with Strawberry Crepe’s complete information retention and Licorice’s knowledge of his own library’s organization. Overall, the competition could swing either way.

The child still had a question. “Um, where are we supposed to find information about the spell?”

“Licorice has quite the collection of books.” The reaper gawked at him. “Now, you two have two hours left. Good luck!”

The mechanic blasted away and the reaper followed them, cursing. Hopefully, the kid won’t trash Licorice’s room too badly. He would help clean up any messes left behind because he did somewhat throw the other man under the bus, but it would be nice if the child had respect for books.

Pure Vanilla waited for them to disappear, then went on his way. He had some extra time to whittle away while the others tried to complete his challenge, so he took the opportunity to indulge in a little chore that had been nagging on his mind.

His beloved gardens, his pride and joy, had withered away to nothing. He mourned its state, but there was nothing he could do to bring it back to its former glory. He had to regrow all the crops from scratch. That was fine by him. The healer was so used to bringing things back from near death, it could almost be called second nature.

Pure Vanilla (ironically enough) lacked any capacity for nature magic in the same way that White Lily could not heal. If anything, that made tending to his gardens more satisfying for him. The visible health of his garden was directly tied to his hard work rather than a casual brush of magic. He had to go the extra length to make sure everything worked. Growing plants required water, dirt, minerals, adequate covering, good timing of the seasons, etc. But first, he needed seeds.

This was why he took to ransacking the dead yards and gardens in the abandoned homes of his city.

He managed to find a pack of beans, oleander, twizzlers, and some daisies sprouting in a corner. None of the seeds were viable except for the beans but he could certainly make something of his finds. He can plant the beans for food (witches knew that Raisin village needed it), and the daisies could replace his castle’s barren gardens. It even matched his old color scheme. Pure Vanilla gave himself a small celebratory moment, then set to extracting the beans and daisy seeds.

Halfway through the time limit, Licorice approached him.

“This isn’t light magic.”

Pure Vanilla waited for him to go on.

“It’s not candy or plant magic either. I managed to find some circles similar to your spell, but those are all books that most would consider illegal. Things like necromancy or stuff regarding the soul.”

What a brilliant cookie he was! The healer couldn’t help but grin. “Does that surprise you?”

“I suppose it shouldn’t. It would be strange for anyone following the Dark Enchantress to be a purist.” Having received confirmation that he was on the right track, Licorice left again.

While waiting out the last hour, Pure Vanilla collected the seeds and bagged them. The rest of the decrepit gardens turned up nothing, but he felt satisfied with his haul. A few packets were enough to fill a substantial amount of his garden plots. He put them away as the two contestants flew to him from the castle.

He gave them a few extra minutes to write down their conclusions so that they wouldn’t be able to change their answers after listening to the other’s theory. Strawberry Crepe was groaning and rubbing their eyes at the sudden brightness outside and Licorice could have been through a storm with how frazzled he looked. This was bound to be good.

“So, who is willing to answer first?”

Strawberry Crepe raised their hand. The healer waved at them to begin.

“I believe that the spell allows for a cookie’s mind and soul to transform into a lesser life form. They placed the paper that he had given on the ground and pointed to several shapes surrounded by an outer circle. “These parts represent transformation from one form to another. Something equivalent to someone becoming a cakehound? I can’t exactly tell from what to what, but that kind of detail is not needed for the test, right?”

“I am not expecting it.”

They smirked, getting more excited. “Alright! As for this part-” they highlighted two identical hourglass shapes, “it represents the soul, and it’s overlaid by the transformation. Therefore, the soul is being transformed. And since I read that souls can’t be transferred perfectly from one vessel to another, it would make sense that the creature is less intelligent to account for accidents. The other lines must be the specific creature that is the goal of the transformation.”

It was a wealth of information built into educated guesses. He honestly hadn’t expected the child to get so close considering that they were unfamiliar with magic. Although their hypothesis about how the soul was transformed strayed from the right answer, they managed to identify and extrapolate a conclusion from two of the three main components: transformation and soul. It was truly impressive.

“Close, but not exactly. I admire the amount of evidence you have used to formulate your answer, and applaud the genuine effort put into it. I came into this test believing the answer was out of your hands, so don’t take the failure personally.” His encouragement finished, he moved on to the reaper. “Licorice?”

“Wait, give me a second.”

He got the crinkled parchment from under his robes, laying out the same spell circle. He was determined too, Pure Vanilla realized. The reaper took Crepe’s attempts seriously and regarded them as an intellectual (though maybe not maturity-wise) equal. Somewhere along the line, he had truly put his all into research, which was easily apparent from all the notes he had taken dissecting the circle.

Pure Vanilla perused the paper. *Correct*, he thought in elation.

“Okay.” the reaper began, “I hadn’t managed to get anything else out of the transformation sigil than Strawberry Crepe, but my thoughts about the soul aspect of the spell are different.” He waved

his hand at the bottom center of the circle. “The two hourglasses are disconnected at the bottom, so I didn’t think it means the soul itself, but rather...something close to the soul. On top of that, the divide leads me to believe that each hourglass is a separate entity, divided by transformation, the circle surrounding everything.” He squinted at the parchment, as though doing so would pry all its secrets out. “I interpret the two sides differently: the right being something “close to the soul” and the left something “close to a soul.”

That was a weakness that Crepe missed in their answer. Engineering, at its core, dealt with absoluteness and solid fact. It was very likely that the idea of interpretive freedom for identical symbols had never entered their mind. He checked on the kid. They were indeed in a state of mounting outrage as the reaper outlined his thoughts.

“This would also take into account a sigil that Crepe has missed- the jagged symbol for *sacrifice*.”

Forget settling for just Red Velvet’s body, Pure Vanilla was going to ransack Licorice’s brain as well.

“It’s like giving up a precious stone to create a golem,” he concluded. The reaper folded his scroll, awaiting the healer’s commentary as though he were their professor. Pure Vanilla, playing the part, gave him a small clapping ovation.

“Did I...get it right?” Licorice’s mounting glee was clear as day.

“You did. Congratulations.”

Licorice took a second to breathe deeply. Then he threw the scroll to the ground and whooped in elation. “Hahaha, I can’t believe I succeeded! For a spell I have literally never seen before, too. You gave us a challenge, Healer. Geez.”

“The circle’s unfamiliarity was the reason I had chosen it as a test. After all, I can’t use a spell that someone as well-read as you would recognize.” It also served as a fun inside joke for himself. They won’t ever discover just how close that spell is to his heart.

The reaper slung an arm over his shoulder, obviously flattered. “So do I get those bragging rights now?”

“As per the competition agreements,” Pure Vanilla confirmed, with no small amount of mirth.

“Hell yeah.” He stuck his tongue out at the seething mechanic, who made a sound resembling a whistle. “I win, so you have to cut back on the insults.”

Pure Vanilla nudged him, taking his attention off Crepe. “I do hope to see the same amount of enthusiasm on our trip.”

“Come on, there’s a world of difference between winning a contest and having to embark on a mission.”

“The mission is in an abandoned school. There will be many books that have survived the sands of time.”

“Forbidden knowledge?”

“Most definitely.”

“In that case, *maybe* I’ll be able to muster up-”

“No!” Strawberry Crepe shrieked. The two adults stopped their conversation. “I refuse to be beaten by someone like him! He’s an absolute idiot! A worm!”

Licorice drew back in offense.

“I can’t lose to someone who would like that dumb boy who can barely string a sentence together but then turn around and ignore me!” They turned to the reaper. “How fucking stupid can you be?! Why would you pick him? What does he have that I don’t anyway? Smarts, strength, even size- I’m more in every capacity, and if anything is lacking then I’ll find a way to fix myself. I want you to care about me!”

Oh, Pure Vanilla thought, I understand now.

The ensuing silence was deafening.

Strawberry Crepe seemed to realize exactly what they said. The child flushed. “Uh- I mean-” they pointed at them both. “Shut up!”

The two stared at Crepe, then at each other. They hadn’t said a word.

The little mechanic swallowed dryly. They turned around, activated their blasters, and within the next second there was only a fading spark on the horizon where they had been.

Pure Vanilla put a hand to his mouth.

“Seriously...?” Licorice said in disbelief, “That’s why they keep harassing me?”

The healer started laughing.

“It’s not funny!” he whined.

It wasn’t. After that very telling rant, Pure Vanilla could easily imagine how Strawberry Crepe’s situation played out. Their outburst clearly came from lacking any prevalent adult figures. The mechanic felt angry at Licorice because they had seen the bond he had with Poison Mushroom, and felt that they were somehow deficient because he hadn’t treated them the same way. Following their father’s disappearance, it was likely that they had tried to latch onto any authority figure, and spiraled when they had no interest in reciprocating the relationship. And why should they? No one had any connection to the strange, high-energy child.

It was such a tragedy, but their confession turned out to be quite the ridiculous affair, and the healer, who smiled far less than he used to, couldn’t help but laugh.

Pure Vanilla revisited his earlier thoughts. He had been wondering if he would ever be able to oppose the cookies that he was currently interacting with. After letting that question sit, he could only come up with a resounding negative.

He would never harm Dark Choco. Red Velvet only stayed with the Dark Enchantress out of ostracization. Licorice had been warm towards him since the beginning. Strawberry Crepe and Poison Mushroom were just children.

Dark Choco and Red Velvet. Licorice. Strawberry Crepe and Poison Mushroom.

That was almost the entirety of the cookies of darkness. From what he had gathered so far, they painted an unfortunate picture, figures set into their positions out of circumstance. Pure Vanilla would not be able to go against them, even if he met them across the battlefield.

How utterly pathetic. *I'm doomed.*

The aforementioned reaper interrupted his brooding. "I've had enough sunshine for a week. Let's hang out inside."

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The shelves had been ransacked.

It was probably inevitable, considering how frazzled the two had appeared. Pure Vanilla wasn't going to complain. He had indirectly caused the mess, after all. Licorice had acted surprised when Pure Vanilla followed him past the healer's chambers until the healer mentioned that he was going to clean up, and then the other practically hurried him inside as though he was an urgent guest.

Licorice then proceeded to watch him in awe until he started to get mildly uncomfortable.

It turns out that not only did the other cookies fail to respect Licorice's time and talents, but also his belongings. Pure Vanilla was sure that in some cases this stemmed from their lack of understanding the reaper's boundaries rather than malice, but there has to be some limit to ignorance. He was just treating Licorice with basic decency, nothing deserving the pure gratitude the other felt.

He was already aware that the cookies of darkness did not mesh well. Sitting through Red Velvet and Dark Choco's dynamic revealed that, and those two weren't even on particularly bad terms. The prince, in his view, had ample reason to dislike the other cookies around him. Pure Vanilla should, and did feel anger on his behalf.

It still wasn't a betrayal of his morals to care if Licorice feels his existence to be inconsequential.

He started cleaning with more fervor. The reaper, who noticed that he was magically moving the books far more efficiently, stopped his efforts and broke off to rife through his chests.

After a while, Licorice found what he wanted. He held up a bag of shrooms to Pure Vanilla. They were different from Poison Mushroom's usual purple blooms: these were in bright pink and blue. The healer recognized what they were instantly.

"Did you ask a child to make psychoactive drugs?"

"Of course not, don't sound so judgemental. He made these on his own." He snickered. "I gave him some candy in exchange." He opened the bag and held out a shroom to Pure Vanilla. "Its effects are pretty wild~"

Pure Vanilla did not take the drug. He felt wary about ingesting anything created by Poison Mushroom, even if he believed Licorice was smart enough not to accidentally kill him.

Licorice rolled his eyes and retracted his offer, taking a bite out of the shroom. "See, perfectly safe."

Really, was this his idea of a bonding activity? The reaper resembled an older, somewhat rebellious student.

"I would like to check the effects of these shrooms before ingesting them, as a basic safety precaution."

"So I'm the only one getting high? That's no party," the reaper sighed. "Fine, I don't intend to

pressure you.” He ate another shroom, disgruntled.

The reaper snacked while cleaning up near the base of his bookcases, while Pure Vanilla worked on levitating the more precarious

“So, about Strawberry Crepe cookie-”

Pure Vanilla saw the way they tensed, and hurried to explain. “I don’t think they are being cruel because they despise you, but rather lashing out because they don’t know how to properly express their feelings of abandonment. It’s a rather unfortunate situation and not exactly my place to tell, but Crepe wasn’t always alone and although unintentional, they seem to be overworking and suppressing their emotion in an attempt to be independent. I am concerned that it may affect them if they receive negative reinforcement on what they view as a display of their true thoughts-”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be nice to them.” he snapped off another stalk. “I may be petty, but I’m no monster. Not to kids, at least.”

Pure Vanilla smiled in relief. “That’s good. I believe they look up to you.”

The other sneered. “Down, more like. They don’t like the fact that I watch over Poison Mushroom, but I won’t apologize for that. They can suck it up.”

The healer slotted another book into place. “Of course. Children should be protected, no matter who they are. It just seems that Strawberry Crepe felt like there was nobody who would watch over them. They became attached to me very quickly.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I hope that I can provide them some comfort, at least.”

“Don’t fret, you’re doing fine. Loneliness is an ugly thing to deal with, so I’m sure they’ll appreciate anything, even if it’s small.”

“Why does that sound like personal experience talking?” He regretted the words, hoping that the quip wasn’t overly prying. Thankfully, the Licorice didn’t take it as an attack.

“That’s because it is. School is a funny ecosystem, alright.” The reaper let out a dry laugh. “For some reason, I didn’t fit in.”

“I wonder why.” Pure Vanilla let a hint of sarcasm slip into his words. Surely it couldn’t be his tendency for dark environments or his proclivity towards forbidden magic.

“I got into trouble often too, though in my defense I never actually did anything wrong.”

“Let me guess,” Pure Vanilla mused. “Sneaking restricted books? There’s nothing wrong with curiosity, in my opinion.” He levitated another one of said restricted books onto its shelf.

The other laughed. “Ha, as if! They never caught me for that. They got me in trouble for bullying, instead. I wasn’t even the aggressor! Those annoying snot-nose light and candy mages started it.”

“What did they do?”

“Well...they stole my homework, beat me up a few times, orchestrated all sorts of public humiliation, and constantly accused me of being an evil dark mage.” He paused. “They were right, of course, but had no evidence beyond the fact that I was poor and had no friends. It pissed me

off.”

“Please tell me they faced some sort of punishment for this.”

“The Creme Republic wouldn’t believe a sewer rat over their precious upper-city children.” he sneered, “But look at me now! I’m one of her mistress’s powerful agents. They’ll rue the day they turned their backs upon me when we strike that whole nation down.”

*The Creme Republic?* He had never heard of such a place. Perhaps it had only come to power after the Great Flour War. He slotted the name away for another time.

This was getting into dangerously personal territory.

“So, how about you? I bet you were popular as a kid.”

“I was.”

“Figures,” he said with some envy, “You’re kind and pretty and apparently powerful, too. Who wouldn’t like that?”

Pure Vanilla frowned. Jealousy directed at him was nothing new, but he still had difficulty knowing how to react to it. “People want to be friends with me, but I have difficulty connecting to others on my end with equal passion. Almost all my true friends are dead. Those few that may be left- *I have been lying to and feel afraid to face them*- “Well, I haven’t spoken to them in a long time.”

“Shit, sorry,” he muttered regretfully. “If I may ask, what happened?”

“I’m a vanillan, Licorice. Take a guess.”

The reaper opened his mouth and then closed it, an expression of confusion upon his face. He seemed to think over something, hard, before speaking again. “The vanillans are still alive.”

“W-what?”

“That’s what half of the Creme Republic is composed of. When the Vanillan king was killed in his battle with our master and the kingdom collapsed, a good portion of the residents managed to evacuate in airships. They eventually settled in a coastal town and integrated with them, and that town eventually became the Republic.” He paused. “Healer?”

“So they survived,” Pure Vanilla breathed. “I hadn’t realized. All that was left of the kingdom was rubble and empty houses and a few corpses, and it was deathly silent. I thought...” he exhaled shakily, unable to articulate more.

“Uh, are you going to cry? Please don’t cry.” Licorice asked awkwardly. “I don’t know how to deal with that.”

He shook his head. “I’m just so glad...”

The reaper squirmed in discomfort. After a drawn-out moment where neither made conversation, Licorice suddenly muttered, “He cares a lot about people, huh? No, not just that. I saw him collecting things for a garden. It’s directed toward all living things.”

Was...was the reaper talking to himself?

“Surprisingly old, definitely some kind of unique entity,” he thought aloud. “Are you the Millennial

Tree or something?”

Ah, he was trying to change the subject. Luckily enough, Pure Vanilla wanted to change the subject too.

He told the other that he wasn't any kind of elemental, though the reaper jumping to the Millennial Tree of all possibilities was quite flattering.

Not ready to give up, Licorice then asked him whether he had used some kind of dark magic to make himself immortal, like the Dark Enchantress. This premise was a bit more interesting, though wrong. The Dark Enchantress's soul gem was nowhere to be found, yet she appeared to stay the same age anyway. Perhaps he should look into that.

He dismissed Licorice's second theory. This time, the reaper gave him some pushback.

“Oh come on. Someone older than they could excusably appear, with close ties to my master and a mysterious soul-related spell, and you want me to believe you haven't cracked the code for eternal youth?”

“Any forbidden magic I may-or-may-not have cast has no bearing on my mortality. Good try, but the answer is a bit unexpected. I suggest consulting Dark Choco. He may decide able to provide a clue.”

“I'm going to figure this out myself,” he said firmly.

“Besides, whatever dastardly image you have undoubtedly created of the Dark Enchantress and me together is exaggerated- our intentions with our experiments were innocent. We were only children at the time.”

Licorice snapped to attention at the new pieces of information.

“So, no immoral mad science in the name of cookiekind?”

“Technically, our actions were illegal, but I wouldn't call them immoral. We- no, I had never hurt anyone. Though the consequences of our actions were severe.”

“Witches, Healer. What did you do.”

“Let's just say- the school our mission entails? It was abandoned for a reason.”

“Come on, you have to give me more than that~”

“Oh, I think the psychedelics should be taking effect now. I would like to check the dilation of your pupils. May I touch you?” Licorice allowed him closer, and he checked the reaper's eyes, his ability to pronounce long words, and the number of mushrooms he had eaten. Everything lined up- it was just a normal, if somewhat weak, psychoactive drug.

“Secretive bastard...”

Pure Vanilla picked out a shroom for himself.

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Time passed. They continued to discuss whatever topic came to mind until a pleasant haze overtook them. Perhaps they ended up sitting in silence, not that he felt particularly aware of his consciousness at that moment.

His daze was interrupted by a knock on the door. “Hey idiot, open the door. I need to ask about something.” Pure Vanilla got off the floor and dragged his feet to the entrance. He ignored Licorice’s call to not let them in and nearly tripped while pushing down the door handle. He giggled at his own blunder.

Strawberry Crepe jumped in surprise, obviously not expecting him to be in Licorice’s room. He leaned on the door for support and gave them a little wave.

“Healer, are you okay?” They brought up their scanner, suspicious of his strange behavior.

“My judent-” his flower blinked. “My judgment may be...slightly compromised at the moment.”

Jam level contains trace levels of the fungi Asmycota Psyzibin.

Strawberry Crepe gaped at him. They moved past their king into the room, quickly walking to Licorice, who was sprawled next to a near-empty bag of shrooms. They poked him in the cheek. Pure Vanilla followed behind at a pace where he could manage to continue standing.

The child picked up a shroom, shoving it in the reaper’s face. “What the heck is this,” they hissed. “Did you drug my liege?”

He rolled over to avoid them. The mechanic stepped over him and smacked him in the face with the mushroom. Licorice groaned and sat up, annoyed. “What?”

The healer, who had only just reached them, took the psychedelic out of Crepe’s hand from behind. ““S not for children.”

He should have kept Crepe outside. He did not want them to touch any of the shrooms. Only around three or so left, so he put them all into his mouth. There. Now they can’t get to them.

“Oh wow,” The reaper finally spoke, “I think we may have gone overboard with the good stuff.”

“You don’t say?!”

“Hrrmm hmmrrfff frmm,” Pure Vanilla retorted cheerfully around several shrooms. The king wasn’t even facing them. It seemed that, when high off his mind, he forgot to do what most would consider polite and pretend to look in the direction of those the talked to. His gaze was trailing over their heads at something in the ceiling corner. Only his flower was pivoted perfectly to see what was going on.

“Don’t forget the chew before swallowing,” Licorice warned. Pure Vanilla nodded.

“I can’t believe you dragged him into your bad habit.”

“Healer joined of his own accord!”

“I did. I even waited to check...symptoms. Everything was acceptable.”

Strawberry Crepe was the very image of disgust. “Ugh, Still. I have lost all respect for both of you.”

Licorice grinned. “You used to respect me?”

“Shut up.”

“Crepe cookie, you came to ask about something, right? If there is a discussion...that needs to be

had. I can. Get rid of the effects.” Pure Vanilla said. “It will take me a while before being centered enough for comfort. Maybe...” he waved his staff around, nearly dropping it. Licorice grabbed his shoulder and steadied him. “...One hour.”

Crepe propped up their screen and set a timer.

“Aww, can’t we have our fun happy drug time?”

“No. Just be sad instead of rotting your mental capabilities away with substances.”

“It is addictive. Not...something that should be used too often.”

“Hypocrite! You’re literally on my shrooms right now.”

“I am a hypocrite, it’s true! Hehehe...” The healer did a twirl before settling on an old spell circle. He had started taking the psychedelics substantially later than Licorice, and was currently much more buzzed. Strawberry Crepe may have said something, but he either failed to hear or comprehend the words. He zoned out, farther than he usually could, until it seemed like he was sitting just to the left of himself.

What a funny feeling.

Two small hands came up to his head. “-ler. Healer. Listen to me. Hey.”

He tilted his head. “Yes, what is it?”

“My alarm is ringing. It’s been an hour.”

Now that he was aware, the cloudiness in his brain had subsided somewhat. He felt secure enough in using magic without it backfiring.

The healer spelled the effects to disappear. Then he went and repeated the process for Licorice.

“Back to normal?” Crepe asked.

Pure Vanilla was utterly mortified.

“I am never doing drugs again.”

He had acted like a lunatic in front of a child. What kind of example was he setting as a person, let alone an authority figure?

Licorice seemed bemused by his reaction. “Is it that big of a deal?”

“Yes, that was humiliating,” he whined, “I’ll stick to gardening.”

Crepe giggled at him, but proceeded to their request, which they have generously waited an hour for. “I had heard a conversation that you two had about some kind of mission. If no other cookies are participating, then I would like to tag along.”

Bringing Strawberry Crepe with them?

Pure Vanilla did not want a child to be involved in his mission, partially due to the potential dangers and partially because the Institute was one of his greatest regrets, and he simply didn’t want someone who looked up to him to know about it. He was about to strike them down, but an unexpected supporter piped up.

“We don’t have any kind of tank, and my licorice beast doesn’t last forever. Neither of us are suited for physical combat. I think we should include Strawberry Crepe, at least in terms of abilities.”

He wasn’t wrong. Pure Vanilla was strong, but he shouldn’t overestimate his strength. Physically, he was still quite frail. But Licorice was who he was most concerned over. He had all the weaknesses of a regular mage, and the healer alone may struggle to keep tabs on him without faltering. Strawberry Crepe can join to protect him.

“Fine, under one condition. This applies to Licorice, too.” The duo leaned in. “If I ever tell you two to pull out from the mission, then my command must be followed in absolute. Is that clear?”

He did not want any more death on his hands. Learning about the Creme Republic felt like a lifeline, and he wished to keep breathing easier for a little while.

“I can agree to that.” the reaper said.

“Nothing should be too much for *Healer* to handle, huhu.”

“Very Well. I’m glad for the help.” Strawberry Crepe buzzed in delight.

They went their separate ways.

He planted the peas and daisy seeds, and waited for tomorrow to arrive.

Chapter End Notes

The sacrifice spell will show up again, but until then, can you guess what the spell is?
There are already many context clues ;)

Soul jam, (or just jam sometimes) is equivalent to blood. Soul Jewels, the ones we can see in the ancients' designs, are unique to them. And yes, the cookies do have organs and stuff, idk how it works but I'm writing it that way.

I have created some original Pure Vanilla lore. I suppose it deviates from canon a little, but it’s mostly just the portion of time between his school days and being king

FINALLY: Should I finish the fic and want to continue writing in the cookie run fandom, there WILL be Creme Republic arc. I have some of the plot thought out already. It is...quite dastardly >:)

PV: *shows basic kindness and gives a bit of food
(Any) cookie of darkness: I love you

Pure Vanilla: The Institute (1)

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Gore/Body Horror, psychological torture, and emotional abuse. This one's a doozy. At least there's a few more crumbs of PV lore, hehe.

DE's communication and PV's thoughts are both in italics. This is intentional.

Me, taking inspiration for DE's personality from villains such as makima and the nowhere king: *maniacal laughing*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

At a reasonable hour of the morning, Pure Vanilla finished preparing for the trip and set out to meet with Licorice and Strawberry Crepe. His morning routine had been rudely intruded on by the dizzying command of the Dark Enchantress, asking to report to her before departing. He refused to let it define his day, however, making sure to clean his space extra nicely to compensate.

He strolled to the hanger to convene with Strawberry Crepe. Before he could get too close to the garage, it opened of its own accord. The child hovered in their armor. They were already prepared for his arrival. He greeted them warmly, and they gave him a somewhat childish response which could also be interpreted as an insult.

Pure Vanilla noticed that each of their mech arms had a cone-shaped addition, jutting out from the sides like spikes. Evidently, the child has been busy during the night.

“Now, what could these be?” He wondered.

“It’s a surprise that will help us later,” they said impishly.

He decided to indulge the child by making wild speculations about the innocuous cones. With Strawberry Crepe, there was probably a fifty-percent chance the “surprise” would be actively hazardous to their health, but they were also capable of marvelous feats of technology for their age. It came down to whether or not they genuinely wanted to help, and Pure Vanilla liked to see the best in everyone. He could almost sense their ego inflate with every comment.

With half of the party secured, he returned to the castle to fetch Licorice. The child accompanied him, a skip for every few steps. They made their way to the striking purple door, and Pure Vanilla gave it a few quicks raps.

There was no response.

After a minute, Crepe banged on the door, significantly harder than he had. “Hey, are you there?!”

another short pause, and Pure Vanilla flicked it open with magic (his own turn to rudely intrude). He went inside cautiously, his flower swerving around to look for the reaper. Pretty quickly, they located him among a lump of blankets in the corner. He was softly snoring.

Ah, the sweet taste of schaudenfreude.

Pure Vanilla moved toward him, making sure to keep his footsteps light. The child, seeming to realize what he wished to do, went along with the plan. He crept forward until he was right beside the sleeping cookie.

“Good morning, Licorice cookie!” He lit his staff to full brightness. The other man let out an unholy scream and buried himself under his covers, only to have it stripped away by Strawberry Crepe.

“Wake up!” they called sweetly, “It’s the day of the mission, and a little kid is ready before you. It’s so shameful. If I were you, I would never leave my room again.”

“Be nice,” Pure Vanilla chastised the mechanic.

“If I was a nice person, I wouldn’t be me!”

“Be nicer,” he amended, tilting his head to avoid the pillow sent his way.

Licorice had only been awake for one minute and was already feeling harassed. Why did he agree to this again? Right, for the opportunity to get rare books and because the Dark Enchantress said so. He bemoaned the terrible start to the morning.

“He’s not getting out of bed. At this rate, I may have to apply extreme measures.”

“Crepe, that’s dangerous-”

He sat up and pointed at the exit. “Both of you! Out!”

Pure Vanilla picked the child from the ground, ignoring their indignation at being moved. Any more and Licorice would probably start cursing at them, which was better avoided right before a mission where they would have to work together. They ended up hanging around the hallway, Crepe vibrating in impatience while he pulled out a small spell and tinkered with it. They eventually settled for running back and forth, jumping to poke his staff’s leaves with every pass.

The healer started holding the flower away from their reach after they slapped it with excessive force. The staff itself did not care, but it was a bit too tolerant of children’s shenanigans.

Strawberry Crepe, annoyed at having their target taken, sank to the floor with a noise of complaint. They studied their cuticles for less than a minute before complaining. “He’s really taking his sweet time. With the way he dresses, you’d think there’s no maintenance involved.”

“It’s not as though we are on a schedule. I don’t mind the delay.”

“I do,” they grumbled. “My time is precious.”

Pure Vanilla chuckled. “That’s a decent value to live by, but I must admit that you should cut him some slack, especially after being such an extravagant bother to that poor cookie.” As much as he appreciated the presentation of a giant wake-up hacksaw, it was overkill for most situations. He would not enjoy being on the receiving end of Crepe’s jokes.

“Thank you, I try.”

Ad if on cue, Licorice finally arrived, freshened up and infinitely more composed. Pure Vanilla pushed himself off the wall and smoothed his robes while Crepe stepped back into their mech. They set out to meet with the Dark Enchantress before leaving (this, apparently, was standard protocol). Licorice assured him that the meetings were short. She would tell them more about their

mission and then send them away.

They traveled to the conference room and Pure Vanilla pushed the double doors open. He noted that the Dark Enchantress had shrunk down to the size of a regular cookie. That made sense; she would have trouble moving through the castle in her actual form.

She had obviously been waiting for them to arrive. They quickly sat at the meeting table, in the same positions as the first time, except that Pure Vanilla was between the others. The Dark Enchantress spoke first. "Why is Strawberry Crepe here?"

"They insisted on coming with us, and we thought it would be a good idea," he answered.

"Their ability to scan ingredients may be...very useful, indeed. They are an excellent resource." She nodded. "They may join."

The child twitched in their seat.

"Now, for the mission. All of you will be venturing to an abandoned school several days' travel east of the castle. It is close to the ruins of Pomegranate village for reference. There are a few notable hazards you may face, since a rift had opened nearby and excess magic in the area had caused living creatures to mutate. Beware, they are hostile."

Pure Vanilla perked up. Are those mutated creatures the haunts she had mentioned? Excess magic can definitely alter the flora and fauna of an area. If some strange plants and animals were the biggest threat, then the expedition should be simple.

"The school itself is quite large and overgrown with flowers, which Healer knows. In fact, I have provided all the information needed- he can address any other questions. But as of now, there is one other thing I would like to add, since you have an extra cookie on the mission" She addressed the child. "Crepe, your armor can take calls, correct?"

"It can!"

"I would prefer to communicate with you three during the mission. Is there a device that can connect to the armor?"

They gave her the affirmative again and ran out to get it.

Pure Vanilla felt a wave of unease. She had the ability to issue one-way commands telepathically, but was that not enough? Perhaps she wanted them to respond to her. He was averse to the idea that she would observe them so closely.

"Licorice cookie."

The reaper startled, not expecting her attention. "Yes, master?"

"This expedition is riskier than it may initially seem. I sent you with Healer because I trust in your abilities. If you prove my assumptions correct, then I may consider elevating your authority. Perhaps leading the next mission would do."

Licorice gasped and dropped to one knee. "Master, that's too kind! Though nothing can compare to your greatness, I hope to be of some worth to you, even if I receive nothing in the end. I will do my utmost to prove myself worthy of your expectations."

"Ensure that you do."

Licorice practically sparkled, and he started praising her again.

Pure Vanilla watched in disbelief as he fell over himself trying to suck up to the Dark Enchantress, ignorant of the ease with which she strung him along. It was sad, how Licorice demeaned himself in the same way others did to him, and no less embarrassing from the side than from the throne.

The sorceress, conversely, appeared pleased by the reaper's groveling. The healer studied her satisfied visage, sidled beside the reaper, and pulled him to his feet. He startled, but stopped his bootlicking. Pure Vanilla smiled beatifically at the Dark Enchantress. *What are you going to do about it?*

Thankfully, an interruption arrived at the opportune moment. Strawberry Crepe burst in, waving an object with a red switch. They trotted up to their master, eagerly presenting it to her.

The Dark Enchantress used magic to pull it into her grasp. She gave it a pressed it and a screen of her own appeared. The sorceress scrolled the screen's contents, seeming content that the screen functions. She flicked it off and spoke to them again.

"This mission is mostly for Healer's sake. The two of you are tasked to protect him while he investigates the abandoned site."

"Yes, Master," they said in chorus.

"Then everyone is dismissed."

Licorice and Crepe stood up to leave, before realizing that Pure Vanilla wasn't leaving with them. He waved them off. "Go ahead without me." There was still something he wanted from the Dark Enchantress.

He waited for the others to leave before making his request.

"I would also like to discuss Pomgranate's treatment of Dark Choco."

This conversation was bound to happen. He knew the Dark Enchantress thought he was a bleeding heart. He would not be able to pretend to be a neutral observer if Dark Choco was hurt before him, so he might as well profess to having an attachment to the prince. The Dark Enchantress may be willing to exploit his care, but it would be ideal if he could avert that situation in the first place.

Since their last meeting, he realized that he could not predict the sorceress's actions and moods. That contributed to his discomfort around her, but he had to try and force this nonetheless. She may be incentivized to use Dark Choco against him, but she would have to go through him first.

"Go on."

"So far, I have only heard secondhand accounts of his experiences, but it's clear by that alone that she is far too harsh with him. You know what he was like back then- his current demeanor is so different from before. I don't think that it should continue."

"Dark Choco isn't the most loyal man, not to me nor his father. A cookie like that must be kept in line. Surely you understand? Pomegranate is the most loyal of my subjects, so I often entrust the management of the others to her- including their punishments."

"I respectfully disagree. Dark Choco's loyalty is assured, no matter how much he attempts to chafe and rebel against the fact. Your enchantment guarantees that. He can't truly betray the darkness without losing his mind, so this torture is completely meaningless. And besides...I don't want to

see him in pain.”

“Sentiment?” she chuckled.

“As if you expected anything else.”

“Ah, Pure Vanilla. Still the same, despite everything.”

Again, that phrase. He couldn’t help but wonder if it was a good thing.

The sorceress continued. “I don’t really care to change their dynamic, though. It’s worked plenty well for me thus far. Although Dark Choco may not be able to disobey me completely, that doesn’t give him any right to be insubordinate- that’ll set a bad example, you see? Pomegranate can play with him to blow off steam, too. She probably needs it after having to work with incompetents. It’s beneficial on both ends.”

He bristled at the trivial reasons. Was the boy’s pain entertainment for her? No wonder he stopped fighting back, if the Dark Enchantress herself turned a blind eye to his torture. Not for the first time, he wished that White Lily wasn’t a part of the Dark Enchantress. It would make her easier to hate.

There was only one benefit to the lack of weight she put on the prince’s suffering. Because the Dark Enchantress did not have any great reason to keep things the way they were, changing the status quo would not be difficult if she could gain something of substance by doing it. He was perfectly willing to bribe her. She would likely ask for another few crumbs, anyway.

“Then what if I am willing to trade for his safety? Ask for anything, and I will consider fulfilling the request.”

“Anything I want, hm?” she hummed, “Give me your hand.”

He raised a hand and the Dark Enchantress took it in hers. Her smirk widened. She laced their fingers together, strangely gentle.

Was...was that all? He was pleasantly surprised. A trifle little hand-holding was nothing compared to what he would do for the boy. He had expected to be asked to commit murder, or something else he would struggle or refuse to accept.

“I want this on contract.”

He would not wager Dark Choco’s safety on ephemeral words. They must be backed by magic, for him to hold them.

“A contract, for something as simple as this?” she raised their entwined hands. “Is it really necessary?”

“Yes, Master.”

He could tell that the title flattered her. She did not object, so he continued, stating his terms.

“Promise that the cookies of darkness will not be able to torment Dark Choco through magical or physical means. This includes you, Master. You also cannot alter his mental enchantment in a way that causes harm.”

“Clever, trying to cover all the bases. I’ll permit it this one time, but be careful not to overreach

your authority.” Surprisingly, she did not seem upset. “Promise me that I get to take your right hand.”

Take, not control. That was a relief...and yet-

Did you make a deal with the Dark Enchantress?

Why was he second-guessing himself right now? Their situations were not at all comparable. The prince had made his deal out of desperation and ended up miserable, but no matter how the healer sliced it, he received the greater benefit. She must have been in a good mood, to allow him to edit the vow.

“I swear to abide by our contract,” he affirmed.

“Likewise.”

A golden circle glowed around them, simple and indomitable. Lock and key.

She released him, practically oozing satisfaction, the cat that caught the canary. Pure Vanilla could not help but wonder if he had stumbled into some kind of trap. The bounds of their agreement were vague, and although his intent would make sure that she kept her word, he could not account for what he cosigned into. He sighed internally. Regardless, Dark Choco would be protected from Pomegranate, and that was what matters.

“Your minions are waiting,” she leaned back in her seat. “Don’t keep them too long.”

He offered her a shallow bow and left.

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The trio traveled to the teleporter, but before they could step onto the platform, Strawberry Crepe held them back with a knowing smirk.

“What if I said that I can change a several-day journey into a mere hour or two?”

So this was the nature of their surprise. Pure Vanilla was so proud. Licorice, who hadn’t been clued in, tried to hide his confusion.

“Be amazed!” the mechanic sang. They snapped their fingers and the tips of their arms split into two horizontal halves, the edges curving inward and making a perfect, protected spot for an average-sized cookie to sit. Luckily, all three passengers were on the petite side, so they would have no issues fitting into the makeshift mechs. Crepe pointed at the cones they had outfitted onto the arm-turned-hover bots. “These bad boys are fuel tanks! They aren’t infinite, but more than enough for a round trip.”

Pure Vanilla clapped, and the reaper couldn’t help but look impressed.

The child inflated with pride. “Haha, I’m totally brilliant, a twenty-five percent prodigious-

*Ring Ring*

They dropped the ego stroke instantly and accepted the call. “Hello, Mistress?”

“I was just checking if the system worked. Call me back when you reach the school,” she said, then cut the line.

“Strange,” Licorice muttered, but didn’t seem to think much more of it. The mechanic could also care less, happy to show off the fruits of their labor.

The child ordered them to get into their mechs. They both climbed into the mechs, the parts curling around them protectively. Strawberry Crepe examined them both and made a choice. They squished into Licorice’s lap. “Hold me. If I fall, then everyone is crashing.”

“I thought you would prefer Healer...” he complained.

“Healer has to carry a large stick constantly. You don’t.”

Licorice could not refute that.

Crepe pulled up their screen, making a few small adjustments that went over their heads. “Okay, all components are working...then we can Initiate TakeOff!”

They blasted away from the ground. Licorice grabbed onto the child tightly, wary of how high they were from the ground. Pure Vanilla was determined to enjoy the whole process since he had never been on such a speedy vehicle.

“I can actually make them do tricks too, like a carnival ride,” the child yelled over. Pure Vanilla gave them an okay signal.

“No!” The reaper said in alarm.

“Relax, Healer’s the only cookie getting spun. I can’t play while controlling the rides.” They pressed an option on their screen and the healer’s bot did a three-sixty-spin. Licorice felt queasy just looking at him.

Pure Vanilla, meanwhile, was having the time of his life. The hover bot spun so quickly he was shoved against the curved barriers. It rolled horizontally and vertically, sometimes dropping so low that it nearly grazed the forest below. He laughed in glee as Crepe threw him around, much to the utter dismay of Licorice, who was too airsick to partake in the chaos.

The child could not pull the risky maneuvers forever, and when they no longer felt assured in their absolute control of the bot, they brought it back alongside them, and the bot returned to straightforward flight. Pure Vanilla was panting faintly from the exertion. “My thanks, Strawberry Crepe cookie. New experiences are rare at my age.”

“No problem,” they chirped. “I’m glad to be of service.”

“You talk like you’re geriatric,” Licorice said to the healer.

“Technically, I am,” he retorted.

It *was* an exciting exploit. The bots flew very quickly, faster than the prototype airships his kingdom had been developing before it had been destroyed. The scenery whipped past them so quickly that he could barely register any details. They passed lakes and mountains within minutes. Nearing the end of the route, Pure Vanilla had to ask the child to manually slow down so he would be able to spot the abandoned school. He managed to discern that same old stairwell beyond the observatory, winding into the sky. They had reached their destination.

The trees rose above them as they landed. He gave the surroundings a quick scan.

For the most part, the school was still evidently the Blueberry Institute from his past, only a more



broken down and corrupted version. Large scratches ran all along the building, old mementos from battle. What little pieces of the school that didn't get ruined were overtaken by plants. The fauna of the school had grown wildly, twisting around and breaking into the structures. They were visibly affected by the rift magic of the area. The flowers were far larger than Pure Vanilla recalled, and the interior had mutated into something that resembled eyes, tracking the group's activity. Although they did not display negative intent towards them, the healer found it creepy and allowed the others to huddle closer to him.

They found an area where the plants were sparser, and Crepe called the Dark Enchantress back. She received it immediately.

"We've arrived, master," Licorice informed her.

"That was much quicker than I anticipated," she said, "But I don't mind an earlier payoff."

*Payoff?*

"Now, Healer. You had wanted proof of my claims."

"I do."

"Listen to what I say carefully. Right next to the glass dome we used to stay, there is a plot of land, slightly to the right, where the flowers grow taller; It signifies where to dig. Your proof will be there." She ended the call right after giving instructions.

Despite how long it had been, Pure Vanilla remembered the route flawlessly, navigating the maze-like hedges as if it were second nature. His party members trailed behind, unsure of the new environment. They hid (at his command) when a strange, half-melted creature slinked across their path, only venturing out once he was sure it had left. Soon enough, the overgrown walls revealed a small glade with a dome and a nearby shed.

The plot she was referring to was clear at close inspection. There were small flowers growing on it, which were a different species from the wildly growing viguiera that used to be cultivated. The healer decided to forgo magic for excavation since he suspected that the "successful experiment" was buried under those flowers, and magic has a tendency towards erosion.

The old tools in the shed were functional despite the school's disrepair. Pure Vanilla chose to dig the flowery plot since he had gardening experience, and if whatever lay beneath was fragile, he was the least likely to damage it.

Licorice and Strawberry Crepe hung around nearby, half focused on him and on the lookout for any creatures prowling the grounds.

Pretty soon, his shovel hit something hard. The healer adjusted his digging and took smaller scoops of dirt. The plot slowly uncovered something faintly brown. White tufts of frosting came first, then cracked dough, and finally, a whole decomposing leg.

The two were now completely invested in his excavation.

Pure Vanilla kept going. He needed more of it uncovered in order to confirm, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this cookie was born of their experiments

He still remembered the cookies that they would bake. They were simple, without any frosting or jello. Although they looked like regular people, they all had the same "lack" that set them apart at a glance: no hair, no distinct features, their eyes closed in eternal slumber on features utterly

devoid of expression. They resided in the uncanny valley, too perfect and unmemorable to be truly alive. As close as they had gotten to successfully baking a cookie, he was hard-pressed to imagine those doll-like experiments being truly alive.

The crumbled corpse had long since started deteriorating, overgrown with rot and flowers, but the ambient magic of the area had served to preserve it. Enough for the expression of agony etched upon its face to be visible, so many years later.

That was what did him in. As much as this cookie appeared identical to earlier experiments, the emotion on the severed head could not be faked.

Pure Vanilla sank to his knees, one hand outstretched to touch the baby's decapitated head, but withdrew just before contact. With all the mold and rot permeating through it, he shouldn't get too close.

This child, this...thing. This was the conclusion of all their efforts to create life? So many months, so many years of research, and this was the climax? White Lily had kept her secret all this time and didn't even consider telling him. Everywhere he looked, faint memories would resurface, flashes of when they hid away in the garden. The young Pure Vanilla had imagined a world of possibility at their fingertips. Those were still happy memories, and he didn't want them to be corrupted further than they already had been.

The Dark Enchantress didn't lie. *Why didn't she lie?* At this point, the revelation only served to lessen his trust in his late friend. The Dark Enchantress gained nothing.

He wished he had kept from prying.

"H-Healer," Licorice spoke haltingly. "Who is this? What?"

*Riiiiinnnnnggggg*

He flinched as the sound of the call cut through the tense air.

Strawberry Crepe let it through. The voice of the Dark Enchantress flowed through their arm's tinny speakers, bringing with it a truth that Pure Vanilla did not want to accept.

"I take it your party has reached the grave by now? Though referring to it as a grave may be too euphemistic. That would imply I tried to give that cookie a burial"

*Why?*

"We have," Licorice responded, in lieu of the blonde not answering.

"Wonderful. And has anyone done the job of desecrating it?"

"Ummm...yeah, Healer cookie dug it up."

A pause, and then her wild laughter crackled the mic. "Hahaha, he's the one who did that? Hahahaha, how perfect! Hah-" she took a breath "I almost wish I was there, just to see his face~"

Licorice drew back, wide-eyed. He glanced at Pure Vanilla helplessly, unsure how to react. Crepe tried to take the lead and direct the topic elsewhere. "Mistress, I don't understand the reason for this expedition."

"Why don't you ask your dear mission leader?"

“Ah, my liege-” they seemed to think better of it.

*Why?*

“Master, is it related to the strange creatures milling about?” Licorice asked, concern radiating from him the whole time. He looked torn between distracting his master and checking on Pure Vanilla. “I think we should study them while we are here, if only to document the effects of the heavy magical concentration in the area.”

*Oh, It appears that you haven't figured out what those “creatures” are. I can't wait. Maybe if you see them up close, you'll finally understand...*

“What the hell do you want from me?!” the healer cried.

“How many times do I need to repeat myself? You've asked this before, you know what I want.”

“Why...”

Pure Vanilla couldn't discern her reason for everything. Perhaps it was as simple as her wanting to hurt him, but there were plenty of easier ways to accomplish that. The Dark Enchantress had mentioned wanting him to feel the same way that she had, so this could be her way of carrying out what she believed was justice, on the part of White Lily.

In that case, he might deserve her hatred. She still wasn't justified in ruining everyone else around him.

“Suffer, Healer.” The sorceress said lightly, as though the demand gave her great mirth.

*Look at the corpse, Pure Vanilla cookie, she spoke directly into his mind. It died the close after it had been created. It ran from my arms and decapitated itself on the school fence. The baby killed itself on purpose. Because it had been in pain from the moment it had been baked. That is the price of artificial life.*

The laughter from the speakers wouldn't stop. It sounded almost like shrieking, something high and breathy, like a bird set free from its cage. Pure Vanilla shifted farther from the grave and put his head into his knees, as if that would stop the oppressive nausea from haunting him.

*You cannot fathom how long I had to keep that secret, how much keeping it took from me. I hope you can hurt the way that I had. These are the consequences of your actions.*

*I want to take a knife and cleave your neck open, but I also want you to live because you are my Pure Vanilla.*

*So do me a favor, and suffer suffer suffer suffer suffer suffer suffer-*

Every laugh from the speaker dragged over him like barbed wire.

“Strawberry Crepe...”

“What am I supposed to do?!” They were on the verge of tears. “I can't- I don't want to listen to this. It's scary.”

**“Hang up.”**

Strawberry Crepe nearly stumbled over themselves in their hurry to slam the disconnect button.

They collectively braced themselves for the repercussions. They didn't have to wait for long.

*Who gave you the RIGHT?!*

All three cookies jerked as the Dark Enchantress screamed in their minds, forgoing independent communication in her outrage.

*I will not be ignored. Call back right now, or the second this group returns-*

Pure Vanilla had had enough. He concentrated on the spells laced around him, delving into the mindscape until he found the passageway that allowed the Dark Enchantress to speak to him and slammed it shut. He straightened as her disorienting voice vanished into the mist, leaving blessed quiet. He turned to see the other two, hunched slightly and scowling. She still reached them. He strode over and snapped their connections as well.

His companions spent a few seconds catching their breath.

"....I can't hear her anymore." It took a moment for the fact to set in. Licorice grabbed him by the collar fearfully. "Healer, you have to undo the spell. We'll be in so much trouble!"

"No." Pure Vanilla took his wrists and removed them from his robes. He was not going to invite the Dark Enchantress back into his mind, and nothing will convince him otherwise.

"Huh?! Don't be selfish, what will happen to us? We can't blithely refuse the Dark Enchantress's orders. I don't want to be punished for something that's not my fault!"

"I will take full responsibility for what has occurred," he said blankly. "If we do receive some kind of punishment for the lapse in communication, I believe...that our master will be glad for an excuse to focus on me."

Strawberry Crepe sniffled.

"Witches above," Licorice giggled hysterically. "Seriously, Healer, what the fuck."

"I'm sorry-"

"No, don't be fucking sorry!" he yelled. "I thought the Dark Enchantress liked you! She didn't even let Pomegranate screw around with you. I thought you were a safe option." The reaper glared at him. "I guess not, though."

The reaper was legitimately angry at him. He seemed to think Pure Vanilla had purposely misled him about his relationship with his master, which was simply not the case. The Dark Enchantress's treatment of him had deeply unsettled the other, and he was the only acceptable target around.

The healer also felt irked that Licorice was expressing his fear by lashing out at him. As if he wanted any of this! He never expected the Dark Enchantress to take her grievances out on him while they were involved. He had told Red Velvet that he didn't want anyone to be dragged into his mess, and he continued to stand by that. If Pure Vanilla knew that she would act this way, he would have ventured to the institute alone.

"Look, it's not like I expected this to happen."

"It's a bit late to feel any regret. Whatever sadomasochistic thing you two have going on, keep me out of it!"

The healer had to put in some effort to keep from snapping back at Licorice. He bit his tongue and turned away from the reaper. “Fine. Let’s keep moving.” As long as he kept busy, he would not have to stew over what she said to him.

He supposed that their natural course of action was to investigate the creatures that lurked around the school. He might as well get a full grasp of the harm the rift magic had wrecked. The Dark Enchantress had been excited for him to discover “what the creatures were”, so Pure Vanilla was certain that he would dislike what he found. He wouldn’t go out of his way to avoid it, though. Consequences could only be avoided for so long.

The notion of more terrible discoveries made him feel drained. No wonder the sorceress had been so lenient with him when making the contract. She must have been looking forward to tormenting him. He was overly optimistic, thinking that he had come away with a positive interaction.

At some point, the healer noticed that there weren’t any footsteps following behind. He looked around. His party members were nowhere to be seen. He recalled that Licorice had been walking very slowly- he was making things purposefully difficult because he was annoyed. They must have lagged behind.

He had accidentally stormed off by himself.

Pure Vanilla lamented his temperament and stopped in his tracks. A few benches were scattered nearby, so he took a seat, waiting for the others to catch up. He hummed a low tune to pass the time.

Something rustled by the brush. Pure Vanilla looked to the side, ready to greet the others, but no one was nearby. His staff peered upwards, and he was met face-to-face with one of the creatures. Or what was left of its face.

*Like stars...*

A blue brooch and cloak hung from its warped and emaciated frame, faded yet still familiar. The thing spotted him and had started crawling his way. He tracked its unsteady heaving with horrified recognition.

It was the Blueberry Institute’s librarian.

~~Protect protect the school from getting away from my school~~

It reached for him-

A mech arm whizzed in front of him, taking the brunt of the blow. Pure Vanilla dodged the creature’s second strike, just in time for Licorice to cast bolts of lighting at it. The spell managed to land accurately, electrocuting the creature and finishing it off in one blow.

“Get your head out of the clouds,” the reaper hissed at him.

His librarian was now in multiple pieces.

“I can’t even tell if they have organs, let alone specific ingredients. How on earth do they survive?” the child wondered.

Strawberry Crepe and Licorice took the initiative to poke around at the sizzling body. Even now, this mission remained an assignment for them. Without prior information, they likely would not jump to the conclusion that this abomination had once been a cookie. The mechanic pulled up their

scanner to determine the creature's composition. Luckily, they only received a flashing sign that denoted failure.

"What the hell are these creatures? They're so saturated with magical energy that it's messing with my scanners." They smacked their screen. "Work, damn it! You've been glitching too much these last few days!" It errored out again.

The mechanic eventually gave up on the scanner, using their mech arms to inspect the creature. They lightly grabbed some of its flank, and its singed crust cracked off, wriggling maggots falling from the dripping piece. "Ew." Licorice was not about to touch it, but he summoned a minion that prodded at the creature slightly. The licorice summons' tiny finger left button-sized indents in its robes. Thin pools of expired jam bubbled up from the holes, lethargically dripping down and amplifying the smell of stardust and decay.

*He used to let us hang out in the library past time, and often snuck books for me because he trusted me. What was his name again? I couldn't recall...*

Pure Vanilla felt faint.

Against his predictions, Licorice inhaled sharply as he studied the creature. He stood up, retreating from the corpse and regarding Pure Vanilla with newfound revulsion.

*Ah, right. Necromancer.*

That was too quick. He didn't want either of them to find out. They shouldn't have to share the burdens of his mistakes- especially Strawberry Crepe, who was still a little kid. If he hesitates any longer then they may figure out how to fix their scanner. He had to get them away from him and the Blueberry Institute.

"Licorice, Strawberry Crepe." They turned away from the body to focus on him. "Pull out of the mission."

The suddenness of his words seemed to hit them out of left field. They didn't seem to register them for a while, before the child suddenly asked, "Huh? Wait, Healer, did something happen? What do you want us to do?"

"You will leave the premises, and I'll stay here and explore the rest of the school myself."

Licorice and Crepe both simultaneously protested, the former in anger and the latter in anxiety.

"You want to hoard all the glory for yourself, is that it? You've made the Dark Enchantress upset and now you want to throw us under the bus to avoid the brunt of the fault. I suppose I was stupid to trust someone who waltzed into the castle after tricking me into believing he was an ordinary healer-

"But there's no imminent danger here, we took out that creature in one hit! It's riskier to split up than for us to complete the rest of the job together. I don't know what the Dark Enchantress is doing or what you are thinking, but I don't like this option. I don't want to lose track of anyone else-

"I don't need to explain myself." he interrupted. "You two promised to obey me if I ever said to drop the mission."

"I'm not gonna leave you," the child protested.

If they won't listen to him, then he must resort to commanding them as their king. "Strawberry Crepe cookie, this is an order."

The mechanic seemed to struggle over what they wanted to do. After consideration, they gave in and bowed their head, despite being visibly discontent.

"Now, Licorice. Take them and set up camp some distance away where the rift magic in the air is thinner. Set up camp and stay there, and I will meet up with you eventually."

"My pleasure," he said sarcastically, grabbing them and dragging them away. The child resisted somewhat, still uncertain about leaving him, but ultimately following the irritated reaper. Within a minute, they were out of sight.

Good. Strawberry Crepe won't find out that they killed a man.

...

Pure Vanilla crouched before his librarian's mutated body.

He was...quite disgusting. Up close, the rotting smell was overwhelming, and he could only thank the witches that he had been too restless for lunch. His body had melted into blue teaching robes, which bent like flesh while he moved. His arms had degraded into stubs. But most disturbing of all was his head. Small pieces of crust, skull, jam and brain had been held together by condensed magic, keeping the living corpse moving far beyond his passing. Now that he had fallen, the pieces had created hundred of tiny splatters on the ground, a mosaic pattern of rot.

Pure Vanilla was sure that the image would haunt him for life.

It felt wrong to just leave him lying out in the open, like an act of disrespect after all the librarian had been through. He at least deserved to die with some dignity. The healer wanted to bury him like he had done with the baby. That was all he could do for them- the creatures roaming the school had long outlived their friends and family.

The fragile body might crumble into pieces if moved, so he had to dig out a grave right beside it. The path was not an appropriate place to be laid to rest, but it was the best he could provide. Pure Vanilla cast a spell that started to hollow out parts of the ground. He wondered if White Lily had done the same with the experiment, before forcefully shoving the thought into a box and burying it deep into his psyche. This was not the time.

A rustle sounded from behind him and he spun around with his staff raised.

Two more creatures, with their dripping bodies and cloudy flesh heads, approached. They detected that the librarian was dead and prepared to attack. One charged him while the latter opened a frayed book, mirrors appearing around it.

Pure Vanilla was still reeling from learning that the beasts were his former teachers. Unwilling to fight back, he cast a powerful shield around himself and hoped they would go away. The faster creature slammed into the shield, pieces of it flying everywhere. It cried in pain yet continued to pound upon the clear barrier. The other, who was clearly a mage, started enchanting. Magic circles glowed on the mirrors, and they shot beams of energy at him.

Pure Vanilla clasped his hands together out of habit, the same gesture he would use in prayer. "Please, leave me alone. I don't want to fight," he begged, as if anyone out there would hear. But who would listen to him?

They didn't perceive his words, continuing to chip at his shield. Upon failing to make any progress, the creature closer to him summoned a sharp needle, spreading its feet and slightly drawing back an appendage.

*White Chocolate, the history teacher. She had a fencing sword in her classroom.*

She thrust the needle. The concentrated force created a small crack, spider-wedding out from the point of contact. The healer withdrew from her. His shield wouldn't be able to hold out indefinitely against that assault, and he must choose to either fight or flee. His staff writhed in agony that mirrored its wielder's. He did not want to damage any of the other teachers. The burial could be delayed until the other creatures leave the vicinity. He chose to run.

As White Chocolate drew back again, he took the moment to dispel his shield so he could move freely. Seeking an opening, the mage creature cast something that would have been useless earlier.

Large chains wrapped around Pure Vanilla and he was-

Buried under the rubble of his ruined castle. Crushed by the Dark Enchantress.

Beams of light cut through the creatures, a visceral reaction rather than any planned attack. The mage crumbled instantly, the book slipping from its grasp. The history teacher's needle clattered on the ground in discordant symphony.

The healer returned to himself in bits, the sharp memories fading from view as he became cognizant of his surroundings. He dispelled the chains with a shaky flick of his fingers, looking around at the carnage he created.

The mage was in a half-melted puddle near a bush, while his history teacher was standing there, listless. She was not hostile anymore, perhaps realizing somewhere in her liquified dough that there was no point. She shifted closer and he gripped his staff cautiously, yet she did not react. Another step forward, dragging troughs through the dirt, until they were close enough to touch.

White Chocolate leaned over him, pieces of her dripping like falling stars, leaving little splotches all over his robes and bandages.

“Ah... Thank you!”

Her limbs collapsed under her, the dead thing falling on Pure Vanilla. He took a few stumbling steps backward and it slipped off him with a wet noise. He shoved a hand in front of his mouth to keep from screaming or whining. She was so messy, so rotten, and had gotten her expired fluids all over him.

And she- she had *thanked* him for killing her. He thought that the creatures had no awareness left. The thought that any semblance of his teacher's sanity remained, trapped in these crumbling forms, for *centuries*-

How could such a horrific form of torture even exist?

...

He wished that he didn't hear her, but the words lingered in his conscious. She could have been repeating nonsense, a quick phrase that she parroted in the early stages of battle. Yet he could not discount the certainty that she had spoken to him as a person.

And if she had, then what does that mean for him? He had unknowingly caused years of suffering



for these cookies who had only tried the best for him and the rest of the students. They may have been rather distant towards him personally, but Pure Vanilla did not hold that against them. He was rather difficult to deal with, in the sense that needed no maintenance but also disobeyed the rules. Even from afar, he had watched the way they had interacted with the regular students. They were undeniably good people, with a passion for teaching and research that had led them to the Institute.

They had people who loved them, and their entire lives that had been stolen by the rift magic.

As for the other students, he had no idea what happened to them. The lucky ones may have received enough education to find well-paying jobs somewhere, but the younger children had no such privilege. The healer simply tossed their well-being aside, too caught up in his own guilt. The young Pure Vanilla hated what they had done and was afraid of being found using illegal magic. He ran from his actions like White Lily had, forgetting completely the cookies he had affected.

Licorice was right to accuse him of being selfish.

First the Institute, then the barn, and finally his kingdom. He ruined every place that he cared about. There was an old saying about patterns: First time was an incident, second a coincidence, and third the confirmation. Pure Vanilla was the only common denominator of every scenario. He was selfish to want happiness for himself, despite every bit of proof in Earthbread that it simply wasn't meant to be. The prodigy who always wanted to help, the poor starved child looking for work, the king who embodied perfection and kindness. The poor fools would take the bait and fall in love with his projection, seeking help and counsel, and he would happily provide.

They get dragged down with him when he inevitably ruins everything. And then they'll fall, fall, fall, like shards of flesh and jam, like dying stars, as he left only gravestones and cemeteries in his wake.

In the past, he had vowed to spend more time in the gardens than the graves, but the Institute had become a singular mass grave, so he probably broke his promise by coming here. If only he could bring these people back to their true selves. Then these people will be able to lead the lives they were supposed to and absolve him of his guilt.

(His staff wrung its leaves through his hair, trying to console him. Its wielder was not at fault for these situations, despite being involved. It would have liked him to know, no matter what was said, that the barn loved him.)

Pure Vanilla waved its tendrils off and regarded the scene before him.

He was burying one person. Now he had to bury three.

At least the viguiera bushes would grow lusciously over the bodies. They already broke and degraded so easily. The abhorrent mutations and rot will be replaced with new life, and not a trace of the bodies will remain. All of the creature forms will disappear, and their pain will finally come to an end.

He wished he could have saved them somehow, but it wasn't possible. He could feel it intrinsically, that these abominations of nature would never be cookies again. For the mutated creatures, existence was undoubtedly worse than death.

If they have even a glimpse of their humanity left, then he couldn't just leave them to wallow in their agony. No matter how much he wanted to run from the horror.

He couldn't.

*Suffer.*

## Chapter End Notes

The (...) parts are Pure Vanilla trying to calm himself (a literal break in the text that doesn't change the setting unlike (~~~)). He's taking a moment before resuming his thoughts/actions.

The White Lily experience is not the greatest thing.

Imagine that one breaking bad gif. That is the Dark Enchantress precisely calculating what lies and truths she'll tell to cause PV the max amount of trauma.

Licorice POV next! The way he reacted was unfair, but also pretty realistic in my opinion

## Licorice: The Institute (2)

### Chapter Notes

TW: Euthanization(?), a bit of re-iteration of what happens in the last chapter or so.

Licorice draws some right conclusions and some wrong ones. Strawberry Crepe is a concerned sweet bean. Dark Choco shows up. The Blueberry Institute arc finally closes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Licorice was still angry.

So it's been two days, sue him. He could probably recognize that he was being obstinate, but in his defense, he had to stew in a camp for two days, while both Healer and the Dark Enchantress were intent to keep him out of the loop. There was nothing to do except for a few menial tasks, so the longer they stayed around, the more restless he got.

Strawberry Crepe was also in quite the state. Healer had managed to worm into their consciousness quickly and they have been worrying over him constantly. They had even referred to him as "their liege" once or twice, playing at some sort of fantasy. He was reminded that despite their independence, they were rather childish. This, in turn, upset him more since it shed a clear light on all the things they have said to him in the past. Licorice made an effort to keep from showing his negativity, but he couldn't speak for how effective he was.

Their master had tried to reach them several more times, and in each instance, the child had just let the ringtone play out until she gave up. After the third and final time, they climbed out of their mech and tried to do chores manually, without much success. They then refused to help at all, and Licorice had to work by himself. No one was happy.

Licorice wasn't able to parse what Healer had done to block his master's voice, so the mech was their only option for communication. He had considered going against the kid's wishes to talk to her, if only to push the blame away from himself, but they were so on edge that he didn't want to trigger them to run away. Forcing them to speak to the Dark Enchantress would feel like kicking the dog.

Find some firewood. Cook. Fix the tents. Sit there until Healer gets back. Look at fish nearby and try not to think about the situation.

Think about the situation.

This was so infuriating. The reaper kicked his reflection in the water, distorting his image as the ripples flowed outwards.

By all means, he should have hated him. Healer was everything he wasn't: An intelligent, personable, powerful mage who had the freedom to choose to be a healer rather than being forced to use his power to survive.

He had never had a bad impression of the blonde. Sure, there was the initial humiliation of being

found soaked and half drowning in a river, but the other had given him no grief over it. The Dark Enchantress's obvious favor made him suspicious, but that wariness also died a quick death when Healer immediately started being protective over Dark Choco, someone who he had apparently gone years without talking to. He couldn't detest someone who was so considerate, especially since that consideration was also directed at him. Healer may have been the only cookie besides Poison Mushroom who viewed him without apathy, condescension, hatred, or some mix of the three.

Once that veil was ripped, then he could actually be excited that, *oh, there was another mage in the castle!*

Upon speaking to him further, Healer strayed somewhat from his first impression. Although he was undeniably a good person (a strange thing to be in their group), his moral bounds were slightly different from the classic light user's. He possessed a clear respect for dark magic and a mysterious hidden identity that was intertwined with their master's.

That's actually what he had been trying to ignore for the last two days.

He may not have the context of their past, but he was not some dull-witted jelly beast. There was something obviously, deeply wrong with the way they had interacted. The way that the Dark Enchantress had treated the blonde felt...borderline abusive, if he would dare to insinuate such as such. It reminded him somewhat of the dynamic between the swordsman and the priestess.

No, that wasn't an apt comparison. Healer was different from that pathetic excuse of a warrior. Unlike Dark Choco, he wouldn't sit there passively and let the circumstances unfold around him because of some mistaken kind of loyalty (although, in this case, Licorice thought he could have been a little more obedient).

Despite his own reservations and attempts at denial, he couldn't forget the unsettling conversation they had in the Institute. Licorice had the persistent sense that the scope of this...relationship between the two spanned something far greater than he originally thought.

A dug-up grave, a grudge held by his master, those strange mutated cookies.

He knew very little of the man since Healer seemed to find whimsy in keeping his secrets, but he couldn't help but suspect that he had been strung along to a line they were both weaving. And it all stemmed from a single, almost harmless fact.

Healer was a kind man. He radiated a kind of strange, warm energy that near compelled others to trust him. Licorice had wondered if it was some kind of spell, before detoxing himself and determining, with no small amount of disgust, that it must be his *personality*.

What kind of charisma would have an effect like that? Was the reaper just responding to- *shudder*- his niceness?

A man like that should not be a part of the cookies of darkness. He would make an absolute failure of a villain. Licorice could hardly imagine him acting in genuine malice, and the reaper was not generally a favorable judge of character. Shady backstory notwithstanding, he couldn't understand how the healer would end up joining the Dark Enchantress.

The last two days, however, had given him an excess of time to stew over their new addition, and after so long, he managed to conceive two possible reasons.

The first was a result of the bond between the two immortals. This possibility may still have a grain of truth, even if their relationship was not exactly how he originally perceived it. With the

Dark Enchantress's strange behavior towards Healer and the blonde's admission that they shared a past, he thought this reason was a contender. Whatever relationship they once had must have deteriorated, though. He didn't want to believe that it had always been like *that*.

The second, which he had only come up with after this journey, he cursed at his own idiocy for not thinking of sooner. Healer must have done something truly horrific. A sin so dreadful that he was exiled from society, or left it himself. No way such a pleasant and seemingly well-adjusted cookie would show up out of nowhere.

This option was looking more and more probable. Healer had said that his actions had "consequences" that led to this school's abandonment. Studying those creatures, it was clear that they had once been cookies. The blonde had seemed shocked when they encountered the cookie with the blue brooch, but that could be chalked up to facing what he had done. Whether he was truly aware of what happened, he had definitely played some role in the creation of those mutated abominations.

It certainly fit the bill of "crimes against cookiekind". Licorice was quite familiar with those, but even he had never made something so gruesome. The reaper had to wonder- what else was he capable of?

His current working theory was that Healer and his master had worked together to achieve immortality. If proved correct, then there must have been some truly terrible acts involved.

...Fuck, he didn't even care if Healer had done horrible things. As long as he wasn't a bully or a creep, and was kind to him, then he would be okay with it. The man had not wronged him personally, so he'll overlook the other's mistakes and defects- that's how the world worked. But the way that he had tried so hard to exclude him from the mission got on his nerves.

~~~~~

It came to him, one day, while he was doodling on his notes. His teacher was explaining something about philosophy and mentioned the phrase: *Knowledge is power*. Licorice had often found philosophy boring. Who needs to spend hours postulating about the meaning of existence and morality when they could be spending their day doing more useful things? He hadn't paid any attention to the words and they slithered across his mind before disappearing into the concentric circles upon his page.

Despite the dull way that the wisdom had been delivered, it had made an impression. He would remember that phrase ever so often, and it took a while before he understood why it meant so much to him. That quote stuck with him because it was a simple, definable truth.

Licorice had only narrowly avoided starvation by fleeing from the Dark Cacao kingdom, and he had done so by carefully memorizing the cloud patterns and patrols. He noticed when the sky would be clear of storms and blizzards, when the guards left gaps in their patrols. He took the chance and reached for the stars, and to his elation, managed to clasp it.

The reaper had traveled across the forests, deserts, and snow, looking for a new place to call home. He imagined a warmer, temperate place, far from his former kingdom. He boarded ships with pilfered coins, leaving a trail of stolen goods and regret behind him.

Against his pessimistic predictions, he did finally achieve that dream. On the other side of the ocean, there was an empire of shells and ivory. It was a newer nation, built from the ruins of the Vanillan people. From a ship's distance, the city gleamed like a jewel.

Of course, it was a pretty fraud. Poverty and inequality ran amok, and he found himself relegated to the sides, begging for scraps from the kinder citizens and robbing the ruder ones. Unlike his former kingdom, however, the Republic had far more resources. Some people lived in true wealth and power.

Licorice was lucky enough to meet one such cookie. He had given her the normal tragic tale that he told people, about a cold and starving kingdom.

She had mentioned something to her compatriot, about him being too old for their program, but that someone from across the water would be good leverage. He missed parts of their conversation, too hungry and woozy from a few bad days on the streets. But he got the gist: he had managed to suck up to the right people. The old women, Canele and Mille-feuille, had enrolled him without any effort. Overnight, he had gone from someone scourging the streets to being in the most prestigious academy in the Creme Republic.

Licorice was not an exceptional individual; he was only an average mage, in both magical output and intelligence. He took multiple attempts to learn a spell, and a lot of time to cast them. He also lacked the wealth and connections that other students had since childhood, and became an outcast as a result. Unlike the Cacao kingdom, it took more than a mere show of his abilities to make him a useful resource, another asset for the village's preservation.

That was fine. He would study harder and learn more spells than they did, and that would make him powerful. It was the only aspect in which he could surpass them. He would prove that he was worthy of their regard.

After many months of academic grinding, he succeeded. He had managed to rank first in the school even though upperclassmen have an advantage on the ranking scale due to their harder courses. He even managed to beat out that one posh coffee nerd, which was no small feat.

He could see the moment that some of the bullies crumpled at the sight of the board. They had to live with the fact that the "poor, filthy vagrant" had beaten them. He hoped that they got the soldering of a lifetime for it. This was definite proof that he was just as good as any of them, an accomplishment that they would have to acknowledge!

The next day that Licorice went to school, the bullying continued. The students tortured him with greater fervor than before, as if that would make up for his absolute gall to do better than them. That was when he realized it. *No matter what I do, they never look beyond these tattered robes.*

Those cookies were the ones who had their livelihoods handed to him, and they'll hand it down to their children. Rankings were ultimately worthless. He had been fighting a one-sided battle.

One day, he realized the star he held was too bright, too fierce. It burned away at his palms. But the reaper didn't mourn that opportunity or try to keep ahold of that light. Instead, he took that star and threw it to the abyss, spiteful at the way it hurt him.

Whatever! He never wanted it anyway.

Licorice had been longing for this chance before he had even conceptualized it, and now that he was certain, there must be some celebration. Since he was going, he was going out with a spectacle. He could finally retaliate without fear. Everyone who had bullied him had their cruelty returned ten-fold.

And what a brilliant performance he had directed!

(Licorice got expelled.)

He thought joining Dark Enchantress would be a better option, and in some ways it was. Unfortunately, the other cookies had no respect for him because they else understood the limitations of his abilities. Pomegranate did not count, since her abilities were too specialized, and the only actual metric they had to go from was their master, who could ruin kingdoms with a flick of her hand. But oh, was her strength magnificent. If he could someday gain even a fraction of that, it would be recompense for the life he lived.

He would claw for every scrap of influence and every display of magic that his master tossed around, even if it took begging on his knees for it.

Knowledge is power.

Of course, learning everything was a pointless and ultimately impossible task. He only needed enough information to get a read on the situation, to have his share of power. It wasn't necessary to know Healer's identity, since that revelation won't change how he is with their master. Licorice was content to treat that secret as some game.

The mission, on the other hand, was on a strict time limit, and he lacked too much information to predict what will happen next. The way that the Dark Enchantress and Healer had behaved was too unexpected, and it terrified him. They were both dangerous people, after all.

A sudden rustle interrupted his sulking, and he looked up at the perfect moment to see Strawberry Crepe's guilty face and the crushed leaves they had stepped on while trying to sneak away. They broke eye contact and started to run into the brush. Licorice rushed after them. He caught up within a few strides and grabbed Strawberry Crepe by a leg, holding them upside down while they struggled.

"Hey, where are you sneaking to?" he asked curtly.

"Let me go!" They attempted to punch him, but he just held them farther from his body and they swung about uselessly. "I can't stand this apprehension anymore. I have to see if Healer is okay."

"He's an adult, I'm sure he's fine. Why do you even care?"

"It's my duty," they whined. "And besides, how can you say that? He went out of his way to be nice to you. It's heartless to leave him the way we did. I never agreed to that, and don't like abandoning him after the Dark Enchantress was so mean."

He also felt some guilt over the way he had acted, but not enough to return. Healer obviously wasn't throwing them under the bus to save his hide, but Licorice had never thought he would. He simply said that because it would upset the other. He did, however, believe the blonde had kept information about the school to himself and knew the reason that the Dark Enchantress had behaved so erratically. That was what the reaper was holding against him.

Besides, Healer had also asked them to leave, so if they were to check on him they would be disobeying his direct order.

"As if he wants us there. Plus, you don't know enough about what's going on between him and the Dark Enchantress to help."

They pouted. "I'm gonna check on him, regardless of what you say. Between the two of us, I can fly faster."

They wrenched from his grip and dashed their mech, but Licorice grabbed them again without any effort.

“Witches, will you fuck off!”

This little shit.

“Strawberry Crepe, you are being real annoying right now. There’s only so much leeway a kid can have before they are considered a problem, and you managed to hit every tick on the list. Foulmouthed, blatantly dismissive of orders, not to mention that grating voice. I understand why nobody decided to bother with you.”

They gaped at him in shock. Licorice relaxed slightly since stopped squirming about. It was callous of him to target their insecurities, but hopefully they would sit tight and patiently wait for Healer now. If he had to hurt their feelings to keep them from running off and endangering themselves, then it was a trifling sacrifice.

“What did I do to warrant that?” They asked softly.

Licorice ignored the question. They were being a burden on top of everything else, and frankly, he had no energy to expend on their antics. If they could shut up and stop being antsy, they would both be better off.

A small sniffle turned his attention back to the child. Tears were dripping from their face.

Oh.

Oh no.

He didn’t mean to take it that far.

“I don’t care if you hate me! You don’t want me to see Healer just because of your argument. That’s petty, and also a bad reason to abandon someone!” They were crying while yelling at him. “I’m going to my liege and telling him about this, and once we get back to the castle we’ll never have to be near each other again!”

If anything is lacking then I’ll find a way to fix myself. I want you to care about me!

The kid was steadfast about going even if that meant his disapproval. Sure, they sniped at him regularly, but that was wholly different from this situation. Strawberry Crepe must be truly determined about meeting Healer if they were willing to discard the prospective relationship they had yearned for so dearly.

He wasn’t going to force them to choose between Healer and himself. That was too much, even for Licorice.

He walked over to their mech and dropped them in it. They regarded him with a mix of suspicion and disbelief.

“If I truly can’t dissuade you, then I have no choice but to come along,” he explained. “I have some things to discuss with him too.”

They scooted away from him and wiped their face, but one of the mech’s arms unfolded into the hover bot pod. Licorice took it as the end of the disagreement and stepped in. The two rose above the trees, Strawberry Crepe guiding them around the school to search for their third-party member.

Finding Healer was easier said than done. It was difficult to spot one cookie in a whole overgrown school, as they have come to find out. They flew over the glass dome from before, scoped out the gardens, and even took a quick obstacle course through the interior of the institute, but still came up empty-handed. By the time they had a clue where he was, Strawberry Crepe's tears had long since dried.

They had eventually gone beyond the school grounds, and Licorice had found something suspicious. He had seen that the gate to the observatory was open, swinging faintly on its rusted hinge in equilibrium, and had requested the Strawberry Crepe fly lower so he could inspect the gate in greater detail. The child had confirmed that the dust showed signs of disturbance and that there was no way it had been swinging like that for so many years without breaking.

They made their way past the observatory. Exiting the building, there was a clear staircase into the air. He couldn't see the end; it was as if the stairs led to heaven itself. They both stared at the path before them, struck with a sense of conviction. He was at the end of the path.

He hadn't packed levitation sigils, believing they would be pointless. Thank the stars for Strawberry Crepe's technology because otherwise, he was not climbing that.

The child took a breath and swiped across their screen, sending them above the stairs. After a few minutes, Licorice looked over the side of the bot, turning faintly green at the sight. They were so high above the ground that the school looked akin to a toy, and if Crepe's mech had any problems then they would be nothing more than a splat on the ground.

Thankfully, they soon reached the end of the staircase. It led to a small floating platform holding a crystal, which had been shattered into pieces. The thin outlines of an old binding circle twisted around the crystal chunks. Healer was sitting atop the platform, staff held close to his body. Next to him was a tattered sack with a few papers on top. The cookie straightened slightly when he noticed them, and the flower's pupil followed them as they descended next to him.

He looked terrible. The healer had given him the impression of someone who was generally put together, but that image had all but fallen apart at the moment. He was covered in dirt and mystery fluid, even in his hair and bandages.

"I thought I had told you to leave," he said, sullen.

"We came back 'cause Strawberry Crepe was anxious."

"I wasn't anxious," the child whined.

The blonde sighed. "I recognize that it was sudden. My apologies for the worry I have caused, but I do not regret taking care of this mess alone."

Licorice wasn't ready to let it go. "Our master tried to call through them multiple times, you know? When we return, you'll have a lot to answer for."

"I'm not mad at him either, please don't fight on my behalf..."

"It must have been hard." Healer patted them on the head, and they calmed a bit. "I underestimated this mission and made a mistake in bringing you. You seem to be dealing with everything quite maturely though, so good job holding down the fort." His flower gave them a wink.

They laughed a bit, the sound out of place in this isolated place.

Licorice scoffed. Like Healer was there to keep the child from dying. He had to be the one dealing

with them the past few days. “Frankly, I dislike all the secrecy around all this. I still don’t get why you and our master are keeping everything under wraps. We got dragged into whatever feud you two had, so we at least deserve to know what’s going on.”

The blonde turned back towards him. “Why are you so desperate to know? It’s not as though this was your school.”

“I care, because we will have to return to the castle, and I have no idea how the Dark Enchantress is gonna react!”

“I’ll take responsibility for the fallout. There’s no need to dwell on pleasing her.”

Licorice was starting to get annoyed again. Why wasn’t he getting it? The reaper needed to be aware of the situation. The way that he had kicked them both from the mission and refused to extrapolate made Licorice feel out of the loop, and the lack of knowledge he had bothered him deeply.

“I am glad you are covering for us. Nevertheless, I want to know why we were kicked from the mission.”

“I dislike this insistence on dredging up my personal demons. Do you think I owe you answers? I sent you away specifically so that nobody else would be entangled in this affair. What happened in this school should be left in the past, and I do not want to reminisce about it.”

“...I am ignorant of your history, so maybe people tend to trust you implicitly. But I am not like those people. The reason for my prying is that I, quite literally, cannot have any peace of mind while remaining so ignorant of what’s going on.”

Healer was silent for a moment. The reaper hoped that the slight show of vulnerability would be enough to compel him to his point of view. After some consideration, the other mage seemed to make a decision.

“Strawberry Crepe, could you complete a task for me?”

“Um, It depends on what it is.”

“Fly over the rest of the school and carefully look for any creatures milling about. Try and be as thorough as you can.”

“Okay, I can do that. See you later, Healer.” They quickly disappeared, eager for the chance to escape before they started arguing again.

Licorice folded his arms. The child had come back for him, and he sent them away again? “Really, what was that for? They were the one who wanted to come back and check up on you. Besides, those mutated cookies may pose a danger to Strawberry Crepe, especially if they scout by themselves.”

“They’ll be alright.” Licorice was ready to protest, to tell Healer that he was overestimating a single child’s ability. “There aren’t any creatures left, so nothing is around to harm them. Crepe will come back empty-handed after a while.”

“What?”

“Those mutants are gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“I...killed them all. Every last one.”

Licorice froze in a moment of incomprehension. Had- had the other mage admitted to murder? It was difficult to associate the nice and fretful man before him with the chilling confession he had received. Morally reprehensible as he might be, Licorice had never ended someone's life.

The blonde continued. “I regret not being able to do anything else, but they were too far gone. Any competent healer knows when their patients are beyond saving.”

The reaper was dumbstruck. He possessed a clear distinction of what he considered dead- it was a necessity, as a necromancer. Cookies that could move and fight were not on that list. If healer was as competent as he suspected, wouldn't he have been able to find a way to bring them back? And if not him, wouldn't their master?

“But those cookies were capable of functioning on some level. I don't think that's possible without a soul. How can you destroy them when they could have been alive? Even if you aren't able to fix them, our master could do it!”

“If their souls still resided within those husks, then I am even more assured in my decision. It is preferable to die than live on in a state of misery.”

Licorice's life, like many others in the Dark Cacao kingdom, had been a cold and difficult one. His survival was his priority above all things, even in situations where escape from the dreary cycle of trying to grasp for any speck of happiness felt impossible. It felt like Healer was dismissing all his experiences and saying that the child he was would have been better off dead. Licorice couldn't help being offended.

“And about the Dark Enchantress,” the healer continued, “do you genuinely believe that she would bother to help these cookies? After centuries of letting them fester? You might just be more of an optimist than I am.” He sighed. “My act was one of mercy.”

“What the hell, are you suicidal or something? Who says shit like that?” He regretted the exclamation the second it came out of his mouth.

Healer's grip on his staff tensed to the point where the flower's petals wavered in alarm. Licorice got the sense that he was trying hard to keep from smacking him or doing anything similarly cathartic.

“I shouldn't have said that.”

“You shouldn't have,” Healer agreed.

“...”

The blonde ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I don't need to justify my actions. I'm willing to tell you about this school, but please, do not interrupt me or commentate about my mistakes. This whole travesty could have been prevented, and I know that.”

The reaper nodded, genuinely surprised he was getting information after his statements.

Healer patted the stairs beside him. “Sit, and I'll give my report.”

Licorice dropped next to him.

“You’ve already figured this out, but the creatures were once cookies who had been mutated by the rift magic. Centuries ago, the Dark Enchantress and I attended this school together. We would conduct experiments together, with all kinds of forbidden and dangerous magic. Some of our experiments had unintended consequences. My actions had indirectly led to the rift opening over the school. All the students had been rounded up. Both of us ran away and lost contact until centuries later. As for the rest, they probably returned to their families or town of origin. As for my teachers...you’ve seen how they ended up.”

Those rotten creatures, Licorice thought, *that’s who they were*. if they have been here for so long, then they must have no surviving loved ones left on Earthbread. What an all-around mess.

“If left unattended, they would have likely been around for centuries more. Someone had to put the cookies to rest, but I wished that you two were spared the job. Strawberry Crepe, and you- you’re both so young.”

He was suddenly, uncomfortably cognizant of the other cookies’ immortality. Was that why he had kicked them from the mission? To try and protect Strawberry Crepe’s innocence? He was astonished that someone would go so far for a cookie of darkness. They were such a menace that most people wouldn’t think about their emotional well-being. The reaper certainly hadn’t. A seed of guilt nestled in him.

“I’m not sure why the creatures never left the premises, but if I had to speculate, it would be due to the time it takes the rift to seal. Though portals experience erosion like everything else, when there’s no one strong enough to suppress it, an opened rift would remain open for a long period of time. Years, perhaps even decades. All the while, monsters must have been pouring out. I think...at some point, they did not even have the mental capacity to travel beyond the worn path.”

What a terrible fate. The Dark Enchantress *had* done nothing, he realized. She had known about the abandoned institute’s state, yet had ignored it entirely. It fell to Healer to kill his own teachers.

That was uniquely cruel. Licorice felt bad for him.

“If only I had known, had come back to check, then they wouldn’t have been rotting away for so long. But there’s no changing the past and there’s nothing more I can do now,” the healer whispered. Contrary to his resigned statements, he could tell that the admissions hurt him greatly. “I had laid the cookies to rest. I will place warning signs around the surrounding trees and school gates. If all goes well, no one shall ever set foot upon this place again.”

“Yeah, that would probably be for the best.” He cringed slightly at his awkward response.

“Do you have any other worries?”

“Just one- what was important about the grave you dug up? That cookie had been buried before we had arrived, so I was curious.”

“The grave? It was an old experiment, nothing more. I think that master only wanted to show me since we had created it together.”

If Licorice hadn’t seen him shut down during the Dark Enchantress, he would have been convinced. His voice was steady and he did not shake nor show any negative outward emotion. Unfortunately for Healer, Licorice had seen him affected, so the claim was a performance wholly for the blonde himself.

He’s a really good liar.

Poor Healer. They shouldn't be here for too long.

"Once there's nothing more to gain from staying, then we should just return. This place is a source of bad memories for you, so there's no need to hover around and torture yourself further. Let's just leave and forget about it."

Healer was surprised by his sudden change of heart. Licorice felt belatedly guilty about forcing the other's confession, but at least he was sure that none of the horrors of the institute were intentionally created. There was no great, purposeful crime to be found.

"That would be great." He seemed relieved, as though he had been waiting for someone's permission. "We should stay near the base of the observatory. That way, Strawberry Crepe can easily find us."

Licorice pulled him to his feet and the healer dusted off his robes. He chose to carry the sack and Healer took the papers, which he could see were warnings that had been painted onto torn papers. The reaper scrambled not to drop it as Healer flew them to the base of the stairs.

"Geez, this is heavy. What's in here?"

"Books."

Licorice blinked. He set the sack on the ground, pulling out a tome and scanning its title.

A history of bone; necromancy's inception and development.

"You had wanted to see what books the Institute had, right? I had passed the library while clearing out this place, so I picked out a few that seemed like they would appeal to you."

He brushed dust from the old tome, shaking slightly.

"I do hope they are alright, or all that effort would be for naught..."

After the uncharitable way that Licorice had treated him, he still went out of his way to do something like this? Even the reaper had forgotten about the books he had originally been enticed with. He had only mentioned wanting them a single time. Healer had gone through an obviously terrible experience, and even in the middle of it, thought about him. Did he not care for himself at all?! This cookie...!

He had been angry at the man who Dark Enchantress had been purposely hurting. A healer covered in blood and grime. Someone who had genuinely been kind to him.

He was the absolute scum of the earth.

"Licorice?"

"I should not have been mad at you. You are going through a terrible experience, and I was being rude and uncalled for, and-" he shook his head. "Think of yourself, next time."

The healer grinned. "So you do like them."

Another needle to the chest. "Yeah."

He silently resolved that Healer was someone who he keep close. Rarely had anyone ever shown him such grace in the face of his less pleasant qualities, and Poison Mushroom was too young to know better. This cookie was too kind to experience that crushing isolation that had once plagued

him.

They waited for the child to appear. Strawberry Crepe had flown back unhappily, reporting that they weren't able to find any creatures despite their exhaustive scouting. The blonde complimented them on anyway, saying that he had already done his own search and had asked the child for a second look to be sure the monsters had all migrated. He added little facts into the story until the child was convinced of its truthfulness, masterfully twisting their conversations to make his lie viable.

Licorice remained silent.

They went around the premises, following Healer as he put up papers warning any unlucky passerby that the area was magically corrupted. Afterward, they took a detour to pack up the camp that he temporarily set up. After making sure that everyone grabbed what they brought, they were ready to return.

Unfortunately, Strawberry Crepe had overused the fuel in their tanks. The mechanic's armor had completely run out of energy as the castle phased into the horizon (as a result of the scouting), and they had landed just as the metal parts crumbled into a dead heap. Healer placed a floatation spell on the mech and pulled it along the final stretch.

There was a positive to the inconvenience depending on who was asked, since if they had not faced this minor inconvenience, they would not have encountered the other frustrated cookie meandering under the former Vanillan kingdom.

Dark Choco was hanging around the teleporter, pacing from side to side with a magnificent glower. The device behind him was cracked, a strawberry jam-shaped stab through the center. Licorice glared at the warrior for adding another tally to the list of this terrible week. He hoped that he had been stuck there for a while.

The cacaoin cookie saw them and immediately made an excuse. "I accidentally broke the teleporter and can't get to the kingdom."

How did he even manage to break the crystal? It must've taken a truly awesome level of incompetence. Licorice was sure that simply dropping his sword, even blade first, would not do this level of damage. Healer evidently thought the same, studying the sword as if to gauge how heavy it was.

The warrior seemed to think that their scrutiny signified doubt. "It really was an accident!"

"I believe you," the healer said.

Licorice did not. But more importantly, he wasn't going to rip out pages from his precious books to make levitation sigils. As if on cue, Strawberry Crepe started complaining. "My fuel tank is empty! Are we gonna be stuck here?"

"I'll bring everyone up. We can deal with the teleporter some other time."

They gathered around as he cast his magic, his magical aura surrounding them as they began to float. As he passed Dark Choco, the warrior eyed the stains on his robes suspiciously.

"Is that blood? It smells awful," he said.

Healer groaned.

Chapter End Notes

Here we can see some of Lico's personality from his view. He's a little different from the other cookies, and one way this can be seen is: Dark Choco likes Pure Vanilla because (he's good), but Licorice likes him because (he's good to ME). Also, it may seem strange for PV to be the one with the "death is mercy" viewpoint but that's he is the equivalent of a medical professional.

The new crunchy dreams event? This is so similar to something I planned in this fic I'm screaming: <https://youtu.be/6JhYs3-cW7s>

Of all the character POVs I wish to write, I'm most excited for Pomegranate's. But that isn't going to come for a while.

Pure Vanilla: Mind over Matter

Chapter Notes

TW: nothing much, canon-typical violence.

There is an absolute shitton of dialogue in this chapter. I don't know why I write so much dialogue when it is one of the weakest parts of my writing. T-T.

A chapter released ~two weeks instead of a month? I'm on some demon time fr. (I am slow). It's like 2 am in the morning lmao.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They ended up all traveling to meet the Dark Enchantress together. Dark Choco, as it turns out, had come back because their mistress had telepathically called for him several times. Pure Vanilla wished to avoid her but refused to let the prince go alone. Licorice and Strawberry Crepe naturally tagged along.

As they filtered into the meeting room, they were met with the sight of the Dark Enchantress and Pomegranate together. She stepped away from their master and stood to her side, the image of dignified subservience.

“You’re late, Dark Choco cookie,” the sorceress hummed.

The prince knelt before her “I am, but I have a genuine reason for the delay.”

Their master quirked an eyebrow. “Do you? Let’s hear it, then. I shall decide whether your excuse has any weight.”

“While at the Cake Tower, I had touched the white remains of a large creature without knowing that it contained cursed energy. It had interfered with my mental enchantments somehow and rendered me incredibly sick for a period of time. I had traveled back once I recovered enough for the journey, but only barely. That’s why your summons went unanswered for so long.” He breathed deeply. “Red Velvet can vouch for this.”

Using the general’s name was a smart choice, despite the hybrid being absent from the meeting. It made him appear credible, mostly because Red Velvet was the type who wouldn’t dare lie to his mother.

“I had another bout of sickness while arriving and dropped my sword onto the teleporter, shattering it. Therefore, I could not reach the kingdom until Healer’s party arrived and brought me up with them.”

Dark Choco had definitely lied about the teleporter in some manner, but it was a small lie not worth confronting him about, so Pure Vanilla had let it be. He certainly wouldn’t bring it up in front of the Dark Enchantress.

“So you had grazed the witches’ bones somehow,” the sorceress commented. “The trace of lingering curses on them could viably react to the enchantments. That must be what caused the sickness. The presence of my magic in your body likely amplified that effect since you failed to

recognize the cursed magic as foreign. Yes, that's a possibility. I will not hold you at fault for being ill."

The prince exhaled in audible relief.

"However; touching strange remains in the first place, as well as breaking a useful implement, both demonstrate a lack of caution and common sense. You have been a great inconvenience as a result, so corrective behavior must be enforced."

"I will take care of it, Mistress." The priestess held up her mirror, ready to administer punishment.

"No."

She stopped, puzzled by the change in routine.

"You are not to touch him. In fact," she addressed all of them, "None of the cookies of darkness are henceforth allowed to harm Dark Choco in any fashion."

Everyone was shocked by the order.

Licorice and Strawberry Crepe started furiously whispering among themselves. Pomegranate grit her teeth and slinked back to her master's side. Dark Choco was the most stunned out of everyone, and it seemed like he was at a loss now that the normal proceedings had been tossed to the wind.

He gave the healer a questioning glance.

Pure Vanilla nodded. This was his doing.

"Settle down now," the Dark Enchantress said, "just because he is exempt from my priestess's thrall doesn't mean his foolish actions should go unpunished- only that someone else must carry it out."

He suddenly felt cold. Did he miss something? He had intended the vow to encompass every single cookie of darkness, including her. She couldn't have brought a new member, right? Pure Vanilla didn't know. What on Earthbread was she planning to do?

"Pomegranate cookie, I require your counsel." The priestess's attention shifted to her master. "If I wanted something, truly wanted it, but that thing served no purpose other than that of my own pleasure, should I take it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you are referring to, mistress."

"Take it as a hypothetical question."

The priestess appeared to think about the problem. "If it is useless, then perhaps resisting the urge is the wiser option."

"Are you telling me that I can't have the things I want, my priestess?"

"...Of course not. I merely advise you to exercise your judgment while coming to a decision."

"Excellent answer, Pomegranate. That's why you're my favorite."

The priestess inclined her head in a show of respect.

The Dark Enchantress laughed shrilly. "I suppose I can do what I desire to my heart's content,

then! Since none of us are capable of touching Dark Choco by magic's decree, someone must take our place. Healer, why don't you do the honors?"

What?

She wanted him to be his new torturer? This came barreling out of left field. There was a chance that he would be unable to carry out the task, but the likelihood of that was...

He sent a stray brush of magic toward the prince.

A cut appeared across Dark Choco's face. He wiped away at the jam that began dripping from his cheek, confused by its sudden existence.

The sorceress noticed this too, an air of satisfaction surrounding her. She had received confirmation that he was excluded from the rule of no harm. Pure Vanilla swore internally. He had failed to factor this into the equation while the vow was cast since he did not exactly consider himself a cookie of darkness, despite claiming so in name. He had never imagined being the one to harm the prince.

"And if I refuse?" he asked, "Will you force me to hurt him, Lily?" If the Dark Enchantress commanded him as she would a servant, then the terms may view him as one of hers and protect Dark Choco from him too. It was a gamble with a prospect of success. Hopefully calling her by name would enrage her enough to use him in this way.

"What nerve-! Fine, I order..."

...

A thin smile cut across her face. "hmm, but perhaps not. Did you really think that would work?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I've always been the cunning one among us, so leave that role to me. You aren't good at playing trickster." The statement, though true, was filled with condescension.

She had seen through his goading.

"It is unacceptable to have a follower that can't be kept in line. If you choose not to discipline Dark Choco, then I will simply remove him from our forces. He will be exiled from the castle and made to wander forever. It's just such a shame that his curse is so powerful- his enchantments will degrade without maintenance, and he'll be lost to insanity." She sighed. "It would be a waste of a bargaining chip."

Pure Vanilla wilted in defeat. Spells often need reinforcement, so that couldn't be deemed a blatant lie. He had been backed into a corner.

"Is there anything else I could do?"

The Dark Enchantress hesitated.

"No. Those are the only choices before you."

The healer quickly thought about how to proceed. Despite the bad spot he had been placed in, he could still salvage their situation. Since he could deal with Dark Choco directly, that gave him some ability to steer what happens. He may be able to get them out of the meeting without hurting

the prince too badly.

Dark Choco spoke up. "Healer, are you-

Something broke him from his calculations.

A sliver of light glanced in his peripheral. His staff trembled. From beside the sorceress, Pomegranate flashed her mirror in his direction.

He experienced the sensation of being pulled like taffy, his staff fizzing out of his reality.

The healer blinked, suddenly standing in his old garden. It was similar to his sanctuary before the Dark Enchantress had attacked, but not exactly. The architecture was clean and unbroken, but the place lacked the floral variety that he had so lovingly cultivated. Spread all around, the uniform color of daisies fluttered around his legs, interrupted by the sharp petals of a single lily.

It took him a moment to realize that he could see with his eyes- despite being blind his whole life. That was a strange feeling. He had spent so long being able to move that flower that having one fixed point of view made him a bit off-kilter. Despite his altered senses, the garden felt more homely than his castle had ever been, and Pure Vanilla could recognize what this landscape was.

He bent down and gently pulled one of the daisies from the soil, keeping its roots intact. "So this is my mind...I quite like it. Why did you call me here?"

The priestess shuffled into view, looking annoyed by the flowers that impeded her steps.

"Things have been quite unpredictable as of late, Pure Vanilla."

So she knew who he was from the very beginning. That wasn't surprising- he had assumed as much.

"And who is to blame?"

She glared at him. "I would think it's obvious."

"No one can claim that I am acting out of character, they don't know me enough. The same cannot be said for the Dark Enchantress. If you want me gone-"

"I don't care a whit about your presence," she interrupted. "But master cannot be tempted to lose sight of her ultimate goal, the death of the witches."

Seeking to kill the gods? How blasphemous. And yet, hadn't she already shown that it was possible? Pure Vanilla remembered the cursed bones and their nauseating aura. And the role the priestess plays in this...

"I have heard that the pomegranate tribe's best and brightest produced seers. Is this true?"

Pomegranate tolerated the inquiry. "It is no mere rumor. The village values its priestesses, for a single cookie out of a hundred has the talent to become a seer. I was one such talent- the brightest they had. This is why Mistress keeps me so close."

"You must have been dear to the village."

She did not react.

"I had traveled to the pomegranate forest once. We had gone on an expedition to cure some sick

cookies after their water supply had been poisoned. But it was such a peculiar incident. The thing about using a river as a water supply, especially a river with a strong current like the village had- poison would simply flow downstream. Natural contamination would be pushed out and diseased corpses would be swept away. When contamination stays in flowing water long enough to make a whole village ill, it is more often than not by the influence of a person.” Pure Vanilla tilted his head in faux contemplation. “You’d think that with an active seer, they could have foreseen the possibility.”

The priestess stilled.

“Did you believe I wouldn’t recognize you as well, Pomegranate cookie?”

Of course, he did not memorize every cookie that he had ever come across, but the circumstances around the expedition had always felt a little strange to him. Pomegranate was also the youngest priestess in the village, and though she only made a meager appearance during their expedition, she was vaguely memorable. He did not know whether she had already become a seer when they had visited, so the implication was a bluff on his part.

He had recalled her at his initiation meeting, though he kept from showing any indication of it. The healer had put several puzzle pieces together at her presence- it was a part of the reason he disliked her, beyond doing so for Dark Choco’s sake.

“What was the point of that whole speal?” she asked. “First off, my powers do not provide an umbrella of omniscience. Second, you are implying that I poisoned the water, which is pure speculation. And even if I were to have done it- at the time, I was still a member of the village. What could I have wanted, to cripple my own people? What motive could I have?”

“The creation of Dark Enchantress.”

For a second, she appeared almost shocked. Then she started giggling. “Ha...Haha,” The priestess laughed, as though the notion was ridiculous. “I would not go as far as to say that I played no part in my master’s ascension, but ultimately, my interference is immaterial. I am but a pawn in the wake of her majesty.”

“Immaterial? You had led us all the way to the cake tower, by which she had disappeared. That is more than mere meddling.”

“The Dark Enchantress was bound to exist by the decree of fate itself. I had only expedited the process to my benefit.”

Pure Vanilla pondered the assertion in a guarded manner. This was another facet of her powers, no doubt. If she had scribed the Dark Enchantress’s arrival, then perhaps she believed the event to be set in stone.

“Ah, but I have gotten off track,” she said. “My reason for bringing us to this mindscape is this: I wish to convince you that I am not an enemy, at least within the castle.”

“Of everyone in the castle, I am closest to my master- her right-hand woman, so to speak. She may disregard the other cookies’ opinions, but she will consider mine.” She seemed to preen at her declaration. “Just because our master treats you differently than the other cookies does not mean she still does give you due respect. If you listen to me, I can tell you what to say and how to act. I can teach you how to guide her actions.”

Those were not the words of a servile retainer. If anything, it sounded like Pomegranate wanted

him to manipulate her master.

“Everything will be easier if you just stop resisting against master’s direct will. Heed my words, your life as a member of the cookies of darkness will become easier.” She reached out to him, palms upturned. “I’ll even keep the Dark Enchantress from targeting that prince you treasure so dearly.”

Heed my words. Listen to me.

Obey me.

Pure Vanilla had a moment of clarity. This was her means of influence. In the same way that Licorice needed knowledge, Pomegranate sought control.

With that fact in mind, her offer was rather generous. Despite being a cookie that valued control, she had offered to let him have a part of her sway over her master. She was meeting him midway, going as far as to give him a choice of declining.

“So how about it, Pure Vanilla cookie?”

Even so, he did not want to obey Pomegranate. He wanted to keep his autonomy out of the hands of a cookie responsible for torturing Chocoling and causing the rise of the Dark Enchantress. If he were to manipulate someone, it would not be on her terms.

“I do apologize for rejecting the proposition.”

She sneered. “You are in no position to disagree with my offer, but so be it. You had best give her the show of a lifetime.”

“I intend to,” he responded.

The garden crumbled into darkness around him, bright blue sky melting into the cracked walls of his castle. The world resumed and the other cookies were none the wiser. The entire exchange they had took place within a fraction of a second.

-going to go through with this?” Dark Choco finished his question.

Pure Vanilla gave him a severe frown. The prince faltered at the uncharacteristic emotion.

If they needed a show, then he would provide one.

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Dark Choco, still on his knees, watched as Pure Vanilla advanced toward him.

The warrior wasn’t sure how to get out of this situation. It was evident that the healer had tried to help him earlier, but the Dark Enchantress had forced him into taking Pomegranate’s place. He wasn’t even sure if the soft-hearted cookie would even be able to harm him.

He stopped in front of him, hair forming a curtain to shield his expression. Dark Choco paused, expecting him to say that there was a way out or refuse to do this.

The healer shoved him.

He fell backward onto his elbows, unsure how to process what was going on. Pure Vanilla wouldn’t go through with this, right? He had promised to protect him. “Healer, what-”

He raised a foot and stomped on his throat.

Dark Choco gurgled, instinctively twisting to the side to protect himself. He threw an arm over himself, sensation only registering a second later.

*Huh? It barely hurt.*

A blow to the throat, even by a lighter cookie like Pure Vanilla, would cause substantial disorientation. It was one of many vulnerable areas on the body where getting struck would make an impact even if the attack was weak. But the effect was smaller than it should have been.

“Why did you have to be here?” the healer asked, sounding some mixture of angry and distressed.

He did not have time to speak before the living staff jabbed him in the liver. Once again, he felt a fraction of the pain he could have.

It wasn't due to his strength. Strength had no direct connection to the visceral reaction of being hit in a vital area. Pure Vanilla must be the one limiting his blows.

“I tried for so long to escape the confines of the responsibility forced upon me. I hid my identity. No one was supposed to know who I am, and I would finally be free. But then you asked me to help, Dark Choco. I don't want to help but I can't say no.”

The emotion that he expressed seemed real. Dark Choco almost wanted to apologize, but he wasn't sure what he would be apologizing for.

“And now I have to take care of you. This really isn't fair.”

Another kick.

Pure Vanilla wasn't trying to hurt him at all. He was simply putting on an act for the others watching. That must be why he was targeting these specific points- to get a genuine reaction out of him while he hadn't figured out what was going on.

“This is not my fault. They're forcing me to hurt you, so don't get mad at me.”

How brilliant! If he wanted a show, then he'll gladly play along. He's had plenty of practice screaming.

The next time he struck him, Dark Choco let out a cry. The healer faltered for a moment, but appeared to get the signal that he was on board. Circles of scarlet magic surrounded him.

He made sure to express the pain that had been inflicted on him for all these years.

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Dark Choco sat back while the healer fussed, in an inordinately good mood.

“You've already checked me over twice. At this point, I am in better health than I was before the meeting.”

“But what if I overlooked something? I have to fix everything- I never wanted to resort to hurting you.”

“You're more upset than I am, and I was the one getting beaten up,” he said, amused. “Lay off, Pure Vanilla. I'm okay.”

The healer was reluctant to stop searching but relented since he asked. “I still find it a poor solution.”

He had come up with the idea on the spot and dragged the prince into acting with him, and somehow, the Dark enchantress bought it. He had hoped, but not expected, to fool her. Perhaps she had been swayed by Dark Choco’s screams. If Pure Vanilla hadn’t been the one guiding the spells, he would have believed they were real.

He was also surprised that the Institute group had been let go without reporting. The Dark Enchantress had already achieved her goal of making him understand the horrors that plagued the school, and he was certain that making him carry out the prince’s punishment was her way of getting back at him for cutting communications. She had no more use for his presence afterward, which let him get away with dragging Dark Choco away from the meeting hall uninterrupted.

If her maneuvering had gone as intended, it would have been a very effective punishment for both of them. He already felt guilty about the whole situation, and most of it was faked.

“Maybe there’s a better way, but it’s infinitely preferable to what Pomegranate does. That was probably more emotionally than physically damaging anyway.” he quipped.

“I only said the first thing that entered my mind, as a part of the act.”

“So does that mean what you said wasn’t genuine?”

He winced. “I have had some thoughts like that- but I don’t resent you!” he quickly reassured. “It’s more of...near the very end of the Vanillan kingdom, I loathed being the king. The identity of “Pure Vanilla” is so entrenched in my kingship, that people associate responsibility with me automatically. It has no relation to you.”

The prince deflated, happy to be absolved of the notion of being an unwanted burden. “I’m relieved to hear that. Thanks for entrusting me with this information.”

“Has this changed your opinion of me?”

He scratched his head. “Not exactly- I suppose it is a bit strange to hear about those struggles, but it makes you feel like more of an ordinary cookie. I only find you to be mildly questionable, now.”

“More like an ordinary cookie? As if I’m some kind of idol? I’m deeply offended, Chocoling. If it takes my faults to make me a person in your eyes, I’ll have you know that I’ve recently buried enough people to fill a town square.”

“How morbid. You’ve dropped back to moderately questionable”

The healer giggled, feeling a weight lift from his shoulders.

It had been a long week.

Something outside shuffled.

Pure Vanilla pointed behind them and jerked a finger. The door slammed open, Licorice and Strawberry Crepe falling to the ground now they had nothing to lean on.

“What the hell,” Dark Choco muttered. He was starting to get annoyed at people listening in.

Strawberry Crepe pulled themselves up, brimming with smugness. “See? See?! I told you he was

fine.”

“Yes, that’s abundantly clear now,” Licorice said.

“What reason do you have to eavesdrop?” The prince asked curtly. “I can’t imagine it’s care for my well-being,”

Crepe crossed their arms and pouted. “We’re here because Licorice has zero trust in anybody and he believed that my liege actually hurt you. He would never do something so horrible!”

“Hey, can you blame me? Healer had-”

“He had what?”

“Nothing,” the reaper replied.

“You two have your proof, now leave. Speak of this to anyone else and I’ll kill you, Licorice.”

“Dark Choco,” the healer chided.

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. I’m not welcome here,” the reaper huffed. “Don’t expect to catch me being concerned ever again.”

They left abruptly afterward.

“What should we do about them?” Dark Choco asked.

“I doubt they’ll confess to the Dark Enchantress, so we should leave them. But even if they keep this secret, it does not change our plight.”

The prince gave a sign for him to explain.

“If I am being frank, I had not expected our act to fool the Dark Enchantress. We may have encountered a stroke of luck this time, but we can’t pretend indefinitely. We’ll be caught. Every day we can avoid her wrath is a tick down on a timer. I think we should start working on a way to dispel your curse, so you would be free to leave the cookies of darkness before the inevitable occurs”

“I want nothing more,” the prince spoke desperately.

“Then we can commence planning.” He paused. “But first, I would like to take a shower.”

Pure Vanilla dashed away, finally having a chance to get rid of his bloody robes. The jam would permanently stain if he left it for too much longer, so time was of the essence. He took an overly long shower, using the opportunity to thoroughly wash away the grime, as though it would cleanse him of his mistakes.

The prince sat in his room and honed the steel of his sword, relieving stress by letting everything fall away but the rough sound of a whetstone.

He came back to the world as the healer entered looking much more comfortable, holding a notebook and pen. He sat across from him on the bed, ready to begin tackling the problem.

“If we want to dispel your curse, it would be nice to find a starting place. Do you happen to know the nature of your curse? Who created it? It would be helpful if the spell is cookie-originated. If we can find the source, then I may be able to reverse-engineer it based on their other works. If you

know the approximate circle of the Dark Enchantress's counter that would also be useful."

The prince looked utterly lost.

"...anything at all?"

"Just assume that I have no clue about anything so technical." Dark Choco said, mildly embarrassed at his lack of knowledge. "I could tell you about some observations I gathered after years of using the sword, though."

"That would be wonderful." The healer opened his empty notebook, ready to jot down information.

"Hey, isn't that Licorice's journal?"

"He has plenty of empty ones. If he minds, then I'll pay him back for it."

"Hmm, how unpleasant." Pure Vanilla looked up at him, but the prince waved it away. "But no matter."

The warrior began to list his observations. "Most of the curse is centered around the sword, I think. It gives me incredible power- almost equivalent to my father's despite his being far heavier. I had found it in a cave beyond the forest, but there were several mint bones nearby, so I am not sure if the cave was its origin point. One of them could have been the wielder's." he shivered slightly, as though imagining himself in their place.

"Since the moment I picked it up, these whispers have infiltrated my mind. They are a rather malignant thing. I would be training and the sword would tell me to stab myself or hunt down one of the others, and I would have to physically not act upon them."

"Do they behave like intrusive thoughts, then?"

"Haven't thought about it like that, but I guess so. The thoughts are from an outside source and not of my conception, but don't seem to be any less damaging for it. I've only given into the voices once."

"What happened?"

The prince shrugged. "The reason I'm here now. Exile."

"It sounds like the curse is directly tied to the physical sword then, so it may become weaker depending on your distance from it. Have you ever attempted to let go of the strawberry blade?"

"I have wanted to on occasion, but I don't have enough willpower."

What a strangely brazen assertion of his weakness.

"Dark Choco, if you decide to leave the curse behind right now, I will guarantee your acceptance back into the Cacao kingdom."

"Why make a promise like that? It won't happen. No matter what you say, my father does not love me enough to take me back."

Pure Vanilla set down his pen. Even discounting that incredibly sad assertion, something was definitely off. Why wasn't he even considering an attempt? From what the prince had said thus far, being exiled from the kingdom (or at least joining from the cookies of darkness) was a great regret.

“There may be a mental component to the curse. The whispers that drive you towards insanity are compounded with a compulsion to either possess or protect the sword,” he ventured, awaiting his response.

“Protect? No, that’s absurd. A simple sword does not warrant any kind of protection. I can’t bear to part with it because I have always wanted power. It’s a personal moral failure of mine, not due to the influence of a curse. My mind is still my own.”

“Then would you sacrifice me for power?” Pure Vanilla, despite their mediocre familiarity, likely shouldn’t be worth more to the prince than his father. He was doubting the strength of that relationship more than ever, but the other seems to be focusing his negativity on himself rather than Cacao.

“Of course not!” he vehemently denied.

Refusing to give up the sword would mean losing free passage back to his kingdom. How could the prince not trade him for power but reject his home at the same time?

That does not fit with Pure Vanilla’s image of the prince. He could be hanging onto the sword if he feels like he had sacrificed so much for it or felt as though he had nothing left but his strength, but his answers were enough to bother the healer. Spells that affect someone’s mental state, whether they block memories or twist thoughts, can result in these small disconnects between a cookie’s personality and actions.

He could try and force the prince to choose between his protection and the blade, but that may be pushing it too far. There was a more direct route.

“Dark Choco, may I have permission to test a theory?”

“Test...? Alright then, do what you have to.”

He would attack the curse at its source and see if that causes any reaction in him. The strawberry jam sword slipped from its sheath, floating up as Pure Vanilla levitated it away from its host.

Break!

Forceful magic twisted around the sword, pushing down upon the metal. The teeth in its rain guard gnashed together, what appeared to be actual jam dripping from it.

Dark Choco grabbed Pure Vanilla and slammed him into the wall, cracks spidering from the point of impact.

The act was more violent than he had expected, but he had been prepared. The healer released his magic and the sword fell onto the ground. The prince returned to himself, blinking away the haze. He registered their position with abject horror.

“B- believe me now?” he whispered.

Dark Choco released his grip on his neck, gently placing the healer back on the ground with shaking hands.

He erased his bruises with a quick healing spell. “Protection. That’s rather troublesome.” The notebook flew back into Pure Vanilla’s grasp and he jotted down his observation.

“Pure Vanilla...”

“Hmm?”

“There was no need for testing the sword if you expected such an outcome.”

“But I haven’t been injured.” he did a twirl, showing that even his robes have barely been scraped.

“That doesn't make it better!”

‘You’re more upset than I am, and I’m the one who got beat up,’ he quoted the prince.

He scowled. “You’ve made your point. Please don’t do something that would get you hurt.”

“I’ll give an advanced warning should I try something similar.”

Dark Choco was unhappy at the implication he would steer himself into harm but appeared to grudgingly accept that this was as much as he could hope for.

The healer, meanwhile, had figured out his next goal. With the mental compulsions on Dark Choco and the blade’s physical resistance to magic on top of that, he knew that the strawberry sword must be the curse’s vessel. It would not require such a level of protection otherwise. Therefore, all he needed to get rid of the curse was to destroy the sword, though it may be easier said than done.

“Also, are you able to use magic to look at my mind? If the curse is affecting my thoughts, then that’s what I’m most worried about. Can that be fixed?”

“This is outside my area of expertise, but I’ll try.”

Pure Vanilla touched him, magic swirling around until he could find the curse winding around the prince. He focused specifically near his head, where it was the strongest. He attempted to find Dark Choco, but could only sense layers of unfolding string, like a giant, three-dimensional web. As his magic moved closer, the strings undulated like a living organism, seeking to trap him inside Dark Choco’s mind.

It would behoove him to avoid getting too close. Pure Vanilla released the spell.

“So what’s the prognosis?”

“Unfortunately, I do not have to capability to fix that.”

“Damn.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to leave a kudos or comment! I would greatly appreciate it.

Next chapter: some cursed sword hijinks, with a small feature from Strawberry Crepe

Me during this chapter: ehehe, big brain time! Way too many explanations! Totally unnecessary magic system building! Also, let me explain some possibly overly ooc things. Dark Choco is only this chatty because he's talking to PV. Also, it may seem strange for PV to be so against having responsibility, but for him, the meaning of the word is more akin to something else

Pure Vanilla/Dark Choco: Interpretable Acts

Chapter Notes

TW: child neglect

Chapter with very few dialogue lines to make up for the last one. This one's shorter too, ~4000 words.

This fic is very character-study-oriented, and I hope that not too many people dislike that. My next book will have more things happening ^^;

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The new day gave rise to blue skies and a clean-smelling breeze. Pure Vanilla pinched Dark Choco from his training and took him outside the castle. He gave him a brief overview of how he planned to approach the sword.

He would try to destroy the sword through physical means, and if that fails, then he would start working on it with magic. From his attempt yesterday, he had the feeling that simple destructive magic would not suffice. This may sound counterintuitive considering that Pure Vanilla was a strong mage, but using a spell would be like finding the right key to a lock, whereas using physical means was more akin to breaking the door. At least, that was how he explained it to the prince.

They were walking to the broken teleporter, where Pure Vanilla would conduct his test.

For some reason, Pomegranate had followed them.

He tolerated her since she was not capable of doing anything to Dark Choco. She may have hinted at manipulating her master in his mindscape but she did consider the dark Enchantress her superior, and the vow would keep her in line.

There was no way she didn't notice their discontent, but trailed behind them regardless.

Pure Vanilla ignored her and Dark Choco copied his example. If she ratted their activities to the Dark Enchantress, he will reveal her offer. The priestess had, perhaps intentionally, given him significant leverage over her.

They reached the site of the teleporter and passed it, advancing until they were at the end of the city, where the cloud cover turned to empty air. The healer held his staff over the edge, checking the land below.

"Dark Choco, can you see if there's anything under us?"

He looked over. "Only dead trees and ash. Other than the village a while away, there's not a living thing in sight."

"That fool's standing so close he'll pitch himself off the edge," Pomegranate said.

The prince moodily took a few steps backward.

“Alright, then. Let me have the sword.” Dark Choco placed the sheathed sword on the ground so he could take it. The healer pulled the sword from its sheath. He stumbled a bit under the weight before righting it, slowly walking to the cloud’s end. Dark Choco seemed to realize just what he was going to do before he let go, going to grab his sword in protest. He wasn’t able to reach him.

Pure Vanilla dropped it over the edge.

Dark Choco lunged after it but magical ropes bound his feet and he fell face-first into the cloud. The prince tried to rise and more ropes wrapped around him, tethering him to the clouds and pavement. His struggling continued although he would not be able to get to the sword from the cracked teleporter. Pomegranate watched the whole affair with something approaching mirth.

Pure Vanilla tracked the sword as it became a mere toothpick, then disappeared entirely. A small *clang* reached the trio, and Dark Choco made a muffled scream of frustration, writhing helplessly in his bindings.

He hoped the ropes weren’t too tight, but he was afraid that the prince would do something rash without them. He descended onto the ashen land and quickly found the sword. Despite falling from the clouds onto what sounded like a hard surface, it didn’t even have a scratch.

He didn’t expect it to be that easy but was disappointed nonetheless.

The healer returned to the clouds to find Pomegranate crouching beside the prince. She had her mirror held in front of him and he was attempting to be wriggling away from her. He grabbed her hand holding the mirror. “What are you doing?”

Pomegranate wrenched it away. “I am simply seeing if I can use my powers on him. If that alarms you, then you’ll be glad to hear I cannot.”

“You assume correctly.” He positioned himself between them. “In fact, I would prefer if you do not accompany us at all.”

“If my presence is really so repulsive to you, then I shall take my leave. I loathe to stay where I am unwanted. Good luck with these futile endeavors.” She began walking away, but stopped to get the final word. “Oh, and Pure Vanilla?”

The healer turned to her direct address.

She flashed her mirror. There was another wave of darkness and a garden of flowers, another message solely for him.

“Don’t stay in the kingdom tonight.”

Having said her part, she swept away in a flurry of robes, leaving the healer to ponder over her command.

Pure Vanilla dispelled the bindings and Dark Choco surged to his feet, taking the (retrieved) sword from him. The prince meticulously checked it for damage while the healer figured out how to proceed.

Originally he would have called it a wrap and gone to hang out with one of the other cookies of darkness, but he would have to change his plans if he wanted to be far from the castle. It may be a sign of old age, but he did not want to be able around too much in the darkness. But whether he should listen to her was the true question.

Why would she want him away from the castle?

His first thought was that something sinister must be brewing that she wanted to keep from him, but soon discarded that notion. Pomegranate had offered him a deal, and although he could think of a myriad of hypotheticals, both positive and negative, Pure Vanilla had no information about what could have prompted this. He had to base the decision on her request alone. He wanted to view people in the best possible light, but that can be too idealistic sometimes. On top of that, the priestess was difficult to read in her intentions toward him.

He decided that he would be alright with avoiding the castle, as long as the person he was most worried about stayed with him. He and Dark Choco will go to the forests and use the opportunity to test Strawberry Jam sword further.

Meanwhile, the prince was coming to his own conclusions. "I had no way of getting to the sword, but I kept trying to get to it anyway. If not for the ropes, I may have jumped."

Pure Vanilla was going to keep a closer watch on him. The thought of the prince dying to satisfy the whims of his curse was chilling.

"I need the power this sword brings and can't imagine lacking it- but that may be the curse's protection. Even if I actively oppose you, please know that I want to be rid of my curse."

"I understand." The prince was actively telling him the specifications of the curse and how it affected his behavior. It must be odd, to treasure something that he actively knows is harming him yet creating affection for itself simultaneously. The affection may be manufactured but it still feels real, and the prince knew it.

He did not go into that trance-like state and directly attack the healer this time, which was a curious difference. That could be attributed to the indirect way that Pure Vanilla had gone about texting the sword's physical endurance.

"We can try the next test, but this one will take longer to prepare- so gather what we need for a night of camping."

The healer sent Dark Choco to collect matches, a pestle, and blankets for the both of them. The prince was confused as he hadn't mentioned anything about this short trip but did as he was told. He gathered a few amenities and they traveled to the forest.

"For this test, we will be doing a bit of chemistry." Pure Vanilla said, uprooting a very gnarly-looking plant. "This is taking me back to my school days...."

He continued to forage for items and Dark Choco followed, unknowing what exactly they were doing.

"Pure Vanilla...why did we leave the castle without informing the Dark Enchantress?" He seemed to immediately remember their interactions and winced at how his question sounded. "I fully get not wanting to see her, but this feels like breaking some kind of rule. What prompted this?"

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"Pomegranate cookie told me to."

So that was the reason for their sudden camping trip. Dark Choco felt vaguely surprised that the healer had listened to her about anything, but he had to admit it was probably for the best. A seer's powers were always useful, even when wielded by someone like her.

“Do you think I made the right decision?” Pure Vanilla asked, conflicted.

“Maybe. Pomegranate is terrible, but she’s also reliable.”

It grated on him that he had to admit that. Of all the cookies of darkness, he despised Pomegranate and Licorice the most. He held a marked apathy for the rest of them, but those two managed to get under his skin like none other. It seemed his uncle was going through the same motions that he was when he had used to when he interacted with the priestess.

It would be easier to dismiss her entirely if she was just some one-dimensional villain, but when one spends so much time in another’s vicinity, it’s hard to view them so simply.

Pomegranate undeniably enjoyed torturing him and Licorice liked to watch, even if the cowardly reaper couldn’t even commit to it without guilt. She liked having power and lorded it over the rest of the cookies of darkness. She was manipulative and her cutting words always left him drained of any positive emotion. By all means, he should have seen her as a devil without any redeeming qualities, and he would have, if not for a few memorable moments.

Once, she had warned him to keep to the right of the road, and he avoided a pit trap. In another instance, she had healed his injuries and cussed him out afterward. She had taken the blame for a failed mission when the Dark Enchantress had been in a particularly bad mood.

These moments had left him reeling, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. He hated the fact that she had helped him because they mixed in with the bad memories and created an image that made him question things. Pomegranate could have done it out of the kindness in her shriveled heart or just to spare one of her master’s pawns. He couldn’t tell. He wanted to see the best in her actions, but if he did, then would that mean she hurt him despite having the capacity to be good? It was a difficult thought to contemplate.

This was not the only time he had been confused by lukewarm memories. He had dealt with them his whole life. After so long, Dark Choco even had a term for it: He called them “interpretable acts”

It always went something like this-

*Dark Cacao would often stand beside his son, despite not speaking to him.*

*He warned the prince from getting hurt, saying that it was to avoid dishonoring his reputation as king.*

*He showed him how to swing a sword.*

Were his actions derived from a place of care, or simply the need to upkeep his image?

Dark Choco trailed behind him, year after year, yearning for that one moment, a single case where he can pinpoint and say *See? My father loves me, and this is definitive proof.* Dark Cacao was not neglectful- he did not run off and disappear into the fog, like those trying to escape the harsh winters of their kingdom and leaving behind families and friends in the process. But as close as he was physically, Dark Choco never made it past the infinite blizzard that appeared to span their distance.

Whether the person was his father or Pomegranate, it frustrated him in the same way. He was just so tired of trying to read between the lines, searching for something that may not even be real. He gave up. If the priestess told him to do something, he would comply. That became the extent of their interactions.



Pure Vanilla waved him over and started enthusiastically talking about the local plant variation while showing him two reeds that looked the exact same. Dark Choco nodded along despite not understanding what was interesting about them or what plants and stones had to do with breaking his curse. He would listen because the healer was the one explaining.

As much as he may joke about not trusting Pure Vanilla, that was no longer true. Dark Choco had given him his full faith back in the cake tower, when he had promised his protection. It may not be that big of a gesture- they were just words after all- but he believed him, and the healer was true to his promise. For someone who has not received any kindness in so long, any bit of it felt like a drop of water in the desert.

The healer was so very expressive in his care for others. Without even knowing, he had given Dark Choco what he always sought. That promise, that hug, had cemented something he had been seeking for so long: A simple confirmation of care that could not be interpreted otherwise.

That was all it took to buy his loyalty.

Childishly, Dark Choco had seen him as the storybook hero after that. Whether he was the princess or the dragon, it did not matter. Pure Vanilla was here and he would give him a resolution. So he let the healer drag him around the forest, collecting miscellaneous items and talking away about meaningless things.

They passed the hours away through purposeful wandering. Dark Choco was happy to follow behind the healer, carrying the growing pile of items while the other harvested things and chattered away. He sometimes chimed in with a remark or retort, speaking more than he had in who knows how long.

Night fell and they set up a small fireplace. Dark Choco sat close to it, enjoying the warmth on his face. The healer lingered some distance away, mashing the collected minerals and plant matter together with a pestle and creating a truly nasty-smelling concoction wafting over. When Dark Choco went to see and craned his neck too close to the mixture, Pure Vanilla pushed the prince away and told him not to touch.

He wasn't upset at the rejection. The prince went back and passed time, waiting for Pure Vanilla to finish his task.

The healer gave his mixture a few extra minutes of grinding, then went to the prince. "Are you sitting in a cozy and relaxed position?" he inquired.

"Yes. Join me," Dark Choco said cheerfully

"Good."

Pure Vanilla put a hand on his shoulder, golden energy settling into him. Dark Choco suddenly realized that he could not move. The healer took the Strawberry Jam sword and stepped back, casting a shield over him.

"Sit tight. I'll return after a while and sit by the fire with you."

He spent the next ten minutes paralyzed under a shield, missing his sword, with Pure Vanilla nowhere to be seen. He would have been there for longer if the shadows of strings started crowding the corners of his vision. They wound around his limbs and lifted the spell around him, the shield fading into nothingness.

He set off running, somehow sure of where he was located. He found Pure Vanilla carefully

observing the sword, remnants of the liquid dripping from its edge. Upon registering his presence, he flew into the air with it so that the prince couldn't get it back

Dark Choco climbed the nearest tree, upset to find that he still couldn't reach him.

"Give me my sword back!" he called.

"I need to clean it first." He cast some purifying spells and then came floated down. Dark Choco took the sword, hurriedly checking it for any damage.

"I had expected you to be gone for longer, but it seems that your curse is adaptive too. Well, no harm done. My tests were pretty much finished anyway." He patted the prince sympathetically. "The Strawberry Jam sword is impervious to acid."

He had slathered his precious sword in acid?!

"Pure Vanilla, I changed my mind," he said faintly, "Don't let me know the next time you conduct a test." With both of the healer's former tests in mind, he was sure that the succeeding attempts would be very focused on his sword's destruction. He may have the compulsion to attack the other again, so it was better to remain ignorant in case that will prevent it.

"You'll know when I have the sword since you never part from it." Dark Choco hadn't thought of that and he felt a bit foolish. "But I won't make myself easy to catch so you don't have to worry about hurting me."

"That's a relief."

They went back to their campsite and Pure Vanilla relighted the dying campfire with a snap. He briefed the other on what he had been doing for the past week and a half since departing from the tower, hiding some personal observations he made about the other cookies and skipping over the Institute's horrors.

Dark Choco found his first interaction with Strawberry Crepe to be funny, though Pure Vanilla failed to see the humor in it (He did, his actions were not thought through). The whole endeavor was quite silly in hindsight, though he was grateful- his blunder and subsequent reveal directly led to Crepe halting the wafflebot patrols.

Now that he thought about it, pretty much half of the cookies of Darkness knew who he was.

"Dark Choco, I think it will be fine if you just referred to me by my actual name in front of others. A majority of the cookies of darkness know who I am: Strawberry Crepe found out and the Dark Enchantress and Pomegranate were always aware. Licorice is trying very hard to find out, though I have limited giving him hints for my own amusement."

Dark Choco decided to keep calling him Healer in front of Licorice out of pure pettiness. Besides that, he noted that Pure Vanilla's list was incomplete, though the healer had no way to know that.

"Actually, Red Velvet is also aware of your identity."

"Oh? Did he overhear us at some point or figure it out by himself?"

"The former. It was the conversation we had after I was sick."

That must have been quite awkward for the prince. He was being vulnerable with Pure Vanilla and definitely would not have wanted a third party to be in earshot.

The healer wasn't sure just how much the hybrid had gotten of that conversation, but evidently, he had been there long enough.

"Did he inform you of that? How did he react?"

"It didn't matter to him- the name Pure Vanilla does not have too much significance in his life. He was more bothered that you two had a recorded history together and used to be enemies. He muttered something about the Dark Enchantress loving you a lot. I think he was jealous."

"Ah..."

Now they were both uncomfortable.

"Let's move on to a better topic," the healer redirected. "What do you wish to talk about?"

The prince, also glad to change the subject, spent a moment determining whether his choice was worth the embarrassment. "...I've always liked to listen to folk tales. You must know many that have been lost to time. If that's not preferable then personal anecdotes are fine too. Since it's you I'm sure some tales fall into both categories." He felt vaguely like a child asking for a bedtime story.

"I would love to share my stories! How about I start with one of my favorites."

He shuffled into a more comfortable position, manipulating the firelight into shapes to accentuate his storytelling. "In the beginning, Earthbread was devoid of life except for the raging elements, pure consciousness in forms like water and fire. They fought among each other, existing in a state of discord until one specific element offered an idea- to work together to make this inhospitable world a flourishing place. This element, who loved all living things, currently goes by the title of The Millennial Tree..."

Dark Choco listened to the stories with rapt attention as Pure Vanilla told his tales, asking for more whenever he finished a story. This went on until the moon was high in the dark sky.

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It had been a week since the sendoff.

Their liege was not present at the castle, but Strawberry Crepe wasn't delaying this for him. They had made a pact for one week and he was not overstepping that.

The broken teleporter would not hinder the wafflebot from coming to the kingdom in the clouds. It would only stall its arrival for a few minutes. Crepe opened their garage in preparation for its arrival and pulled out some tools in case it needed fixing. Despite Pure Vanilla's assurances, they did not expect their bot to return completely intact. The guardian of the village was quite brutal and they had to discard several models that they had mauled beyond repair.

The lancer appeared according to its program, still draped in the healer's old ratty robes. Strawberry Crepe scrunched up their nose at it. Even if it did serve as an object of recognition to the villagers, that old thing needed to go. If cloth could rot then those robes were certainly close to doing so.

The bot looked fine and was able to move about. That was good but didn't say too much about its state- these machines had been built to last, and anything less than decimation wouldn't stop them from following protocol.

They threw off the old cloth. Under the robes, the bot was as unmarked as the day they had sent it, except for a single bandage surrounded by scribbles. They peeled it off to reveal a long, familiar cut. It was the village guardian's attack style- they had become intimately familiar with those cuts after many months of repair.

The bandage didn't do anything, but there was an effort. A few encouraging words and drawings had been inscribed onto and beside it, like one would on a cast. Strawberry Crepe traced a small sketch of the bot, surrounded by ashy. *Get Better soon!*

No circuitry had been damaged, so all they had to do was solder and reinforce the cut with waffle. After a second of consideration, they took some tape and layered the edges, so the drawings would be untouched.

"They treated you nicely, huh? And I thought that Pure Vanilla was being ridiculous."

They had promised that a single cut upon the bot would spell the village's doom. But this...there was acceptance and forgiveness in that bandage. They could imagine what happened- the guardian must have attacked before realizing who the robe belonged to, then pulled back once they did. Multiple cookies must have patched it up afterward, judging from the different styles of writing on the bot.

They had no way of knowing that this specific bot would go back since it did not follow patrols like the rest. They could have done anything they wanted to it. They could have carried out (admittedly) warranted revenge and Crepe would have retaliated, but the only cut on the bot was most likely accidental.

They should get to work on including video and different kinds of calls.

Strawberry Crepe wouldn't immediately meet the villagers face to face because they had been nice to a single bot, but they had to admit that they weren't as much as hostile as they had initially treated them. They would watch them, and if that goes smoothly, then communication would be on the table.

Chapter End Notes

Neither DE nor Cacao are good parents, but they fail in different ways.

Up until now, the relationships between the cookies of darkness had been tense but still easily resolved. The Pom/Choco/Licorice triad, though? That's not going down easy. They all have reason to loath the shit out of each other. I'm so excited, ahaha. Also, we are coming closer to the first scene I envisioned while making this fic :)

Pure Vanilla/Dark Enchantress: Sweet!

Chapter Notes

MAJOR WARNING: This chapter will be one of the worst in the fic regarding triggering content. Note the tags on this fic, please. Proceed with caution and please take care of yourselves. Explicit list: non-con cannibalism, mild body horror/blood/gore, hint to suicidal ideation, and some kind of religious trauma (unsure definition)

Also, my ao3 account has hit 200k words. Yippee!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He fell into somewhat of a routine after that.

Despite serving an evil sorceress, the cookies of darkness had plenty of free time outside of their master's direct orders. Apart from missions, everyone just split up and went about their own business. Strawberry Crepe fixed their bots and kept cracking at the Goliath. Licorice holed in his room to read in the darkness. Dark Choco trained, ate, and slept. Red Velvet stayed at the tower with his dogs.

Pure Vanilla put somewhat of a dent in their pre-set schedules.

He spent a pre-portioned amount of time every day stealing the Strawberry Jam sword and putting it in a variety of circumstances, physical and magical, that would make any bladesmith cry in agony. The prince, compelled by his spell, would expend significant amounts of effort chasing after him.

He would initially tie him up or use a sleeping spell, but the curse quickly became acclimated to these methods and he would be up and raring to reclaim the sword within minutes. It wasn't difficult to keep him at bay, though, Pure Vanilla just had to prepare something new with each attempt.

The ways that he would keep Dark Choco from chasing after him have morphed from genuinely blocking his niece to finding the most creative way he can mess with him. These tricks have ranged from reversing his sense of direction to sitting on top of a high precipice to giving the poor man a charmed paper full of math problems that would only fade once done.

Minus the math, Dark Choco enjoyed these games as much as Pure Vanilla did, since they both gave the prince some much-needed stimulation and memorable experiences on top of being completely harmless. He also got to spend time with him and was glad for it, which he told the healer so earnestly that he got uncharacteristically flustered.

Wasn't he becoming a bit too attached a bit too quickly?

Pure Vanilla didn't have the heart to do anything about that.

In one sword-related instance, which was now dubbed "the furnace fiasco". Dark Choco had escaped the illusion he had created and managed to wreck the mechanic's furnace in a magnificent

fashion, taking out half the hangar with it. On an unrelated note, they were forced to clean up and cater to the child's whims for the next few days, until the bots fixed up the damage and Crepe found them suitably contrite.

Licorice came along to snipe at everyone involved and lord their blunder over Dark Choco. The healer, finding his behavior distasteful, stood there and regarded him in disappointment until he squirmed guiltily and joined the clean-up. The two continued this mutual antagonization over his head, feeding into whatever emotional brew they had so callously spent years concocting.

Pure Vanilla let them stew. As much as he disliked the tension, he was not going to be the one forcing everyone to make up whatever grievances they had. They were adults and no one was actively harming the other, which sufficed for him.

It turns out that neither was willing to give up the healer's company, instead choosing to make a temporary peace when the three of them were in the same space. He was rather flattered.

After that incident, Licorice would often deliberately seek him out. The healer was half-convinced that he put in so much effort as some kind of competition with the prince, but regardless of his motivations, this resulted in the reaper consistently badgering him to teach him more magic. Pure Vanilla acquiesced to his requests, careful to bypass the darker and more dangerous spells in his arsenal. The reaper was surprisingly gracious despite the avoidance, saying that he was doing him a favor by teaching him anything in the first place.

He even brought along the famous Poison Mushroom to meet him. Their interaction went something like this:

The child waddled up to him and hugged him, instantly proclaiming that he was a friend.

Pure Vanilla asked him why he would think so.

"Because Lico likes you...and Lico does not like many people, even the ones that he should. He is very..." his nose scrunched as he struggled to find the right word "...par-ti-cu-lar."

"That's quite perceptive," he complimented.

Poison Mushroom brightened. "Hehe."

Licorice was not nearly as happy with this conversation as the two newly acquainted cookies. Part of this was because Pure Vanilla had proceeded to eat the shroomie that the child offered him. The healer had recognized its effects and altered it before swallowing, but the other had believed he thoughtlessly poisoned himself and freaked out.

Was it not supposed to be obvious? Beyond the traits of the shroom itself, Poison Mushroom's name gave everything away.

Poison Mushroom didn't see why Licorice was panicking and thought he was being silly.

...and then there were four.

Other than the shroomie-loving child, the rest of the cookies were always vying for his attention, and since there was only one of him, they had to play nice.

Dark Choco, the only other cookie that was self-sufficient in some manner, would aid him in the process of cooking. The prince made it especially clear that he only cooked for Pure Vanilla and not to feed the others, though that was what they ended up accomplishing anyway.

Licorice would start talking about topics that the prince had no idea about and exclude him. Strawberry Crepe would either chime in and dominate the conversation or start complaining until they discussed something else that the child and (by proxy) the prince would understand. Sometimes he would chime in with knowledge and experience that proved unexpected to Licorice, which upset him. The mechanic and reaper would fight often, but never with the same cutting edge that they had previously exhibited.

Crepe had told him that they had stopped patrols. They didn't give him any information beyond that, but Pure Vanilla believed them. The population explosion of wafflebots in the abandoned kingdom was easily noticeable.

He would often tend to his gardens, accompanied by whoever was bored enough to tag along. Het let them do some small chores while he did the brunt of the digging and weeding. The prince had tried to help him in this task as well, but he had the habit of stomping on the shovel to drive it further into the ground, which led to the shovel getting stuck, which led to the prince pulling on the handle with all his might and bending the whole implement like one would a spoon. This, along with a list of other offenses, led to him being banned from anything requiring more skill than watering.

The scene played out like this: Pure Vanilla in the dirt while the other cookie with him sat nearby, not quite wanting to garden too but also feeling like they were an ass for doing nothing. He assured them that this was a hobby, not a chore, so they did not need to accompany him. Then he would return to his maintenance, without a hint of magic. The reaper eventually asked him why he didn't just enchant his daisies to grow.

Licorice was flabbergasted when he revealed that he could not, in fact, cast nature-related spells. "But your staff is a *flower*," he said emphatically. Pure Vanilla laughed and told him that it was a special case.

No one else quite seemed to understand his insistence on not using magic in some way. They were in no place to judge, but had some difficulty conceiving the reason for his inefficient practice.

He first did it for a personal promise, for the reason of creating new life in his castle. With repetition, however, gardening had become something he genuinely enjoyed. This couldn't really be accomplished as using magic would speed up the process by too much, and doing things by hand forced him to be careful with his plants- it was the antithesis of what his kingdom's technology stood for (efficiency and progress) but the healer had always been sure that something taken care of, with love, would grow stronger than an artificial creation. He enjoyed seeing the literal fruits of his labor, and a bed of flowers, though treasured, can be taken care of by or passed onto someone else- it doesn't chain him down.

Pure Vanilla slowly watched his flowers grow, ignoring the building feeling of being dislocated from the world. He was experienced enough to know what it was- it had appeared plenty in the Cacao kingdom and among warrior sects such as the tea knights- but he did not wish to accept it in this twisted version of his once-thriving kingdom. So he kept pushing it off, with the vain hope that maybe the darkness would dissolve.

Pomegranate only appeared when he was alone- Pure Vanilla was certain that she sought him out during those specific periods. She had tried to convince him to her deal on multiple occasions, but ultimately gave up once he didn't budge. Then she just started doing miscellaneous tasks in his vicinity, without saying a word to him.

She did not use her powers on him or even treat him with much hostility, but he still found himself unsettled by her. There was something about Pomegranate that was too insightful, like she could

strip people down to their very souls. Perhaps it was due to her prophetic abilities and mastery of mental magics, but he did not feel too keen to pry into this particular mystery, lest it be turned upon him.

The priestess would disappear after a while, vanishing into the air in ghostly fashion. Pure Vanilla would think nothing more of her, until the next time she visited.

He spent the days working, unaware that someone else was struggling with himself.

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The Dark Enchantress paced her throne room.

If there was a single person on Earthbread that she would listen to, it would be Pomegranate. For as much as she detested the witches, she was glad for her own creation.

From the beginning, her seer had guided her to prosperity. She alone bore the weight of the sorceress's consideration, for there was no doubt in her mind that the priestess had known her in full before the very conception of her identity. She had taken the steps to ensure that the ragged hero and her quiet desperation were freed from the shackles of her past.

*Go, and remember what I've done for you*

Pomegranate had warned against this impulse, and that had been the sole reason she had held off on indulging herself for all these weeks. If Pure Vanilla hadn't been absent the first day after his mission to the Institute, she may not have been able to resist. The Dark Enchantress was slightly grateful for his absence, if only to placate her conscience for her lack of self-control.

But really, why should she deny herself of her temptations? Wasn't the very defining moment of her transformation characterized by her freedom? She had gotten rid of those morals, and done what she wanted without fear of reprobation. Why should this act be any different?

Because it's Pure Vanilla.

White Lily had always been alone. Even as part of a group of students, or among the ancients, she stood adjacent to everyone else. The healer was the only one who consciously tried to include her. He was her special friend, the light of her life- and it wasn't a one-sided obsession on her part. He had clearly reciprocated that friendship.

Yet the sorceress and he were intrinsically different. The other ancients had looked at him the same way- as though he were a light, a moral compass, an idol to strive to be. They built the foundations of their relationships on him, and he accepted that. She didn't understand how he can mingle among people without being haunted by what they had done.

*Don't you feel it too? She had thought. You are hiding just as much as I am. Does it eat away at your heart, having to hide away our dark magic and put on a farce of righteousness?*

She had a hard time discerning this- such was the nature of his mask. Pure Vanilla was skilled at pretending to be okay. That was really all he was good at, in terms of manipulation.

Finally learning about the mental wear that he experienced felt like a weight off her shoulders. She hadn't been the only one cracking under everything. When you think about it, she did him a favor by destroying his kingdom. This was what he had ultimately wanted- the freedom that he lacked that view from the castle, without those little specks moving about the roads, the people he had to protect.



And yet, despite her kindness, Pure Vanilla returned to fight her with all his friends, that little doll alongside him. She had seen it from a distance, the puppet he had created in her image to stand alongside them. No one else was able to tell that it wasn't the real White Lily- it must have taken a great effort to fashion, even for a short while.

Even after the Dark Enchantress had caused so much ruin to his kingdom, he was not able to let her go.

Strangely, the sight of it made her happy. Despite being on opposing sides, she still exerted influence over him. White Lily wished that Pure Vanilla would always be there for her- that he would die with her. She may yet have the chance to grant that wish.

Because no matter how much he wanted to, Pure Vanilla would never leave her. The man may not know it himself, but he had signed over his life to her long before stepping back into this castle.

The Dark Enchantress came to a resolution, leaving the velvet throne. She would take what she wanted, without hesitation. There weren't any great repercussions to an act like this anyway.

She made her way to Pure Vanilla's bedroom. There weren't any chairs around, so she sat on the bed, making sure that she had spells in place so that the frame wouldn't collapse under her. Even in her smaller form, she was just as heavy, the only difference being the density of her body. It was annoying, but her true form wasn't very practical.

After about half an hour, he came back yawning, deep in the warm haze of sloth.

"Oh!" The healer finally saw her. He started to close the door between them, but she cast it back open.

"Hello, Pure Vanilla." She waved him over. "Sit down, I would like to talk about a few matters."

He complied with reluctance.

"Do remember the philosophical discussions we had, back in school?"

"This is an unforeseen avenue of conversation, but I'd be fine to reminisce." There was caution and precious hope in his voice, a sense of fragility present, as though he wasn't sure this situation was real. The Dark Enchantress had previously spoken like she and White Lily were two identities, but broke in the pattern.

"No one quite knew who had created the first cookie. It could have been the elementals, a creature lost to time, or a witch. No matter our origins, witches are the beings who currently create new variations of cookie, for unknown reasons. I had argued for the apathy inherent in all creation-

"And I argued the opposite, naturally," he ventured.

"Naturally," she repeated. "I still don't believe that- no one asks to be born, so they cannot exist by their own will. Animals procreate only through natural instinct. It's apathy- there's no love involved. How can one love a child that does not yet exist?"

"They can love the idea of that child, then the child themselves once they are actually present in the world. I don't see what's apathetic about caring about someone's real or potential family. Besides, animals exhibit protective instincts, too. Most don't just leave their offspring to the elements."

"Then what about the witches' creation, then? Why aren't their actions apathetic?"

“We don’t have any communication with our creators, but I do think that there is some care put into our formation, since no two people are completely identical. Everyone has their place in the world, because they were each created unique. Each has their purpose in the world.”

“Even if that purpose is to be eaten?”

Pure Vanilla tripped over his thoughts. “I- pardon?”

“There are bones scattered around the cake tower, bones of the witches I had killed.” The healer didn’t seem surprised, but then again they were reasonable assumptions he could make from the environment. “I had stumbled upon their feast. They were baking new cookies and cakes, for the sole purpose of eating them. I think unique flavors give the meal a little kick,” she said cruelly. “I was discovered and tossed into a cauldron, and what was left became the Dark Enchantress. It may sound farfetched, but the truth can be a ludicrous thing.”

“Strangely, I do believe you.”

“If you wish for any corroboration, Red Velvet has seen the feast himself, so he can attest to this.”

“Is there another reason for bringing this up?” he inquired. “I doubt you are telling me about the witches for the sake of it.”

“This leads to my true aim for this conversation.” She touched his shoulder and he tensed.

“I am a unique entity, formed because of the witch’s magic. Falling into the boiling pot had unintended consequences.” Lies, all lies, but she could hardly stop now. “Ever since that day, I have had urges, similar to those of our dreadful creators. It wears upon me, how I mirror them, but I have, thus far, chosen not to act upon them. None of the cookies under my care have been harmed in this sense. But I could only hold myself back for so long.”

(Each strand of hair, collected with the utmost care. What little taste they provided was treasured until they dissolved into nothingness.)

Though she may be misdirecting him, they were also interspersed with true secrets. When a part of her claims are proven and the rest have no backing, he would have no choice but to assume the verity of everything that she told him.

The Dark Enchantress had never fully committed the taboo, though she had certainly faced temptation before. Ever since learning about their true purpose, she could not ignore her burgeoning curiosity. Their taste was so precious to the witches, their gods- she wondered, what was this taste they created cookiekind for?

The healer couldn’t help his wariness. “But if you had not eaten a cookie thus far, then doing so isn’t necessary for your survival. I don’t think anyone would consent to being eaten anyway, so couldn’t you just...refrain? I can search for another way to quell your hunger.”

“But Pure Vanilla, I want to.”

The healer suddenly stood up, putting some distance between himself and the sorceress. “Why are you coming to me with this?”

The question was redundant.

“Because we have an unfulfilled vow.”

He took another step back, anger and disbelief warring at her declaration.

The Dark Enchantress paused for a moment, evaluating her emotions. She had expected to feel some shame for mirroring the sins of her creators, but there was nothing. After all the destruction the sorceress had wrought upon the witches for consuming what wasn't even their own kind, she could so shamelessly commit the same atrocity. Such a notion was deeply ironic.

It was indeed wonderful, to be unbound by guilt.

"I really thought you would understand."

"Understand what?" he accused, "that you have fallen into such depravity? Do not expect me to sympathize with cannibalism."

"I'm not asking for sympathy."

She stalked toward him as he backed away, staff held before him defensively. Cold magic swirled around her, and she recognized the spell with a start. It was dark moon magic, the same kind that had sealed her so many years ago. Was he about to start an all-out fight with her?

During the flour war, he may have been able to scrape a win. But as he was currently...

She cast a counter to the spell, circles upon circles canceling each other out, and sent a polearm fork at him.

He raised his left hand to create a shield, but the limb suddenly fell limp. He swore and haphazardly dodged the weapon, the thin needles glancing his side and sending his jam splattering across the door. The weapon followed, turning the wall into rubble and sending a cloud of dust around them.

"Gh-!" With a raise of his staff, he blocked the red flames that she sent toward him, deflecting them into the now-revealed hall. He cast a flurry of blades formed by light at her and the Dark Enchantress retaliated, opening a rift to receive his attack. Pure Vanilla healed his injuries while she dealt with the blades, but his robes were still stained. His useless hand, the one he had vowed upon, hung at his side.

The vow was grinding into motion, correcting their fates to make sure that her claim on him would come to pass.

He drew back as she approached, keen to take the prize she had bartered. He stabbed the sharp end of his staff toward her face and she dodged it more out of habit than anything else. The Dark Enchantress grabbed the flower before he could pull it back. He was a mediocre physical fighter at best, and far, far slower than Dark Cacao.

She pulled the staff lightly, and to her surprise, Pure Vanilla let it go. In that moment of distraction, a spark of orange lit between them, and the sorceress saw the sheen of a shield cover him.

The room exploded, shards of the castle walls spraying out from the tower.

The Dark Enchantress took the blast head-on. The shockwave and debris glanced off of her enchantments, the thin film repelling the rocks and fire. She waved the smoke away. The healer was nowhere to be seen.

What a nuisance. But she felt a strange thrill at his resistance. A prize is always more fun when someone had to work for it.

The Dark Enchantress went into the hall, pausing at the junction. She made a split decision to swerve to the right, seeing the faint traces of scarlet his robes left. She swept down the corridors, trailing after the strings of a spell in the process of being woven.

She had not let any of Pure Vanilla's attacks strike her directly, so he couldn't know about her defensive enchantments. She could almost see his desperate plan unfold before her. Her memory self would have sensed the spell and left through the only exit- the window. Then he would take the chance to cloak himself and wait for her return to take the staff.

And then what? That plan was doomed to fail.

Without his flower, the healer was completely blind. He had to rely on memory alone to move through the castle, so it was natural instinct that he did not run as fast as he could have.

Before he could finish casting them, all his invisibility and cloaking spells were ripped away like paper.

"Ah-!"

She grabbed his hair and jerked him off his feet. He fell to the ground and she pushed his head into the ground. "Game over," she whispered.

Pure Vanilla tried to struggle, but her mass made it impossible. He squirmed fruitlessly, trying to stop her more than flee. "Help...someone help me..." It was so quiet she didn't even think he meant to speak it aloud.

It was utterly pitiful, to her delight.

"No one is coming to help. Do you really want Dark Choco to walk in and see this? Or maybe one of the children?"

"I hate you." He was trembling. Was it from anger or fear?

"That's unfair," she said. "Hypocrite."

He stilled.

It seemed like all the fight had left him. The Dark Enchantress sneered. It felt wonderful to look down upon him. The former king, once clad in beautiful flowing robes, crumpled before her. She reached down, grabbed his face, and pulled it up to hers. He didn't resist. She let go and Pure Vanilla shuffled back from her touch.

After a moment, he got to his feet. It was pointless to try and escape again, and both of them knew it. His hand was able to move again, as if it was mocking him. He held it up to the Dark Enchantress. "Just get on with it."

The prize was within her reach. She took it, studying the meal that she had desired. She brushed his knuckles, studied his nails, and ran her fingers over his palm.

The seeing flower she had tried to avert its gaze, as Pure Vanilla was disturbed by the intimacy of the situation.

She placed the digit into her mouth, running over it with her tongue. She opened her jaw again, and-

Crunch

He tasted even sweeter than she imagined.

She bit them off one by one, taking her time to savor the taste. Pure Vanilla was quiet in the beginning, but could not keep from making sounds of pain as she chewed his bones apart and licked the open wounds.

When the meal had concluded, she released him and he stepped back gracefully. The bleeding nubs on his hand left a drizzle of scarlet on his robes and the ground. She could see him trying to flex his fingers that weren't there.

"What are you doing? Heal yourself. I do not want to see any of my followers in pain."

He cast a warm glow on his injured limb and within a moment, his hand looked good as new. There was nothing that could have suggested he had ever been injured except for the drops of blood around him.

She held out his flower staff. The healer gingerly took it and left without question.

The Dark Enchantress waited before he left to let out a satisfied sigh. Her curiosity and appetite had been sated for now- those little scraps of hair were not able to suffice anymore, and she truly got a taste of her Pure Vanilla.

Pomegranate entered after a minute, and the Dark Enchantress felt a vague hint of regret before sweeping it under the rug. A topic of conversation that appeared whenever she went against the priestess's advice, consistently rehashed, made her confident enough to assume why she was here.

"Master..."

"Have I strayed from the ideal path again? Frankly, I don't see how this could impact your vision negatively."

"...That is not my chief concern. Your health and glory are my utmost priority, and that is exactly why I hope you would keep from playing with him."

"Hmmm." She gestured for her servant to continue.

"Even a man like Pure Vanilla has his limits, master. He will only tolerate so much before giving up on the goal of reaching White Lily."

"He won't run away, Pomegranate. He promised to stay by my side, til death do us part." She noted her servant's look at the words' implications. "Don't make such a disgusted face, we don't have that type of relationship. Pure Vanilla is simply...a bird with clipped wings."

"Yet death is still an avenue of escape."

There were several possibilities that her warning entailed, and the Dark Enchantress liked none of them.

"I will keep that in mind."

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Pure Vanilla walked away, not too panicked. Perhaps he was in a state of shock. He was wandering through the hallways toward the main entrance when he came across Pomegranate. She noticed

him and her facade of unflappable mystique giving away to fear and what seemed to be resignation.

He was struck with the certainty that she knew exactly what happened.

“Pomegranate cookie?”

She froze like a worm caught under a microscope. When he took a step toward her, the priestess made a split-second decision and rushed past him, making sure not to accidentally touch him. She was heading in the direction of her master.

For a moment, he thought to call her, to tell her that it was dangerous. Then the ludicrousness of that declaration caught up with him. Of course the Dark Enchantress was dangerous- that was a given. Fortunately, she only had eyes for him, and the other cookies of darkness did not appear to have ever had the problem of...of being cannibalized.

Urgh, how violating. He had the nonsensical urge to cut off his fingers again, just because she had told him to heal himself. And now there was blood on these robes for the second time.

The disconnection grew stronger.

A brown blur whizzed around the corner, and Pure Vanilla caught it as it slammed into him. The small puppy yipped excitedly while pawing at him. He instantly relaxed, swept away in her utter cuteness. “Hello, Truffle!”

“I smell blood,” Red Velvet announced as he turned the corner. He was immediately met with the source of the scent. Pure Vanilla gave him a gesture of greeting. “Welcome back.”

“What the hell happened to you?”

He knew he painted a pitiful image with the dust and jam. “I was just meeting with the Dark Enchantress.” The general frowned. “Don’t worry, I am not injured.”

“Is mother free at the moment? I have yet to give my report.”

“Pomegranate may be with her, but perhaps not.”

“After a minute, then,” he decided, and approached Pure Vanilla. “Come, I’ll walk you back to your room.”

His place was filled with rubble. “Ah, I don’t think...”

He noted his soft rejection. “Mine, then? I don’t use it anyway.” Pure Vanilla didn’t protest, so Red Velvet began walking to his spare place. The healer followed while carrying Truffle, much to the cakehound’s excitement.

He didn’t comment on the dirt that he was leaving all over his clean sheets. There was a faint sound of water running, then the hybrid gave him a towel. “Thank you,” he mumbled, wiping away some of the dust on his face.

He could feel the other’s presence beside him shift away.

“Red Velvet cookie, please wait!”

He stopped for a moment.

“Tell me, do the witches eat cookies?”

The general took a deep breath as he stared at the healer, as though he was searching for something. He seemed rather saddened by what he found.

“Yes.”

The staff closed its eye.

“I’m sorry, Pure Vanilla.” He disappeared, leaving him alone. The puppy bound after him.

He waited until the hybrid was out of earshot.

“Fuck!”

He was never the excessively devoted type, but he had conducted some old rituals. He had prayed, semi-rarely. It was more for stress than anything else, but he had entertained the idea that the witches would hear him and laugh among themselves. He had the soul gem, and since they made him that way, he should be able to be a good person by design, right? They would probably find amusement that he struggles so much in his set place on Earbread.

There was something singularly crushing about the fact that his prayers had slipped into thin air. He had been screaming into a radio only to learn that it was dead- no, that it had been played to scavenging creatures incapable of hearing him. Pure Vanilla seldom spoke to anyone about his troubles. He didn’t wish to burden others, yet still yearned for someone to understand and accept him for his imperfections. If god was the only one who could hear his troubles, it would have sufficed for him. And if not the witches, there was still someone he could pray to. Someone who would listen to him, even if they never lift a finger to aid him.

Listening would be enough.

He clasped his hands and bowed his head.

“My god, I believe that I may have been praying to the wrong creatures for a long time.” He thought about his opening. “It is rather awkward, if I do say so myself. I’ve never been that religious, but it has appealed to me in a couple of senses, including the idea that a god can hear their subjects. You probably do not want to hear me, well, I couldn’t say- but you are someone I trust.”

“I- I hate what the Dark Enchantress has done to me. I hate the way she touches me. I don’t want it to happen again, but it probably will. I don’t think what she does is deserved, but the consequences of my mistakes seem to have hurt many people. Maybe this is some kind of punishment. But even so-” he cut himself off.

“My kingdom is gone, my people are scattered, and I feel so alone. Everything that the Dark Enchantress is showing me shatters the foundations of what I hold dear. I don’t know how much more I can take. I will hold out until Dark Choco is saved, but beyond that...it’s too ephemeral. Any little thing will do, I don’t want to die. So please, my god. Show me that you are there, give me another reason to keep living-!”

His staff’s leaves gently brushed his face.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Pure Vanilla pressed the flower against his body, curling around it like a hug. All along, the proof had been right in front of him.

Please like and comment! This takes a lot of effort for me to do!

A chapter like this does not fit the cuteness of a title like "Sweet!" I'm really starting to consider upping the rating of this fic. Cannibalism was the first thing I came up with when thinking about this fic. Call me twisted, but I was listening to Saccharine by Jazmin Bean and thought "Huh. This would be a wonderfully horrid premise." Go through DE's part with that song, actually. I wonder what kind of experience that would be.

Guess who PV's mysterious god is?

God I hope my family isn't reading this. I had sent several of them my ao3 at some point if they bring this up I'm gonna pass away.

Misc: Damage Mitigation

Chapter Notes

MY FINALS ARE OVER WOOT WOOT

Pure Vanilla destroys our kingdom, then finally realizes the state of his own mental health.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Frustrating, it was all so frustrating.

Pomegranate couldn't help her annoyance towards Pure Vanilla. Even if he wasn't the one instigating the Dark Enchantress, the instability within the cookies of darkness was all attributed to him.

It may be an innocuous shift to anyone else- he was a rather kind and gentle man, the type that she used to respect for their principles- but in a mixture like the cookies of darkness, he became an element that disrupted the order. It was obvious to anyone who had a lick of common sense, the way that the others swarm to him and hang off his every word, seeking his company and approval. Slowly and surely, he was influencing them, making them grow as people.

In any other place, that would be a marvelous sight. But the ruined castle does not favor change.

Dark Choco shouldn't hope for the chance to find a better life, or he'll act on his troublesome loyalty towards the Cacao kingdom. Licorice shouldn't have any self-respect, or he'll grow too discontent with his place in their master's ranks. She had so carefully helped to cultivate the destruction of their character, all to ensure that they would never disobey the dark Enchantress.

For disobeying the Dark Enchantress meant death.

Pomegranate was perfectly willing to bend and break the others to keep them under control. Perhaps it was cruel of her, to pluck them out of their fates and throw them into this frying pan, but she just found it rather ungrateful of them to loathe her so for it. She didn't care for their feelings, not really. All that mattered was the Dark Enchantress, the monster she had willingly bound herself to.

Pure Vanilla just had to come in and treat everyone with kindness, and wear down years of her careful conditioning. Could he not understand that that kindness would become poison for them? Even her, who he hated, he treated with some level of respect borne from wariness. She would have preferred the Dark Choco's defeated silence or Licorice's curses. She was used to that.

The healer wasn't even supposed to be here in the first place!

It was not in his fate, yet something had drawn him to the castle. She never saw any indication of what it was: that condition, that speck on a butterfly's wings which meant his return. The chances of him meeting Licorice, asking him to be brought into the cookies of darkness, staying beside the Dark Enchantress despite what she had done to him, all of this combined was near infinitesimal. Yet that is the future that had come to pass. She almost expected some sort of foul play.

Because of his presence, her master had stepped down a path that she could not come back from. Going forward, she will likely ignore Pomegranate's counsel when it comes to the healer, and since he interacts with everyone, there is bound to be a ripple effect from that.

She scoffed.

Ultimately, she had to remember her reason for being here. It didn't matter if Pure Vanilla disrupted the order. She will simply adapt and continue on as always.

Red Velvet passed her, claws twisting in a jittery fashion. "Pomegranate." He gave her a shallow acknowledgment, then went to speak to his mother. He seemed troubled by something. A quick pry into his future revealed that he tried to bring up the healer, before being shut down by the Dark Enchantress. He gave the rest of his report, subdued.

How very moral of him. It would be endearing if it weren't so useless. One would think, after all this time, he would know his own mother better than that.

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Pure Vanilla had managed to discover some things when it came to the Strawberry Sword.

Though curses can form naturally through resentment and close proximity to death, a curse as strong and particular as the sword would likely be crafted. Magic users were often prideful, and as a result magical items usually had some type of claim inlaid upon their weaving. After careful study of the magic layering it, Pure Vanilla had managed to find the creator's etch. There were no names, but a short description of the sword was present.

*The sacred knife, first of our utensils. What is holy cannot be destroyed.*

It felt some kind of ironic, that this cursed sword was called holy. Perhaps it originated from some kind of cult sect. The title of "utensil" rang no bells, but the signature implies that there were more weapons similar to this one. Perhaps there were an array of cursed weapons scattered across Earthbread. It was worth looking into, once he...once Dark Choco was free.

The proclamation did not dim his hopes- nothing could truly be indestructible, after all. It actually gave Pure Vanilla somewhat of an idea about how to proceed with his experiments.

Later on in the day, Red Velvet came in and sat with him. He had ventured back to report the interference of an organization. A lone mercenary called Pastry cookie had attempted to breach the tower, only to be stopped after a few levels, overwhelmed by the amount of cake hounds attacking her. He tossed her from the tower and returned to talk to the Dark Enchantress about said organization. During his journey, he had come across several dead and injured cake hounds. He followed the other hounds who led him to them, and discovered a small kingdom, more akin to a village.

Red Velvet had felt some type of way about all his hurt dogs and asked the Dark Enchantress for permission to engage both in combat. The sorceress had barred him from Pastry's organization until she knew more about them, but decided that there likely wasn't any great ulterior motive for the kingdom, so he had permission to destroy it.

Pomegranate had told her about a newly scribed witches' den, so the Dark Enchantress would take a month's worth of time to go and exterminate them while the remaining cookies took care of this assignment. Red Velvet told him that he would be a part of this mission and that Pomegranate had insisted on joining too.

Although his intentions weren't bad, bringing Pure Vanilla along to destroy a small kingdom was the opposite of helpful. He floundered as the healer's misery grew at his news. The hybrid tried to lighten the mood by attempting to convince him to show off his magic again, but he hadn't cheered up by the time they had reached their destination.

The other member of the group was not so soft with her words.

"Think about it like this," Pomegranate said harshly. "If we don't destroy this village, then the Dark Enchantress will. She is already aware of its existence, and it isn't as weak as the village under the clouds, so she probably won't leave it be. Which do you think is the better option? Do you want to give up all control to her?"

"I won't kill anyone." This, at least, he was uncompromising about.

"As long as the job gets done, I cannot care less," she said. "Take their lives or take their livelihoods; it's your choice."

There was some merit to what Pomegranate had said. He could ruin this kingdom without taking a life since he controlled what happens on the mission. It was a way to mitigate the damage done by being the one responsible. He had already used this strategy before, giving Dark Choco a few physical cuts and bruises and sparing him the punishment that he had been acclimated to.

Even so, he would prefer not to destroy the budding kingdom at all. His discontent was clear to both of his companions, and while Red Velvet seemed regretful of putting him in a position where he would have to use his abilities, Pomegranate remained unsympathetic.

"If you are thinking about abandoning the mission, then just leave. You are no help to us."

"If I do, will you two harm the cookies here?"

Red Velvet paused, then gave his assent. He said he wanted to try and take revenge for the deaths of his hounds. The general then stumbled and collapsed into Pure Vanilla's arms as the healer knocked him unconscious with a sleeping spell. Pomegranate raised an eyebrow.

"I'll destroy the kingdom, but you must tell me how to do it so that everyone survives." It was a request that she had no obligation to fulfill, but he demanded it anyway.

Since Red Velvet was out for the count and Pomegranate's powers were generally unsuitable for causing such carnage, it fell on his shoulders to carry out the deed. He would have been equally guilty of the act if he had held back and let the others get their hands dirty, so he told himself there wasn't any distinction.

Pomegranate granted him the request, informing him of the places that he should avoid attacking and which cookies to be careful of. The priestess advised him that if he wished the cookies to thrive long after, where he should direct them. He soaked up the advice and memorized it- she should be nothing but reliable. Once she made sure he knew the details, she sent him on his way.

Pure Vanilla did not quite want to attack an innocent kingdom appearing as himself. He created an illusion overlaid over his own body, changing the shape and color of his hair and eyes, shifting his soul gem into an ornamental star, and transforming his flower into a shepherd's crook.

The priestess made no comment but he knew she judged him anyway.

He stepped into the market, filled with the shouts of sellers and happy laughter. Someone bumped into him from behind and brushed his side in the bustle, and another friendly stranger wrangled a

hearty rye bun into his hand. He stared at it, then placed the bun down on a countertop. He couldn't take it in good faith.

The healer was seized with the urge to cry, but smothered the urge, since he didn't deserve to express regret for what he was about to do.

He waved a hand at the small gingerbread castle, and a skull and pair of horns were steadily charred into the brown plates. The market quickly descended into silence. A few people watched, hypnotized, before some passerby recognized the symbol and raised the alarm.

"The Dark Enchantress is attacking!"

Pandemonium ensued.

Some people saw the symbol and instantly sprung to action, taking their valuables and loved ones before fleeing. Others seemed to be too stunned to process what was about to occur. Well, they wouldn't be frozen for long.

He set fire to the trees and shops, causing small firestorms in many pockets of the village. They blazed to life with a crack, swallowing up the fresh leaves far quicker than any ordinary flame. Some of the more watery species exploded at the heat, tearing shrapnel into the nearby architecture and reducing its surroundings to shreds. Pure Vanilla made sure to avoid houses- he had to wait until everyone had escaped or they may collapse onto some unsuspecting cookie.

Those who froze finally snapped to their senses, escaping before they could be harmed by the flames sweeping the greenery and into the roads. People struggled to avoid the flames and crumbling shops, heading for the protective cover of the forest as if their lives depended on it. People fled and he destroyed the ground they left, smashing the village into pieces. As they left, Pure Vanilla heightened his mayhem.

He swept his arms around like a mad conductor, flattening walls and buildings with his telekinetic magic. He knocked down a series of defensive walls closest to him, feeling a twinge of satisfaction at the ease with which they fell, more like children's blocks than some kind of defense. Then he mentally reproached himself for the thought.

It must have been easy for the Dark Enchantress to destroy his kingdom- her magic was stronger than his. He felt a wave of cold fury that subsided all too quickly.

Swords of light slashed through ropes and poles. The shadows of buildings and objects extended and consumed their real counterparts. Cold, efficient magic sucked the life out of any plants untouched by the carnage. Not even the bugs were spared.

A few sugar gnomes were desperately throwing buckets of water on a burning house, their delicate constitutions melting under the heat. He landed beside them and picked them from the ground, moving them some distance away from their kingdom. They struggled even though he saved their lives, still believing that the buildings they had crafted from scratch could be restored.

He glanced around for any other stragglers, finding a hint of green in the searing red. Someone with hair made of leaves was crawling out his second-story window as the base of his house burned. The cookie seemed to be considering the risk of falling. Pure Vanilla levitated him down. The straggler started to thank him before recognizing him as the cause of all the destruction. He startled and quickly rushed away.

Pure Vanilla saw the uprooted plants he had stuffed into his apron pocket. The dull sting of shame

stabbed him in the chest.

Even the houses were mostly dust and wreckage at this point. There wasn't much left of most of the kingdom, but the castle has been left mostly untouched up to this point. Should he do any more? Most of the residents must have surely given up on this place by now.

As if to answer his question, a group of cookies appeared before him, their backs to the castle they wanted to protect. He recognized some of the cookies that Pomegranate had warned him of- a group of teenagers that work well together, a mage, and a young woman with a staff that was strangely reminiscent of Hollyberry. They were the kingdom's final stand.

It was a great feat of courage, but senseless from his point of view. They were but a small group, and if the sorceress were here she would have vanquished them instantly. He had to dissuade these people to give up without a fight. Pure Vanilla normally would have preferred talking over other alternatives, but he wasn't going to try for diplomacy after the kind of destruction he had caused. He would have to convince them against fighting him some other way.

He hated having to resort to this act, but it made the most sense. He would have to crush their spirits, show them that they were completely incapable of defeating him.

"Stop there!" a boy without clothes yelled. "Don't just destroy our kingdom and think that you'll get away with it!"

Crush the child in front of him. He...he could do that.

"I don't *think* I'll get away with it. I know I will." He stepped closer to the group and they collectively braced themselves. The healer kept his stance relaxed, affecting an air of utter confidence. "The Dark Enchantress has decreed that this kingdom must be destroyed, so please, leave."

"Awfully arrogant of you, hmm?" A paladin said. "What would you say if I did this!?" A shield appeared in front of Pure Vanilla, the paladin's sword burying itself halfway into it. The man seemed to belatedly realize that throwing his weapon may not have been the best idea.

Foreign magic pulled it back, and he caught it by the hilt. The mage beside him started berating him for his stupidity.

"I reiterate, please leave this place. There is nothing you can do to save it. I do not want to fight but will if necessary."

A young woman in pink inched a bit closer, the first to make a move. "Would you really be able to fight all of us alone? It would be easier to give up, and let us live in peace," she reasoned. He didn't pay any heed to her appeal. When she thought his guard was down, she ran forward, bashing his shield with her scepter. He raised a hand to attack and her knight pulled her out of the way.

Pure Vanilla dispelled his shield and launched his offensive. He placed a rune onto the duo, blasting them into the nearby brush. The boy's candy cane swung his way and he grabbed its length, dragging it out of his grasp. The boy hit the floor at his feet and squeaked, quickly rolling out of the way of his staff's blunt end. He tossed the cane away from them.

He dodged out of the way of a lollipop bludgeon and narrowly missed several bolts of lightning, the latter of which singed his cloak. He put a magnetism spell on the two teens and they yelped as they crashed into each other. In his distraction, he had missed the paladin sneaking up on him, sword raised. When he finally became aware of him, Pure Vanilla tried to dodge, only to nearly stumble

as something caught his leg.

The boy had grabbed him! He augmented his crook and blocked the blow the paladin sent his way, buckling slightly under the force. The brave teen, his job done, rushed out of range. As the paladin pushed him deeper into the dirt, the crook trembling in his hands, the ground under him lit up with the circling sigils of coffee magic.

One or the other. He could only deal with the paladin or the coffee magic.

He dropped to the floor and placed his palms on the spell, reversing the flow of magic and nullifying the spell.

A scepter and sword crossed under his neck. The people surrounded him, relaxing slightly since they thought they had him trapped.

“...Did you all believe I was fighting seriously?”

He reached up and gently brushed the weapons, which broke and crumbled at his touch. The two withdrew in shock, their weapons rendered useless.

It was true that Pure Vanilla had a marked disadvantage on the ground. Though the Dark Enchantress was far stronger, even fighting this group simultaneously was difficult for him, due to their numbers advantage. He would eventually slip up and lose track of one of the members, as he had already done once. But he didn't need to defeat these cookies to win.

He would play to his strengths. He would show them a feat of incredible magic that they could never overcome. If being able to engage with them all was not disheartening enough, that should be the nail in the coffin.

In front of the castle sat a clear magic fountain, a few star candies bobbing in it. A magical cornucopia.

*Yes, that would suffice.*

Before the group had time to react to the broken weapons, he flew past them and landed on the porcelain by the tips of his feet, settling gently atop the fountain. The resisting cookies looked at the mage in shock, this mysterious figure clothed in red and black, an angelic harbinger of destruction.

The water in the fountain lost its natural blue luster, candies shriveling to ash as Pure Vanilla sucked up every last drop of magic from its waters. The fountain cracked in several places, the change in composition too drastic for its structure to hold. Dark liquid dripped down the castle's dainty steps, soaking the shoes of the fighters. They prepared to fight again.

He exhaled.

A large magic circle appeared behind him, almost overshadowing the castle itself. The cookies watched in frozen horror as space itself split in half, the circle dividing as flickers of feathers crawled out. Something massive, with dark skin and white wings became visible within the crack. Its thousands of spiraling wings twisted within the next dimension, the thin feathers reaching across the abyss and creeping into Earthbread.

The knight was first to buckle, overwhelmed by the sheer force of the avatar's presence. The princess grabbed him as he fell to a knee. They exchanged a glance and took off in unison.

As if their retreat was a catalyst, their reaction spurred the others on. The teen with the wizard hat paled several shades. He lowered his staff and grabbed both of his friends, dragging them away from the healer against their wishes. A coffee mage nearly fainted and his paladin friend caught him and followed behind the children. They fled, the last of the kingdom's people, disappearing into the forest.

Pure Vanilla waited for them to vanish and then forced the rift closed, the effort taxing even to his enormous magical reserves. The slit in space drew back upon itself, a thin whistling, dying scream as the dimension on the other side struggled against his power.

...

Without the resisting cookies, the little kingdom was truly empty. The place was draped in complete silence but for the slow crackle of flames. Battered houses and architecture lay around, accompanied by glimpses of happy memories- a gift-wrapped anvil, a potted plant, a pumpkin-colored doll. Pure Vanilla registered every detail in this formerly cozy village.

Should he be satisfied with a job completed? Should he be agonizing at having become what he loathed? At the moment, he couldn't feel anything at all.

What a profound...emptiness.

He dropped down from the fountain and walked down the path from the castle. There was no rhyme or reason to his actions, or at least none that he purposefully deliberated on. He just went forward with his impulses. Thinking would lead to comprehension, and he did not want to understand what he had done.

Even though he wished it not to be, the thoughts slithered into his conscience.

*I destroyed this kingdom, as the Dark Enchantress had done to mine. What right do I have to be angry now? I am just like her.*

*Shut up*, he told himself.

He strolled through the ruined kingdom. It smelt like ash. The scent was so familiar that he could almost feel his lungs clogging back up, the slow creep of suffocation. Healer cookie's first memories were quite horrible, and they were returning with a vengeance beside the ash and smoke.

*I had no choice. It could have been worse. I tried to make the best of the situation.*

*No, that's a justification. It doesn't take away from this horrible act. It doesn't mean the people who have lost their home stop hurting.*

Who was speaking now? Was it Healer or Pure Vanilla? No, they were one and the same. They should be identical. There was no true difference between the two, he existed outside his roles, his responsibilities, his...sacrifices...

A soft hand brushed his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

He spun around wildly, but it was simply an illusion. There was no fragile painted doll at his back, no specter whose faint clack-clack-clacking only he could hear.

*Oh witches, I'm losing it. I'm- oh god, oh my god...*

...

A soft clanging reverberated around the emptiness, just loud enough for him to question its existence. "Great, I'm having hallucinations," he groaned, hitting himself to try and make it go away.

To his surprise, the clanging continued, and seemed to grow louder as he moved forward. It wasn't just in his head, then. Something was making that noise. Was someone still trapped within the ruined place? They may need his help.

He searched for the source of the sound, tracking it until it became a significant clamor. A burning jail came into view. Of course, anyone in prison would not be able to escape until they are let out. He should have checked the village more carefully. Upon entering, he found a redhead slashing at the bars of her cell with a dagger, rapidly glancing between the advancing flames and her slowly-growing slice. He touched the bars and they dissolved to dust with a whisper. The woman quickly left the cramped space, skidding up to him in her hurry. "Hey, what the fuck is going on?"

"Your village has been destroyed. I suggest you make your way out as soon as possible."

"I thought so, but still..." she made a noise in angry frustration. "Have you seen a group of teens and a little blonde boy? The twerp's about-" She put a hand to her hip. "This tall."

He didn't know of anyone that small, but there was that group that had fought him earlier. "No, but I don't think they have come to any harm," he lied. She nodded and grabbed him, pulling him out to look for them together. "Ah, I have to search for others..." he cried.

She didn't seem to hear him whatsoever, winding through the flames as he warned her not to get closer to the epicenter of the kingdom, that it was dangerous there. She dragged him around until abruptly stopping before a crumbled gingerbread house. It was nearly indistinguishable from the others, but something about it caught her attention.

"This was my home."

The woman watched the smoke rise for a moment, then let out a loud screech. Pure Vanilla stared at her, baffled.

"Damn." She tied her hair back. "Whatever, a sedentary lifestyle is boring anyway. I'm gonna make sure my kids haven't kicked the bucket now. I won't keep you for any longer. Good luck and goodbye, pretty boy."

"Wait!"

She halted, turning back to listen.

"If you wish for everyone to survive, tell them the following."

He passed on the message, and the woman gave him a nod before speeding away.

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"Aha, Found you guys!" Chili Pepper skidded to a stop, seeing half of her group in tears. "Oh no."

After being freed, she had run around searching for anyone else, only coming across abandoned houses and empty streets. She decided to go back to the last place where she had seen the mysterious mage that freed her, intent on telling him that there didn't seem to be anyone else to save, but her house had crumbled into ashen pieces and he was gone. She then wandered around the edges of the forest around the kingdom until she came across the now-homeless residents.

“Chili Pepper!” She embraced Gingerbrave as he leaped into her arms.

“Our home is gone! How could this happen...” he wailed. “I heard the Dark Enchantress and her forces were strong, but nothing like this. I thought we would be able to fight them if they tried anything. I was so stupid.”

“Shh, shh, it’s okay,” she consoled. “Most of us knew what we were getting into by living around here. We don’t blame you for anything. If anyone does, then tell me and I’ll give them a good beating.”

Custard huddled beside her. “Does this mean I’m not a king anymore? If my kingdom fails, that means I did a bad job and now everyone has to struggle. Will they hate me?”

“You can still be a king without a kingdom. You called yourself one when we first met.”

“But that’s different!”

Gingerbrave tried to calm the little prince down and they ended up sobbing on each other. Chili Pepper gave them a long hug and then went to mingle with the rest of the crowd, pushing a few cookies over who will inevitably affirm that they had no fault in the destruction. Strawberry and Wizard, the more levelheaded ones, joined her.

She sidled up to the cookies who were trying to rally everyone. “So, have any plans for the future?” She nudged Espresso, who wasn’t paying her any attention beforehand.

He grimaced. “I was hoping to have a fancy dinner tonight, but that is no longer possible. I suppose I must travel back from where I came.”

“I’ll join you since we’ll be going to the same place.”

Princess cookie seemed confused by her choice. “You? In the Republic? They give more than a few weeks of jail time for robbery, you know?”

Chili Pepper loved treasure, but she loved not dying more. That young man who helped her, whoever he may be, had radiated a strange aura that made her want to trust him. It may seem nonsensical to cookies who operate by reason only, but Chili trusted her gut. It had not led her astray when it mattered. Besides, a wealthy place like that nation would have truly precious treasures, just ripe for the taking.

“I’m not making this decision based on the Republic’s stiff laws. I got stuck in jail yesterday and this strange mage rescued me and melted the bars when everything went to shit. He told me, and everyone else here, to head for the Creme Republic.” She looked around. “Now that I mention it, where is he?”

Apparently, not many people knew who she was talking about. In an attempt to clarify, she described his features and notable traits.

“Dark hair and a strange crooked staff...that sounds like the cookie that attacked us,” Madeleine commented.

Espresso kicked him. “It obviously is the cookie that attacked us! The true question to be considered is this: why would he tell us to return to that nation? Why would someone working for the Dark Enchantress give this miscreant such a command?” *Perhaps something had befallen the Republic*, he thought, hope and dread coiling in one breath.

“I don’t think he was working for the Dark Enchantress.”

They all stared at Princess cookie. Why would she defend the person who just ravaged their home? “Wait! Hear me out,” she placated. “I noticed that he only targeted the buildings. The stranger’s exact words were ‘The Dark Enchantress has decreed that this kingdom must fall’, but he only caused enough destruction to technically follow that order. I don’t even think anyone among us is injured.” All that useless politicking among the nobles had proved useful- she could recognize a disobedient maid or a backstabbing servant in a jiffy, and these were not the actions of someone truly loyal.

“It makes sense,” Wizard cookie admitted. “For the kind of power he possessed, he could have probably destroyed our kingdom in one fell swoop. But everyone is alive and accounted for, and that’s not statistically likely if he really sought to kill us.” He recalled the massive portal and shivered. What truly awe-inspiring power. He was simultaneously glad to witness that incredible magic in his lifetime and angry that it had been used against him. He was going to get an upset stomach at this rate.

“That person didn’t feel evil,” Strawberry added. “L- like a reluctant final boss, at most.”

“That pretty boy broke me out of jail, so he’s not terrible in my opinion.”

The paladin suddenly grinned. “He must have been there to help us, then!”

“Don’t make such absurd leaps in logic!”

“You’re too negative, Espresso,” he whined. “It could be true.”

Unlike the paladin, Espresso had been perfectly content to stay in this little kingdom and never return to the Republic, even if it meant that he did not have the same caliber of technology at his disposal. Having this choice forced upon them displeased him.

“W-well, we obviously can’t stay here. Even if we rebuild, I think that our progress will just be reset again when the Dark Enchantress or one of her followers notices. None of us can fight that winged thing.” Strawberry looked like she might cry.

“I think I’ll return to my kingdom,” the princess sighed. “It was nice getting to know you guys, but I don’t feel comfortable traveling so far from my homeland in case anything happens to it.” She and her knight bowed and bid everyone goodbye.

“Me too...I’ll find somewhere else to stay. I don’t wish to go to the Republic, for personal reasons,” Herb stated.

“Ohoho, I never expected someone like you to be on a criminal record, Herb. Congrats, it takes guts to make such a powerful place nation an enemy!” Chili Pepper slapped him on the back, hard.

“I-It’s not like that!”

One by one, the cookies slowly made their decisions. The previously unified kingdom broke into pieces as people chose to go their separate ways. With the structure of their lives upturned, their connections and ambitions, their hopes and dreams, were all brought to the forefront.

Gingerbrave and Custard were the most distraught, having been the main individuals responsible for the little kingdom’s creation. The others had to reassure them, saying how they were lucky to be alive and that’s what mattered. It didn’t help much- they had poured so much effort into making the place a cozy and wonderful place to live that they were both rightfully inconsolable.

Thankfully, most of the people were traveling to the Republic, so the group hadn't split apart too much.

Most of the cookies were pragmatic enough to have an emergency pack on hand- they had to be, to travel through the mostly uncharted land of the forest. Under Alchemist and Sparkling's guise, they pooled their packs on hand and split them among each other. With everyone's rations and materials together, they had enough to make the journey: past the desert, through the mountain pass, and then beyond the edge of the ocean. On the other side, there awaited a city of shells and ivory.

Madeleine smiled throughout the process of counting resources, keen on keeping a brave face for the others. Internally, though, he couldn't help his nerves. Not only had they failed to procure any hint of the ancients' precious soul gems, but now they must return with a group of refugees, bearing the news that the Dark Enchantress had a servant, however disloyal, that was strong enough to flatten a village singlehandedly. The fallout would be unpleasant enough for him, but Espresso...he would be scrutinized far more. It was unfair.

Said mage had apparently noticed his anxiety. "Are you really worrying about what the public would think right now?" he asked cuttingly, "Get your priorities straight. Or is that noble act of yours just for show?"

Ah, Espresso. He provides his jabs at a perfect time, expressing how the negative attention was not a great bother to him and insulting the paladin in the same breath.

"You're right! It's a shame to return empty-handed, but this is far more important!" Madeleine said, his cheer miraculously returning. "I'll inform everyone about our possible routes."

"How he acts so merry in such a situation, I'll never know." Despite his grumbling, the mage caught up to him and helped, filling in the holes in his enthusiastic speech.

Off to the Republic they went.

Pure Vanilla, who had been invisible, left the clearing they had been in. He had hung around to see how the people would progress, and they had exceeded his expectations. They set a concrete, reasonable goal to strive for, so quickly after being uprooted. It should have been admirable.

Since he had technically completed the task set before him, Pomegranate gave him no more grief for his mercy. She had asked him if this resolution was satisfying. He mechanically expressed the same ideals he had done previously, that he regretted destroying the kingdom, but was glad that the residents were otherwise unharmed. The priestess seemed strangely happy about what had occurred, as though his actions proved something to her. She was so happy, in fact, that she told him there weren't any casualties.

Red Velvet thanked him for completing the mission, though he was slightly miffed at the fact that none of the residents had faced decent retribution for hurting them, in his opinion. It must be difficult, to reside between cookies and cakes. He saw their acts as murder while even Pure Vanilla would say they acted in self-defense when encountering the patrolling hounds.

To his faint surprise, he couldn't feel anything for the hybrid's plight. He thought that was just a result of adrenaline. This did not bode well.

Pure Vanilla thought he could put his mental health on hold for longer, but it had caught up with him. Any more and he would start to become a danger to himself and the people around him.

“Pomegranate, you said that the Dark Enchantress won’t be back for the rest of the month, right?”

“Yes, at least that amount of time. Why?”

Well, he didn’t have any assignments after this one and his old friend wouldn’t be around for a while. The circumstances were about as preferable as he could hope for.

“Red Velvet, may I move into your room?” He had no wish to clean the rubble in his place, with all its horrid memories.

The hybrid nodded. “I don’t see why not. It’s not like I use it anyway.” He seemed to calculate whether or not to say anything else, evaluating both Pomegranate and the healer. “Even beyond my responsibilities, the castle is an unpleasant place, to the point where I find the cursed cake tower more bearable. Everyone always smells like pain, though it’s gotten less with you around.”

He paused. “But you, yourself, are quite dreadful.”

Pomegranate startled at the proclamation. She seemed to direct some newfound annoyance at him. Pure Vanilla honestly didn’t know how he could be “dreadful”. He wasn’t feeling much of anything at the moment. The disconnect was strong enough that he barely cared to formulate any sort of response.

“I am sorry. If there’s anywhere you wish to reside, I can avoid the area.”

He didn’t seem happy.

“Stop that. This isn’t the sort of thing you should apologize for.”

“Red Velvet, do you hate me?” he asked suddenly.

“No, I don’t.” There was confusion in his statement, but it was firm.

“Good, good. I…” he paused. “I want to go to sleep.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, some pointless lore: What Pure Vanilla had done was open an untethered rift in front of our castle. Dark Enchantress would have been able to do it by her own power, but since PV isn't quite as strong he had used the fountain to supplement his magic. Tethered rifts, as DE used in chapter 2 to free the cake creatures, work as portals connected between set locations. Untethered rifts (such as above the Institute and in this chapter) open a portal into a random location in the universe-miasma, which are usually filled with beasts and monsters. The monster we saw this time happened to be a more eldritch Avatar of Destiny.

Opening and closing rift takes a shitton of power but it's quite simple to do, so no pre-drawn spell is needed.

PV is acting real weird this chapter but he's literally falling off his rocker so it's somewhat justified I hope.

Misc: A Short Reprieve (1)

Chapter Summary

Chapter 15, starring: Pomegranate, Dark Choco, and Licorice, pointing guns at each other. If you don't know that meme, just imagine three spider-men pointing at each other. with weapons.

TW: the desire to not exist is present at the beginning. Several people get smacked too lol.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The mind does intriguing things.

It is a patchwork of neurons and electricity, spanning a web so complex that no scientist or philosopher could ever hope to grasp the magnitude of its existence. It possesses self-awareness, the kind that can only exist in the most blessed of all the world's creations. It connects, it calculates, and most marvelous of all, it protects itself. Even in cases where such horrible things happen, it will block memories, dull receptors, and even splinter itself for the sake of its own continued existence.

After pushing beyond its limits so far in situations of extreme stress, it would, ironically, shut down once there was a guarantee of safety. Pure Vanilla, who had endured multiple traumatic experiences and been in a mindset of unconsciously protecting himself from danger, pushing away his inevitable break after being forced far beyond his limits, finally crashed.

When he had returned from the kingdom, the healer took some time to evaluate himself. He had already become aware that his mental state was on the brink of crumbling, and took what little collectedness he had to choose how he'll deal with it. All of his emotions, both positive and negative, were too far away to reach. He could understand that he was feeling them, but it was as if he was sitting in front of someone else and watching them experience them instead. He felt like a rubber band being stretched and stretched until it was on the brink of snapping.

Depression? He thought absently. No, not exactly. A severe case of disassociation was more accurate. Combine that with a few more common symptoms and he could approximate his condition.

He wasn't ignorant of his own power. Pure Vanilla thought it would be incredibly unwise to force himself through anything at the moment. He had already conjured physical and auditory hallucinations, and if someone managed to move behind him while he wasn't paying attention, or rounded the corner too fast, then...

Not everyone had the durability of the Dark Enchantress.

If the healer hurt someone right now, he wasn't sure how he would take it. It would be too much effort to retain any hint of calm professionalism. In fact, most things seemed beyond his capacity at the moment. It didn't feel worth it to get out of bed. It didn't feel worth it to do anything.

He was weary, in a way that spanned far beyond the physical.

He had told Red Velvet that he wanted to sleep. That sounded like a wonderful dream, to lay down and never wake up. Pure Vanilla even had a spell that could accomplish just that. He had learned many skills in his centuries as a healer, and one of them filled the role: a self-imposed magical stasis, that places the subject in an unchanging state until they choose to be revived.

Yes, that would be perfect. He would have time to rest, away from the Dark Enchantress and the cookies of darkness. He could be removed from himself, from his half-crumbled castle in the desiccated corpse of his kingdom.

I don't want to be here anymore.

Pure Vanilla retreated from the world.

~~~~~

It took about three days for people to become concerned. Pure Vanilla's absence was keenly felt by the cookies of darkness since he was so involved in their daily lives, but most of them had brushed their worries away. The healer was smart and powerful, so surely he'll be fine. Since he had returned, they'll go back to their normal schedule soon enough.

The second day had Dark Choco shifting about, feeling antsy with their game of chase waylaid for so long. Licorice realized that he hadn't visited in a while at an ungodly hour of the night, and he had to be the cookie who made sure that Crepe didn't skip too many meals. Pomegranate contemplated drawing several people's faces on a dartboard.

On the third day, three people, for three separate reasons, decided to check up on him.

Pomegranate was the first, entering without knocking and finding the man sleeping soundly with his staff set in the corner. She called for him to wake up, threatened him, poked him, and then decided that this wasn't an ordinary slumber. A closer examination revealed magic weaving around him as he slept. She quickly concluded that this was an induced condition and that Pure Vanilla had likely done this to himself.

She had worried herself over nothing. This was the price of being surrounded by all these dramatic people. When he had not shown, she assumed the worst. The priestess had been relieved when she scried him and found that he had been right inside Red Velvet's room all along.

This man proved to be a constant bother to her. Did he really go as far as to lock himself away? She understood the necessity of his seclusion, but it bothered her nonetheless, how he was so willing to waste away. Most healers, unless they were in a hospital, did not put people to sleep for more than a few days at a time. Any more than that and they would be in danger of bedsores and ulcers, and no one was around to attend to him.

This was unacceptable. If he decided to retreat into his head to hide, then she'll bother him until he comes back to the real world.

Actually, how conscious was he? Was it on the level of being awake or lightly sleeping, where he would hear her, or was it closer to REM, which blocked off all exterior stimuli?

The staff observed as Pomegranate tried to take his pulse and track his breathing. Both of them were slow enough to be inconclusive. She then chose the age-old trick of flicking him on the cheek. His eyelids twitched and he buried his face into a pillow.

“So you are awake. Then don't mind if I let myself in.” She opened one of his eyes and tried to pull herself into his mental space.

Nothing happened.

*Right, he was blind.* She dragged a hand over her face and then went to his flower in the corner. She held the mirror up to it instead, and this time she could reach the palace of his mind.

Petals swirled around her.

The healer was laying in his bed of flowers.

He sat up at her intrusion, turning toward her. In place of the upper half of his head was empty space, as if it had been simply chopped off. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. The next time she looked at him, his face was whole.

She shook off her unease. Had she just been mistaken? No, you can't make sensory mistakes in the mental realm. Whatever that strange glitch could be, she hoped it was not something that she would have to deal with. He seemed to have decent coping mechanisms as a healer, but that made it hard for her to understand the depth of his issues. How long was he willing to spend locked away in his conscious?

“Are you going to stay here forever?”

He rolled back onto his stomach, not bothering to face her. She noticed that he was sprawled right in front of the singular lily in his garden. Pomegranate was seized by the urge to stomp on it, but Pure Vanilla's state was alarming enough to make her reticent.

She didn't want to see that stupid flower every time she entered his mind. The way he held onto such sentimentality made her sick.

“I'll be here until I recover somewhat, and there isn't a time limit on that,” he replied.

“There absolutely is! Your body would atrophy if you keep doing this.”

“Not in stasis, it wouldn't. Is this your first time seeing such a phenomenon?” He asked, not giving her a chance to answer. “It is a useful skill, indeed. No one else needs to be there to take care of me.”

“That...wasn't the point,” she said in muted frustration. “I don't want to deal with a useless pawn, so it is for both our benefits if you stop sulking like this.”

He sat up, finally sparing her a glance. “A pawn?” He turned back to his flowers. “A pawn!” He started wheezing with laughter.

She was a bit thrown off. Had the healer gone insane? Perhaps she should have interfered more with his missions- she can't have her master's weakness be so unstable. Unstable people were hard to maneuver.

“Now I understand why you follow the Dark Enchantress.” He was smiling almost feverishly, joyful at his revelation. “I feel for your plight. But even so, I'm glad that this is your motive. I am glad that I can...believe in the good of a person like you.”

...What?

“Whatever mad ideas you have concocted, keep them unspoken. I don’t want your baseless assumptions about my person.”

The source of her frustrations had the nerve to laugh. “How very pitiful we are,” Pure Vanilla mused, gently brushing the petals of the single lily in his garden.

Pomegranate dispelled the mindscape.

The priestess wanted to throw something in her anger. What right did the healer have to make such judgments about her? She was supposed to be the one seeing through people, not the other way around. She had shown her cards too plainly while making him the offer, and now, after all that she had been through, the healer’s claim of knowing her felt shallow.

She looked over at him. The true Pure Vanilla was still laying there, unmoving. She couldn’t tell that he was awake and conscious without serious inspection, but perhaps that was the point.

She traced a hand over his cheek. He was utterly defenseless. Even the seer, with her average strength and limited magic, could do anything she wanted to him. Did he really trust the residents of the castle so much, or did he have no other alternative? Was she considered safe enough for him to devolve into this state? Being less dangerous than the Dark Enchantress was a low bar to fill, but Pomegranate didn’t think she had done anything to prove the integrity of her character to him. She wouldn’t trust herself in the healer’s position.

No, she was underestimating him. It was possible that he had some kind of protective enchantment, like her master’s defense, which repelled all physical and magical damage that may befall her. If Pomegranate figured out whether he had an enchantment, maybe that could tell her more about his perception of her.

Pure Vanilla...He was not quite as simple a person as she originally thought, but he was still kind. She wasn’t going to hurt him to check. Pomegranate stood beside him for a while, as the healer’s faint breaths permeated the air.

*How very pitiful we are.*

The statement felt ineffably frustrating.

Unluckily for her, other cookies had also noticed the healer’s absence. Pure Vanilla had spent some part of the day with multiple cookies, and with him lacking, they had been worried enough to check. This had led to both Licorice and Dark Choco bumping into each other on the way to Red Velvet’s place, and then arriving in the nick of time to see her leave.

The prince noted her leaving the room and the blonde slumbering deeply inside. He stopped, unsure about letting her leave without some kind of explanation. Licorice had no compunctions and went to Pure Vanilla, doing the same things that she had done to try and rouse him. His methods proved futile. He returned to the duo, also suspecting that something was afoot.

“What’s wrong with him?” the warrior asked.

“He’s in a stasis. It seems something like magical hibernation.”

“I didn’t know you were capable of that.”

“Healer did it to himself.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Dark Choco said. “Putting someone to sleep seems like it would be



right up your alley. I know that you hated his inclusion into the castle, and now that the Dark Enchantress is gone, he goes into a mysterious sleep right after? It all seems very suspicious.”

Licorice looked like he bit something sour. It was the classic case of someone you hate making a good point.

“As much I may culpable of his condition, it simply isn’t true.”

“How are we supposed to trust your word?” the reaper accused.

I don’t see how I can prove my innocence,” she huffed coldly. “Do you think Healer would be tricked by me? He’s an intelligent man, he won’t fall for traps so easily.”

Dark Choco certainly thought it was possible. Pomegranate was slimy, cunning, and not above making promises and going back on them, and Pure Vanilla, no matter how he acted, was the most trusting of the ancients. Those two were a bad pairing. “I still cannot discount you because of your dislike towards Healer. He may have fallen for your honeyed words.”

“The reason I dislike him isn’t personal. If there’s anyone here who he is weak against, then it would be you. Because he tries to protect you.”

The prince snarled. “You dare mock him-”

“I’m not mocking him. I’m mocking you, Dark Choco.” She purred. “You seem in awfully high spirits lately. It must be because of Healer- nothing else has changed. That man...he’s awfully kind, and awfully devoted to those he deems his people. Do you want him to protect you- you, a full-grown man? He’s not your father. He must find it to be so burdensome.”

He gripped his hands into fists. This viper before him always stabbed others' vulnerabilities, and he refused to succumb to screaming or violence. Even so, the desire to fight her was strong. Pure Vanilla had made it so that she wouldn’t be able to send him into a spiral of horrible memories if he does, and that freedom was testing his self-control.

“What, is the noble Dark Choco going to hit me now that I can’t fight back?” The priestess spread her arms invitingly, goading him to try.

The prince studied her. This woman who had caused him so much pain was practically at his mercy, and even now she showed not a smidge of regret for her actions, even for the sake of self-preservation. It may have worked if she did. Dark Choco would feel too bad to confront someone who simpered and cried, though he couldn’t imagine Pomegranate ever acting that way, even for the sake of manipulating others. He had no intention of tormenting her now that their roles had essentially reversed, but...

“I’ve always wanted to do this, just once.”

He socked her in the gut. She stumbled back a bit before falling on her rear, hacking up empty spit.

Licorice gaped at them.

He made sure to keep from using all of his strength so as to not seriously injure her. It would still hurt like a bitch, though, and would most certainly bruise if the priestess didn’t heal herself.

“I don’t intend to cause any torment,” Dark Choco declared. “As long as you keep from harming anyone in my stead, then I will have no quarrel with you.”

“Haah...how gracious,” she coughed, the edges of sarcasm coating her tone. “I suppose I had that coming.”

Licorice observed the whole exchange, his shock slowly morphing into glee. This was a change in the hierarchy! Pomegranate had felt nigh untouchable, but now she had no defense against the Cacao warrior. While the reaper would never dare to harm her directly, he still enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing someone he detested be brought down. He sidled up to the prince and lightly pulled his arm, trying to close the distance between him and the priestess.

Dark Choco shook him off, but that did not deter him. “Is that really all?” The devil by his side crowed excitedly, “You should retaliate in full, the opportunity is ripe for the taking! Repay her for everything she has done! It would be nothing less than she deserves.”

The prince glared at him and he instantly lost his bravado. How like the reaper, to bask in someone else’s pain. If he wanted to fight Pomegranate so badly, he should do it himself. “Try to start something and I’ll hit you too.”

Licorice seemed shocked at first, as though he hadn’t realized he was also unable to combat him. Then he was outraged. “Huh? Why should I get the same treatment as her? I’ve never tortured you before- at one time, I would even ask Pomegranate to lay off on how harsh she was. You should be grateful!”

“Please. I know it was solely to pacify your guilt. You enjoyed watching me be hurt, admit it.”

“Like hell!”

“Denial is a terrible look on him,” the priestess commented.

“Shut up! You don’t have any ground on which to judge others.” He put one sleeve over his face and affected an air of condescension. “Oh, I’m Pomegranate cookie, I slobber at the Dark Enchantress’s feet and fall over myself to please her like a teacher’s pet~” he added a high moan to the end.

“Licorice,” she said, a warning note in her voice. Dark Choco also took some offense to the crudeness, but he hated Pomegranate enough to not intervene.

“I burnt down my own village and then bragged about it, like that was some great feat! Like that proved anything about what a good and loyal servant I am. Hah! My position is barely better than the rest of us, and yet I still strut around pretending to be so superior.”

Pomegranate was genuinely angry now. “You wish to know why I act like I’m better than you? It’s because I *am* better than you!”

There was a moment of shocked silence as she regained some of her composure.

“I was the first to enter our master’s service, the progenitor of the cookies of darkness. Nobody else would be present if I made different choices than I had. No one has any idea of the sacrifices I have made. You are all here because I managed to convince the Dark Enchantress that you are *useful*. You owe me your very *lives*.”

“And you, Licorice, come wailing like a babe about how nobody respects you, when you don’t do anything yourself. You are a right fucking coward, and I will not spend my precious time listening to your inflated, victim, complex.” She poked him in the chest with every hissed word. “I shouldn’t have ever convinced our master to accept you. It would have been better to let that pathetic boy wander the ashen planes below the castle until he starved to death, as fate had decreed!”

Dark Choco squirmed. Pomegranate had voiced some traits of the reaper's that he disliked as well, and he quailed against the notion of having anything in common with her. He did not, however, agree with her saying that the other deserved to die. That went overboard. This entire argument had devolved into something too personal for his tastes.

"Bitch," Licorice hissed. He charged at her haphazardly, intent on tackling her. She whipped out her suzu rod and brained him so hard his whole body reverberated. He slumped forward, covering his face. Once she was sure that he wouldn't try again, she slipped the rod away.

The reaper got back up, groaning in pain.

"Ugh, I have a nosebleed now."

"I'm not healing that," Pomegranate said airily. "Stuff a tissue in it."

Dark Choco wished he were an insignificant flower in one of Pure Vanilla's gardens.

"What is everyone doing in front of my bedroom?" Red Velvet asked.

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They ended up walking the same way since Red Velvet's room was at the very edge of the castle's wing. Licorice cradled his nose and Pomegranate limped around as she clutched her waist. Red Velvet kept his mouth shut but was obviously trying to figure out what happened. It was so awkward. He regretted everything.

Now that they weren't fighting anymore, there was something he wanted to ask. It felt slightly inappropriate after the whole confrontation, but Dark Choco still wanted to know about the stasis Pure Vanilla was in. The priestess seemed to have the most information about what was wrong with him and was the only other cookie who could heal to some extent.

"Ummm...Pomegranate?"

"What."

"Is Healer okay?"

"Physically, he is fine. The magical stasis, however, seems to be a direct result of an extreme stressor. To my knowledge, he has too much magical power to expend easily and has not received any injuries, so the source of the stressor would be emotional." Technically, he had been injured by the Dark Enchantress, but certainly not to the extent that it would require what would be equivalent to a medical coma. Pomegranate decided to keep that to herself.

"I mean, what is significant enough to cause such an affliction?"

"The institute-"

"Mother seems-"

"His own me-"

Licorice, Red Velvet, and Pomegranate exchanged a three-way loaded silence.

"What, exactly, are you all talking about?" The prince asked. "I don't appreciate being kept in the dark about my family."

Family??? Licorice mouthed.

“We are only making presumptions as to what could be troubling him,” Pomegranate responded diplomatically, “They are not facts, and I daresay, we do not have enough of a judge of his character to act on them. If he wished for you to know why he is in this state, then he would let you know.” She raised an eyebrow. “And besides, why would knowing about Healer’s affairs matter so much? Have you even told him about your patricide attempt?”

The others were startled at the question. They had not known about this.

“That has nothing to do with him.”

She gave him a condescending smirk. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“Patricide? You raised your sword against a parent?” Red Velvet could hardly believe what he was hearing.

“Drop it,” he scowled. It was bothersome being the focus of Pomegranate’s manipulations, and he did not appreciate this information being dropped in front of everyone.

The hybrid muttered something and slipped away from the group.

Dark Choco decided to follow his example and break away from the others, even if he had to walk the long way around the castle. He did not want to be in the uncomfortable atmosphere for any longer, especially since he had played a part in its conception.

He went outside and squinted as the setting sun flashed in his eyes. The warrior went alongside the rubble of the castle and retrieved some things from the tool corner, intent on doing something for his protector.

Dark Choco carried the pail and his other tools to the garden. Licorice had taken on the job of doing of tending the garden until their mission had been up, but no one had taken care of it afterward. A few days may not make that much of a difference but he wanted it to be nice for when the healer returns. It was the least he could do.

He filled the pail and watered the plants, repeating the action into infinity, a funhouse mirror of his training. A simple task, carried out over and over, until the physical procedure was so familiar that he started practically daydreaming.

“Hey, you’re overdoing it!”

He suddenly realized that he was pouring the water onto both the plant leaves and his shoes. The prince stopped, embarrassed.

Licorice trotted over and gave the plants a critical eye. “You’ve gone and drowned these poor things! I bet their leaves and roots will be yellow by tomorrow. We better hope that the ground around is moisture deficient enough to stop the garden from spitting the plants back up.”

That sounded like something that can happen. He regretfully wiped the drops off the plant’s leaves with his cloak. “When did you learn so much about plants?”

The other harrumphed. “I do try to understand the things Healer talks about when he is going over his interests, and I’m decent enough at it that I didn’t get banned from holding a shovel or rake, unlike some people.

Dark Choco ignored the jibe. “Then is there any way to get the water back out?”

“I don’t think Healer wants any magic used in his garden, so no, not easily. It’s better to hold off the watering for tomorrow to let the moisture set in. Next time, fill the pot up around ten times and spread it around. That should set a good limit on how much water the garden needs.”

It was genuinely good advice. Dark Choco set his pail aside.

He wasn’t sure why the other was being so nice all of a sudden. The other could have wished to salvage the garden for Pure Vanilla’s sake, but he was still suspicious. The reaper hung by while he finished up the chores around the garden and followed him back to the castle.

He was stuck to his side firmly, like a barnacle. “You said that Healer was your family. Were you two very close? I can’t imagine you calling him by any nicknames...I’d bet you’d be all formal about it!”

He was right, to the prince’s dismay.

“If you are trying to find his real identity through me, then nice try. I’m not revealing anything.”

The reaper sighed and shrugged carelessly. “It was worth a shot.”

He continued to trail behind him, all the way to the training area. Dark Choco knew for a fact that the reaper did not utilize this place for anything. *Why are you still following me*, he thought, *Please go away!*

“So what kind of hobbies do you have?”

Was the reaper trying to be friendly? This felt like it came out of nowhere, but perhaps he was finally extending a hand of friendship, or if not that, a truce on the part of their shared connection to the healer. Dark Choco would welcome more positive interactions with the other cookies of darkness. He hadn’t had casual conversation with anyone but Pure Vanilla in a long time. It was like receiving a bit of water and realizing how truly parched he was.

“I don’t have many hobbies other than this.” He swung his sword again in a truly impressive slash. “It may be repetitive, but I find it calming.”

“Is that all?” The disappointment was clear to hear. “That doesn’t sound like much of a hobby, more of a routine. Surely there is something that you enjoy doing.”

“For a long time, I fought to get stronger.” It wasn’t really a hobby so much as a desperate attempt to prove himself, but he didn’t want to tell the reaper that he had nothing else.

“It may be a stretch, but I suppose seeking power can be fun. Nothing compared to getting power, of course, but learning a spell can be thrilling. Awaiting power is its kind of excitement. Once I have it, then I seek more. It’s quite the heady sensation.”

Of course, how could he forget the reaper’s similar obsession with power? Well, he didn’t have too much ground to judge this specific aspect of his. Dark Choco had been the same before he had stolen the sword and received its curse.

“As for me,” Licorice chatted, “I like-”

“Writing.” The prince cut in. “You also like pie and pastries, have an affinity for dark and dessert magic, and named your favorite licorice minions. You are focused on what people can do for you

over most other things. You're good with kids yet terrible with anyone older.”

The reaper was struck speechless. He wanted to say something, then decided against it, resembling a fish in the process. It was a bit funny, watching him struggle with the horror of being known.

Dark Choco felt a bit proud of his absolute shock. Licorice had obviously not expected the prince to be so observant, and while Dark Choco was never as good with his words as the reaper or the priestess, he could remember specific facts about the people he interacts with and lives with, things they had never overtly displayed or spoken aloud.

The other finally found his voice, raising it in protest.

“No, that has to be a fluke. No way you noticed all these things about me! I demand another example.” He pointed at him accusingly. “Do Pomegranate!”

Should he? The prince did enjoy showing off, just a little.

“Pomegranate values efficiency above all else- she’s the type who focuses on the ends rather than the means. She is vain about her hair and enjoys the praise of others. She hates the sound of bells and always covers her mouth when she lies, but that isn’t the only time she does it.”

Licorice put his hand to his cheek, appearing to think hard. No doubt he was recalling all the times she had performed this exact gesture and what it could mean. That type of doubt, that the prince had so often associated with interpretable actions, was now settling over someone else. Looking back, how many of her words to the reaper could have been falsehoods? Pomegranate covered her mouth often, as his memory goes. She even did so the first time they met.

Come with me, if you want a second chance at life.

Suddenly, the thought wasn’t so humorous.

Licorice finally spoke again. “I think I have a few new things to add to my journal. All I had previously for your entry was ‘the ability to cook’, and Healer was better at that too.”

The only good thing, more like. The reaper had pulled out his dairy after many conversations with the other cookies of darkness. He wondered what else could be under his page. “Is a food donkey all I am to you? How hurtful. Next time, I’m slipping poison into your meal.”

The reaper gave him a wide-eyed look.

“...that was a joke.”

“Right, right.”

They continued to chat for the whole time Dark Choco trained.

Chapter End Notes

T-minus 2 chapters until our protagonist returns!

All of these plot points, like PV's aversion of responsibility, the god he prays to, the sacrifice spell, the mind lily, and the headless flicker- they are important. They are

related and relevant. I swear T-T.

Keep in mind that these characters are all unreliable narrators in their own way. For example- Dark Choco's perception of someone, though it has its ounces of truth, is not exact to who they actually are.

Misc: A Short Reprieve (2)

Chapter Notes

Shorter Chapter ;-;

Licorice says eat the rich but the rich is just Dark Choco.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Red Velvet was leaving. As much as he was also worried for Pure Vanilla, he could not keep his hounds unattended indefinitely. Although they had become old enough to see each other as friends rather than foes, they had yet to outgrow the stage of challenging the older cake hounds' authority and trying to set their value among the herd. Due to this, the hybrid reluctantly bade the castle goodbye.

Normally, he would be in good spirits to leave the castle with its cloying scent of bitterness, envy, and well-concealed pain. However, he had come to see that the Dark Enchantress may have caused the pain of someone he liked, and he would have trouble coming to terms with that fact.

Pomegranate could deduce this much with ease. He had been rather troubled and kept from speaking to the rest of them. When Dark Choco had asked what had led Pure Vanilla to his stasis, the other had mentioned his mother.

He stood at a crossroads. Red Velvet could either accept what his mother had done and continue to live on as normal, or act in accordance with his screaming instincts and admit that he had witnessed something deeply wrong. There was a third option, of course, if he truly wished to turn his head and fake ignorance- denial.

Pomegranate was not kind enough to grant him that escape.

If Red Velvet wanted to follow the Dark Enchantress, he could not do so half-heartedly. By choosing to stay with his mother, he sacrificed a peaceful life, the lives of his hounds, and the few people who wouldn't care about his hybrid nature. If he wanted to fight against the world for making him half a beast, then he could not do so stewing away in regret. She used what was arguably her most powerful tool: a utilization of her abilities that only her level of proficiency allowed. The priestess peered into his fate, changing how she would act in every potential future that she viewed and the ramifications of her actions. Dozens of dips into the fabric of time would leave her exhausted, but this way, she could find the path that cut him the deepest.

In the end, Pomegranate settled on a simple manipulation. She entered his mind and looked around, searching for a memory that would fulfill the purpose she wanted. Thankfully, the general had no practice in the mind arts like a mage would, so she moved around unencumbered by a mental avatar. She reached into the recesses of the charred cage in the center of his identity and pulled out an old, ragged pelt of a cakehound's severed hind leg, stuffed and sewn like it was meant to be a child's doll.

What a fragile little thing, to be at the center of the general's heart.

Like a broken vase, memories flowed off the stuffed animal part. Small flashes of burning flames and a desperate clinging onto softness, then the alien light of a rift opened before him...

She grasped what she sought. A single memory of the Dar Enchantress carrying a young Red Velvet from the devastation as he buried his face in her neck. The sorceress's softly spoken words played over the memory, words from another time, but associated with the same comfort.

I love you.

The memory, despite its simple and positive place in his mind, was not dredged out of compassion. No, this note served as a reminder, a constant drag on the general's psyche, a proverbial stab to his heart. As long as it continued to fester in his mind, he would not be able to ignore his impending crossroad, his flaw.

For Red Velvet's greatest flaw was his own perception of love.

~~~~~

For some reason, the general had left his dog with them, along with a request for Dark Choco to feed it. The prince didn't know how he managed to get roped into this shit again but Red Velvet had seemed truly despairing at the fact that he couldn't stay to see the healer recover and he didn't want to pile onto the hybrid's list of worries. Since he had gone, the small brown puppy seemed to have attached itself to Pure Vanilla's side. Maybe it had been one of the ones that he had treated when they first set out to the tower- It didn't look old enough to have a good grasp of orders, so he doubted that Red Velvet had commanded it to stay.

At least the presence of the dog forced him to visit Pure Vanilla every day.

The singular room had none of the quiet bustle of the former floating kingdom's healing quarters, nor the chaos of the Cacao kingdom's makeshift injury room. No one attended to him while he was unconscious, even if Pomegranate truthfully claimed that there was no need. It felt incredibly lonely. Dark Choco had heard that a person in a coma would be able to hear when people talked to them, and although this was not exactly the same, he didn't want to take the chance that Pure Vanilla would be completely alone throughout his stasis. He had no idea if the older cookie would be able to listen when he spoke to him, but he did anyway.

He talked about nearly anything and everything that crossed his mind. He recounted how he passed his days to the man, and when he realized that he just repeated the same activities each time, he would try and pinpoint something that made his day stand out. On some level, this did spark a faint appreciation of the world in some long-dead part of him. He would include the healer in his day, in the little way that he can.

Then he fed the dog.

Among the more positive developments was Licorice. The reaper had chosen to speak to him more over the last week or so, and they had been rather amicable. Though Licorice was the one talking for the most part, the prince lent him an attentive ear since he had limited the number of personal insults directed his way. If you squint, you could even say that the two were getting along. He had relayed this to the sleeping healer with more excitement than probably deserved.

The others popped in sometimes too.

It seemed like everyone had the same idea. Licorice came once and word-dumped for several hours, and Crepe slipped in to poke and command him to wake up a couple of times.

Pomegranate...he wasn't aware of her movements, but she had probably visited as well. After the argument, he developed doubts over her part in his condition.

The other had been dismissive when talking about his missions. He was still wary about how the dynamic between him and their master. And yet- he still can't shake the notion that it might have been his fault.

Pomegranate had told him that he was a burden, and although he knew that she purposefully said it to get to him, the insecurity seeped in anyway. Besides, this wasn't the only proof that suggested that Dark Choco could be at fault for his emotional turmoil. The healer himself had expressed his frustration with him when the Dark Enchantress pulled that trick at the meeting. Were his words then just for show? Would the Dark Enchantress accept them so easily if they lacked a grain of truth? Pure Vanilla had told him that his frustrations were directed elsewhere, but the emotions he displayed were definitely real.

The prince groaned and leaned the back of his head against the wall. There he goes, making this all about himself.

He shouldn't worry about it too much. Pure Vanilla told him that it was his identity rather than Dark Choco that bothered him at that time, and Pure Vanilla wouldn't lie. He was far stronger and more knowledgeable of a person than the prince would ever be. Dark Choco trusted that he would be okay. As much as he wanted to help with his stasis, he couldn't do more than talk to him, and there wasn't any point mulling over things that he was powerless to change.

As usual, he chose to blow off his anxieties with exercise. He picked up his cursed sword and went to the training room. Licorice was there, watching, and he gave the reaper a nod before beginning his practiced training. Swing, slash, stab. He moved on to more complicated movements, using the blade's weight to propel his actions.

It felt a bit wrong to care for the Strawberry Jam sword so dearly, now knowing that that attachment was fabricated, but this knowledge didn't dampen his care of it, a clear indicator of this "protection". Even now, It sheened with how he had ground and polished it.

Licorice studied the movements of the sword, already recognizing the movements after spending a multitude of days analyzing his training regime. Since deciding to stay close to Healer, he had come to accept that he will probably have some kind of conflict with the Dark Enchantress. Licorice, in those circumstances, will make his judgment on who he will side with. The annoying thing, however, was the blonde's devotion to others who also did not necessarily deserve his affection- including the warrior before him.

Dark Choco had called him family. Licorice had his suspicions about what kind of people he could possibly know to make him consider an immortal man something as close as that, but whoever the warrior could be, that did not change the reaper's disdain for him. He disliked the fact that having Healer also meant potentially sacrificing his time and position for Dark Choco.

The warrior was the only cookie of darkness who was visibly disloyal to their master, which was the reason that Pomegranate would always single him out. The Cacao kingdom remained the jewel in his eyes, that worthless devotion that led to his senseless pain. Yet he was also meek to the punishments they dole out, a placid doormat in the face of a priestess who Licorice loathed and also loathed him for submitting to.

That stupid fool fell for the reaper's little act of faux kindness so easily, yet flummoxed him at the same time. No matter how closely Licorice followed, no matter how closely he looked, he couldn't see it.

"I don't understand what's so special about you."

The prince stopped his movements, the sword coming to rest at his side. "What?"

"I've tried to understand, but maybe I'm missing something. Maybe Healer sees something I don't, but I just don't get how you're important to him. You two have almost nothing in common."

"Why...why even ask such a thing?" He was bristling, now. "He's my uncle, my godfather. It makes sense that he would be fond of me."

"Do family ties really mean anything? Jam is just jam, and I doubt you two are even related by blood."

It would have been different if the question was purely innocent, but there was a kind of twist to the question that made him aware that Licorice was prodding him on purpose. Instead of asking him how their connection came about, he was stabbing with a needle, asking why the warrior was worth caring about.

There it showed its ugly face again; the reason that Dark Choco had disliked Licorice.

The reaper had no inherent loyalty to anyone. He saw everything as a transaction- information for information, a favor for a favor. He spat upon his still-existing devotion to his kingdom and Pomegranate's service to their master while groveling on his knees for his scraps of power. Licorice was a coward who stood for nothing.

"If Healer is who I think he is, then he may feel some kind of obligation because of your father. But you tried to kill your father, right? I'm not sure whether Healer would still help you if he knew."

"That is, quite literally, none of your business. Our interpersonal relationships are our own to deal with. I don't see why you are always out for my blood."

The reaper slinked around, placing himself in front of the exit. "I like him, you see. He's a man that I want to be around. But I don't want to deal with a burden like you. I think it would be better if he stopped associating with a *selfish monster*."

How could he, using that against him-!

Dark Choco picked up his sword and charged at the mage, swinging the large sword at him. He only intended to scare the reaper away, but this time the other didn't run. Before the blade could come close to Licorice, it glanced off a clear shield.

"I may not be able to fight you due to the Dark Enchantress's order, but I am still able to defend myself." Licorice knocked on the shield in front of him. "Healer taught me some pretty nifty spells."

"I don't see why I should stand here and listen to your drivel about how nobody loves me," he ground out. "**Get out of my way.**"

"N-not before you tell me who you are." Despite the shake in his voice, he was steadfast. He wanted his suspicions fulfilled, so that he may...

Dark Choco briefly considered slicing his head clean of his body, an accompanying image provided by his curse. It whispered desperately, goading him into the act of violence. He internally shrugged off the urge, sheathing the sword across his back. If Licorice was trying so hard to find out his identity, he doubted that he would be left alone even if he got out of this confrontation. He might as well give him what he wants.

“Fine! Since you so dearly wish to know, I’ll tell you.” He looked down at the mage coldly. “I am Dark Choco, son of Dark Cacao, former prince of the Cacao Kingdom. Are you happy now?”

He slapped a hand over his mouth. “Pffh...heh.” He doubled over, unable to contain himself, his calm mask completely cracking before the disgusted warrior. “hehehh...hahahaha!”

He may finally validate this feeling: this justice, this hatred, this pleasure in seeing another’s misfortune.

Oh, Licorice.

Licorice, licorice, licorice. No matter how grand his dreams were, he was what he had always been- a piece of trash who lashed out at everyone around him. He picked apart the warrior’s supposed character flaws with all the focus of a diamond inspector, looking for an imperfection that would justify his hatred. The reaper assigned him traits he could use- his passivity in the face of torment, his loyalty towards the Cacao kingdom, his stupidity to hold on to said loyalty...all to justify his pain, his personal vendetta against him.

“I’m happy, you know?”

“What on Earthbread are you talking about?” he grumbled.

“It’s great that you’re my prince. I’m relieved that you, of all people, were treated so harshly by Pomegranate.” Dark Choco drew back in revulsion, but the reaper kept going. “At first, when I had joined, I thought that what she did to you went overboard, that it was barbaric. I did actually ask her to stop, you know?”

“What changed, then?” he asked coldly.

“Pomegranate approached me afterward and asked me why I defended you. And it got me thinking. You were a stranger, and I didn’t owe you anything, so why should I bother? I’m not lifting a finger just because we share a birthplace. And that’s not even considering that your loyalty obviously remained with the kingdom. I hated that place! The kingdom was in dire straits for most of my life, and we were all on the brink of starving every winter. Many did!” He said all this in a jeering tone, as if there was something worth mocking about their fates.

“And that’s what you kept your loyalty to; that’s what you represented to me. I heard you scream and thought, ‘Oh, this feels like justice, for what I’ve been through.’ And of all the loyal warriors it could have been, you turned out to be my loathsome kingdom’s prince. Isn’t that just hilarious?”

“You speak as though I have been actively choosing to harm my citizens! Do you think I control the blizzards? The dreaded sea? While I still resided in my kingdom, I had actively tried my hardest to provide for the people under me!”

This was true. Dark Choco did want the best for the villages under his rule, going above and beyond to bring them some respite from the resource scarcity. He would travel to them and bring what they lacked. He had looked towards taking his father’s place on the throne and enacting his own decisions and policy changes so that he could better provide for them. Sometimes, he even opposed the decisions that the king had made, not that it made much of a difference.

“That’s not enough! If you really wanted to help the people of the kingdom, then tear down your palace by brick and brick and sell it to foreigners for food. Kings and princes should die among their citizens- that’s your responsibility!”

Dark Choco wanted to fight this point, but was struck by two sudden realizations:

1. Licorice was right. Dark Cacao and he had been sitting at the top of their nation and therefore the general well-being of the people rested on their shoulders. They controlled and indirectly caused their sorry states, and therefore they should provide for them at their own expense. Of course, Dark Cacao may give up some food, but he certainly wasn't letting himself nor his son starve. Dark Choco didn't want to die in that way either. It was unfair, but also simply the way the world worked.

2. This must be the reason, or one of the reasons, that Pure Vanilla despises the idea of responsibility. If a ruler should live and die with their subjects, then by that logic he should have been killed the day the Vanillan kingdom fell.

“Ah, I didn't mean...I don't want that to happen.”

The reaper didn't want to be like Pomegranate. As much as he had no problem telling the other cookie to die or off himself, he couldn't stand wishing the same demise on Dark Choco as the priestess had wished on him.

(Foot, meet mouth.)

Dark Choco regarded him with bleak humor. “So that's the reason you hated me. All this time, I thought you just enjoyed someone else being the target of ridicule.”

This was exhausting. He had about enough of listening to Licorice vent. As much as it brought some unpleasant facts to light, the fact remained that he had placed his anger against the Cacao kingdom onto his shoulders before discerning who he was. The thought of an innocent watcher in his place, being viewed the same way, made him feel a sense of injustice. The prince went to the corner of the training room and dragged over a chair, placing it before Licorice, who crossed his arms defiantly, still in front of the exit. He stepped onto it.

“Huh...?” The reaper seemed to figure out what he was doing. “Hey- wait-!”

He vaulted cleanly over the shield and onto the other side. He took off, leaving the other cookie in the dust. There weren't many places he could go, since he wasn't one of the few people who were able to descend from the castle due to the broken teleporter, but he made his way through the city and as far as the edge of the clouds, slowing down as the ashen plains appeared below.

Licorice followed him, first with magic, then on foot when he ran out of sigils that could possibly help. It was impressive that he deigned to travel so far, despite being too unfit to keep up with the warrior. That didn't stop him from running around searching for the other when Dark Choco was out of sight though. Around half an hour later Licorice managed to find him. The reaper saw him and finally doubled over, panting.

The prince had to give him some credit for trying so hard.

“I don't understand why you insist on chasing me, but since you have come all the way out here, I might as well hear it.”

The thin cookie, still bent over, pointed at him accusingly. “The...\*pant\* the prince of the Cacao kingdom... \*pant\* is that why Healer is helping you break your curse? So that you can escape and reclaim your destiny or some shit?!”

“He would do this for anyone. He's that kind of person.”

He had been teaching Licorice magic without anything in return. He had always been the type to do things for others. Perhaps Pure Vanilla would not have been quite so protective over anyone else,

but that does not mean he wouldn't try to help them.

Licorice groaned. "That guy really can't help his good nature, huh..." He trembled for a moment before shouting. "Fine, then! As long as Healer wants you to return, then I will do likewise! I'll study your curse with him. Fuck, I'll even lie to the Dark Enchantress if I have to."

This was a sudden deviation from his earlier ideas. "You just spent an inordinate amount of time expressing your hatred toward me and everything I stand for. Don't say you've had a change of heart in... what, thirty minutes?"

"This isn't about you, but Healer. I don't like having an unpaid debt."

"Healer isn't expecting anything for teaching you. You're the one calling it a debt."

"Shut up! He's been good to me, so I won't do anything to get in his way, since your well-being means a lot to him. But don't get the wrong idea, I hate your existence and therefore I can't let you go so easily. I exist as a product of you and your father's mistakes, and therefore I will continue to remind you of that, even if that means following you back to my dreadful kingdom and hovering over your shoulder with every breath you take. I will make sure that no one needs to flee the kingdom just to survive. There won't be another Licorice cookie."

It was his turn to laugh.

It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that Dark Choco craved companionship- quite the opposite, in fact. He was quite the social butterfly in his younger years, and although the people around him have faded into the wind, that yearning persisted all through the years. Licorice's declaration, despite its hostility, contained striking similarities to the pledge's he heard over the years, given to his father while he listened from the sidelines. The watchers had pledged to stand behind Dark Cacao and spend their lives serving the kingdom. When boiled down to its bare bones, what Licorice said was not so different.

*Someone to stand beside me for the rest of my life.*

It was a nice fantasy, though somewhat discolored by the person who made it. But Dark Choco wasn't going to complain. If only he had someone at his shoulder, telling him what an idiot he had been when he reached for that cursed sword, then his life would have been drastically altered for the better.

"You want to haunt me for all my mistakes? For All the deaths on my head? I welcome you to do it! Every king needs his adversarial advisor, and you could fulfill that position. Even if that position doesn't exist yet, I'll make one. I'll let you carry out this justified punishment of yours. Follow me to my father's kingdom and climb up the stairs until you stand by the throne. Haunt me until the day I die!

The reaper seemed thrown off by Dark Choco's passionate support of his grudge.

"...weirdo," he muttered half-heartedly.

"And just so you know, Licorice, I've never liked you either."

"Oh, Fuck you!"

"Fuck you too."

~~~~~

It had been another several days.

Dark Choco was half-dozing near a wrapped picture of some cake creature when the hound near him suddenly started barking. He snapped to lucidness immediately as the puppy ran around in a few circles and jumped upon the bed. The slim figure in the sheets slowly pushed himself up, groaning and trying to tame his amazing bedhead. He scooped up against the headboard and held out his arms for the hound to leap into, which it did with a wagging tail.

The prince also hurried to his bedside, hugging him with equal ferocity. He accepted the embrace without hesitation, smiling at the reception.

Pure Vanilla had awoken.

Chapter End Notes

The stuffed leg in Red Velvet's mind was the leg of the dog he was holding at the beginning of chapter 6. Have fun with that information :)

eww, so much dialogue. We're doing more plot since the protagonist is now back with us. A few relationships did drastically shift during these two chapters (PV-Pom and D Choco-Lic), which is important for the rest of the story.

I find it funny how much of several characters' motivations it's in to NOT be like Pomegranate.

Pure Vanilla: Breakthroughs

Chapter Notes

Something about this chapter was rather hard to write...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Pure Vanilla awoke feeling much better than before.

Although it doubled as such, the purpose of his stasis was more than rest. While his body had been inert, he receded into his mind. He was still thinking, analyzing, and compartmentalizing everything that had occurred, putting everything into its place in a way that would serve his mental state.

Being a mage had the benefit of developing a mental avatar through magic, which people otherwise had to cultivate and learn many years of meditation for. Their powers were bolstered with and affected by their mental state, and vice versa. If a magic user's mental state is too poor, then they would experience a deterioration of their senses as well. Hallucinations, paranoia, and a breakdown of grasp over reality were all par for the course.

So through all that time, he had quite literally been organizing things around his mind. He went through the interactions he had with others and clarified his feelings towards them, and slowly worked his way through the multiple events that had led to his sleep. Pure Vanilla replayed his memories of the Dark Enchantress and concluded that she would never be redeemed through his actions, by the very nature of their relationship. She had power over him and enjoyed dangling the pieces of the truth down to him as jagged hooks. She was too antagonistic and watched him too closely for him to do anything. Even if he genuinely expressed a wish for her to change, she would probably turn that admission on its head to manipulate him- she was so keen on inflicting pain. If nothing else, he could trust that the Dark Enchantress would tell the truth to hurt him.

If anyone could successfully sway the sorceress, it would be Pomegranate cookie. Ah, the priestess. Here was another person who underwent a paradigm shift in his perception. He puzzled over her contrasting actions and words. She spoke with sweet poison, not truly taking a side, and offered him a way to protect himself from her master. He pored over her especially carefully.

Instead of trying to bridge the gap between the contrasting actions, the healer focused on the interactions she had with him and picked out meaningful snippets, building on what they could have in common. The pieces of the whole slowly slipped together: her interest in fate, her satisfaction at his actions toward the kingdom, the offer to help, and various other oddities, all of them hinged from a singular ability- her power of foresight. Though it seemed like a blessing, it was more of a curse. Pure Vanilla understood that. Immortality was very much the same. If nothing else, He could trust that Pomegranate would take any action for the sake of "fate". She saw him as nothing but a piece that got in her way, if what she said to him about being a pawn was any indication. He had pretty much expected her to show up there sometime.

Other than Pomegranate's initial visit, no one intruded on his mindscape. This didn't mean that he was unaware of the others who had visited him while he was in slumber. He was semi-conscious for the most part, able to hear the cookies who spoke to him and able to see them with his flower, which had been sitting in the corner. Yes, he did hear the argument that occurred outside. It

certainly gave him some fodder for thought.

Since he was stripped of his kingship, he always felt a bit of surprise when cookies remember him beyond conversations or the time he actively spends with him. The fact that they specifically went out of their way to visit him meant a lot.

Dark Choco had come every day. He would mostly talk about himself, but included the interesting things he had seen so he could share it with the healer. Pure Vanilla soaked in the attention, making the most of his words, repeating them over and over in his mindscape as he tried his best to visualize the nice sunset, a pretty fish in the river, and a particularly excellent swing of the sword. The prince had tried to make sure that he wouldn't lose the beautiful things in life, without expecting anything in return.

It was such an unnecessary kindness, but the fact that he did it anyway, purely for his sake- it was...moving. The prince kept the silence at bay, so he wouldn't be given the opportunity to feel loneliness.

What a display of a simple connection between people.

After this, he could not deny that he was attached to Dark Choco as well.

"Pure Vanilla! You're awake! How are you feeling?"

"I feel refreshed. The last month or so have been taxing, but I'm ready to face it again."

"What..." The prince stooped himself from asking what was so taxing that it forced him to go into stasis. Pure Vanilla also wasn't keen to tell him, since the noble man would no doubt try to take the brunt of the burden onto himself. "So, you're better now," he finished lamely.

"Yes. Your company certainly helped. I appreciate it, truly."

"Ah, so I wasn't talking into thin air. Okay." He turned away and moved to get up. "You're welcome."

Pure Vanilla pulled on his sleeve before he could rise. "I don't think I fully communicated how much your presence meant to me. I care about you deeply, and I know that it's reciprocated. You've shown me a great kindness, Chocoling. You're a good person, and if Dark Cacao overlooks that, then he is a fool in that regard."

The prince was at a loss for words.

Pure Vanilla shifted in his blankets. "It's rather selfish of me to say that, isn't it? I'm only making it harder on you, for when you eventually leave for the Cacao kingdom." It would also be harder for him to let the prince go, even though leaving this stifling castle would be to his benefit. There were too many years of isolation and pain here, sticking to the walls like tar.

The prince was purposefully avoiding the gaze of his flower. "What's wrong with that? Of course I'm happy that you care about me so much. Anyone would be." His voice sounded a little strained. He fiddled with the sword at his side, a nervous tick. "...Pure Vanilla...when I am finally able to leave, are you going with me?"

The healer gripped the edges of his blankets tighter, frowning into the creases of the sheets.

"That's okay. I didn't really think so."

Pure Vanilla knew that he felt protective of him. He was the one person the prince can lean on, so Dark Choco valued him more than he probably deserved. But he could not be too dependent on him, since the healer would not accompany him to the kingdom. He had to deal with the Dark Enchantress first.

“Dark Choco, promise that when the opportunity to escape arises, take it. Don’t worry about me or my feelings. I’ll finish what I must.”

“Hmm, I’ll make my choice when the time comes.” He hugged Pure Vanilla. “By the way, we kept the garden alive while you were asleep, but we aren’t nearly as good at it, so I think the plants will be relieved at your return. You should take a look at them later.” He stood and left in a dignified manner, then swerved onto the side of the hall with an elated leap, one arm over his face. *He thinks I’m a good person!* His joy was unseen by anyone else.

The healer sat in the messy bed, what he wanted to other to know still on the tip of his tongue.

You’re my reason for living.

He couldn’t say that. He would be dooming that boy to be trapped forever. When he manages to get away from the castle-

The thought vanished into thin air. There was no point in contemplating this yet.

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The garden outside had been taken care of, if a little overwatered, but he was enthused that the plants survived in the first place. Pure Vanilla didn’t ask anyone to manage the garden before going dark. He was too out of it to think of his plants, but the other cookies knew they meant a lot to him so they took over. He felt another wave of affection for them. Fresh daisies bloomed in plantations, and plenty of the beans had sprouted as well. He collected the food that had grown, borne of his and Dark Choco’s labor. It was nice, to have something to show for his efforts, and it can be used to help the village.

The Raisin Village...thinking of them also came with the association of wafflebots. Pure Vanilla bagged all the beans and lugged the sack to the hangar. The garage opened automatically, keyed to him by the child since before his missions. They were sitting in a high chair, a welding mask strapped on while they soldered together parts of the Goliath. It was almost complete.

“Strawberry Crepe.”

The child ignored him, continuing to fire their mig.

He set down his bag, leaning against the wall as he waited for them to finish. They seemed intent on dragging it in as long as possible, though, and even after twenty or so minutes, the sparks of the welder continued to fly.

He decided that they won’t talk to him at this rate. He would need to interrupt them. Strawberry Crepe continued to ignore him as he reached over and gently turned off the machine. They didn’t resist as he pulled it out of their hands and set it aside. Pure Vanilla then retreated away from the child, giving them space to react.

Strawberry Crepe took off the mask. They stayed facing the goliath for a few seconds, before taking a deep breath and finally acknowledging him.

“Pure Vanilla...”

The healer felt strangely chastised.

“What were you thinking?! Suddenly falling into a coma for weeks! I thought you were going to die or something!”

This was not the first time he ditched the child and dropped off the face of the earth- he had forced them away at the Institute too. It was by no means intentional, but the fact still remained.

“If you scanned me, you would have known that I was in perfect health,” the healer said weakly.

“I hate to admit it, but my machines aren’t perfect. What am I supposed to think when someone falls into a long, unidentifiable coma? And the part about being in perfect health isn’t even true, Mr. massive-scar-and-missing-entrails.”

The scar they were childishly pointing out was a crush injury that had healed multiple years ago. It was obviously not the reason for his reclusion, but Strawberry Crepe knew this, and expounding on this point would make them feel as though he wasn’t listening so he refrained. Besides, he had a good guess about what exactly they were bothered by.

“I was not in the right frame of mind to inform anyone before going into stasis, and I can’t guarantee that this won’t happen again in the future. However, I won’t recede into my mind forever or run away without telling you, so don’t worry. I will make sure that you are okay before making such decisions.”

“That’s not it! I was worried about you...”

Pure Vanilla was surprised. So they were concerned with him, and solely him. They weren’t upset over the notion of being left alone- no it didn’t occur to them that he would do so in the first place. He shuffled over and patted the child on the head. How precious.

“Stop already...” they whined, slapping his hand away.

“I’ll try to take better care of myself, okay?” He pacified them. “So don’t worry about me.”

They huffed. “Fine. But I’m holding you to that!”

With the dragon in the room addressed, they quickly delved into other matters. The mechanic brought him up to speed about the developments. They revealed that the bot had been damaged, then strategically reassured him that they still won’t be resuming patrols or destroying the village. That child was going to drive him into a heart attack one of these days. They also showed him what they had been doing after the bot had been retrieved.

“I’ve installed cameras into the bot, as well as a few others, so I’ll be able to pull up their view onto my screens. I’ll be sending them down to the village.”

“What about the video calls? I thought that having a visual feed transmitted would be more difficult to add than audio.” He had heard enough about the wafflebots to know about this at least. Cell lines were invented before videos for a reason.

“It’s easier, but I won’t be using the calls yet. For now, I’ll just spectate them. I’ll be able to pick up what they think of the bots, and what they think of me. There’s no way they haven’t noticed that there’s someone behind the wafflebots, so I want to know their perception of me.”

This was fair enough, but the mechanic had gone somewhat overboard with the number of bots that they outfitted with this spying ability. Pure Vanilla trusted them not to do anything untoward

toward the villagers, but the sheer number would probably be a bit intimidating. He sent a quick prayer that the villagers would not panic at being surrounded by the machines.

They repeated the ritual of going to the edge of the clouds to send them off. He brought over the beans that he had grown. He was finally able to give them some kind of support from up here. Strawberry Crepe commanded the original wafflebot to deliver the food to the village. Several more bots accompanied it, coded with orders not to engage. They wouldn't attack or help the villagers, but simply patrol the edges of the village. Strawberry Crepe had sent them as their eyes.

There's probably something to be said about this kind of overseer-esque monitoring. It was completely overkill, especially since the village didn't hold any kind of weapon or secret. It was just a ragged little town.

This time, the machines descended on their own because of the broken teleporter. After the bots' departure, the child quickly holed back in the hangar, saying that the cameras had taken too much time away from regular maintenance. Pure Vanilla was shut out of the lace as the dangerous technology was unstrapped from the walls.

He decided to visit the other cookie that he hadn't yet seen.

After some wandering, he found him. The two Cacaoins were talking in furious whispers, and when he came into view, the reaper kicked Chocoling in the shin.

Pure Vanilla waved to them. Dark Choco had spoken very positively about his newfound friendship with Licorice while he had been out, so he was expecting them to get along nicely. "You two have made up during my absence, haven't you?"

"Absolutely not!"

"I hate this guy!"

"..." He did think they were friends now. This didn't seem too friendly, but for some reason, they were still spending time together. Whatever antagonistic camaraderie they have now, he was not touching with a ten-foot pole.

"Healer cookie!" Licorice took the chance to confront him, raving about how his identity had finally been revealed due to the prince's blunder. Dark Choco looked away guiltily as he went on about secret identities and keeping him in the dark. "I finally discovered who you are. How many immortals are in close proximity to an ancient, let alone someone like my kingdom's king?" He laughed. "After all this time, I never expected you to be..."

Dark Choco sighed in defeat.

"...White Lily!"

*Eh?*

The prince made a noise resembling a squeak toy.

Pure Vanilla was rather at a loss for how he should react.

"Licorice, are you saying that I look like a woman?"

The squeak was longer and louder this time. Dark Choco quickly got up and shuffled away, failing to hide his shaking shoulders.

“I- I mean- if someone is standing at a distance and you don’t speak, yes! People can get things wrong, so it’s not too unlikely that history would mistakenly immortalize you as female. And besides, robes are pretty close to a dress so people naturally substitute them for each other!”

Pure Vanilla put a hand over his face. He wasn’t very annoyed being mistaken for a woman- it has happened before- but the reaper slipped comically off the mark of his identity. He was so close yet so far. “Licorice. Which other ancient cookie is a mage, wields a flower staff, and is counted among the ancient heroes?” He gestured at his sunflower despairingly. “You cannot tell me that this is a lily.”

“Then you must be...Pure Vanilla?!” he boggled.

The healer nodded.

“THE Pure Vanilla? The beacon of goodness and light mages everywhere?” Licorice looked confused yet euphoric as the reveal slowly sank in. “I can’t believe it. Pure Vanilla, who is so beloved by everyone, knows dark magic...haha, imagine what everyone would think if they knew.”

He deflated. There it was, the response he dreaded. The perfect image he had crafted and preserved for years still inconvenienced him, even in this desiccated castle. “Rumors are just rumors and my reputation isn’t the same as my person. Please don’t impose them on me. Treat me as you always have.”

“Heh, that’s such a positive depiction though...” He quickly backtracked, not wanting to be insensitive. “But I can get why you wouldn’t want it! A reputation like that must be a lot of pressure. I’ll continue to treat you with disrespect.”

Pure Vanilla was suddenly hit with the idea to do something funny. “Twirl in a circle,” he commanded.

The reaper followed the instruction without thinking, doing an awkward spin in front of him.

Pure Vanilla gave him an angelic smile. “You were saying something about disrespect?”

“Don’t push it, old man.”

Since the reaper had decided that he wanted to aid him with creaking Dark Choco’s curse, he joined in the healer’s plans for the daily sword-stealing. While Pure Vanilla created his next trap for the prince, the other complained about his fellow Cacao. He criticized everything about him, from his looks to his personality to unrelated factors. The healer was rather peeved but stayed quiet. He wondered just how much he was going to talk bad about the other before stopping, and if he was bound to say so much, why the reaper even wanted to help in the first place.

“He barely talks to anyone else! I think it’s basic manners that a prince would be sociable.”

Licorice wasn’t the most sociable person either.

“You’d think a guy that’s descended from the king would have a nicer face!”

Dark Choco would probably throttle him for the insult and the added bonus of implying that Dark Cacao was hot. Pure Vanilla spent more time than he should contemplating whether to pass the word on.

“And he’s always lugging around that sword. He trains with it every day and sharpens it almost as

often, and he has no other hobbies. He should marry it already.”

Pure Vanilla snapped to attention at the immature insult. “I’m sorry, can you please repeat that?”

He flinched, finally realizing that deriding him to the healer’s face was not a great idea. “Oh, was that too insulting? Uh-”

“No, no, what he does with the Strawberry Jam sword. Repeat what you said.”

“He...trains with and sharpens it a bunch?”

This was news to him. Pure Vanilla had never walked in on the prince directly sharpening his sword, so he hadn’t thought about weapon upkeep. He had tested the Strawberry Jam sword with a bunch of factors such as force, heat, acid, pressure, and multiple types of magic. None have caused any change to the sword’s physical state, so how was Dark Choco able to use a whetstone on it?

There must be some difference between himself and the warrior. Perhaps he was able to manipulate the sword as its host. Unfortunately, Dark Choco was influenced to protect the sword at the cost of his life and would refuse to destroy it. If this was the case, Pure Vanilla could use some form of his illusion to try and cause him to damage his sword. He preferred not to trick the prince beyond the bounds of what they normally did. As much as it was programmed into his psyche, he genuinely cared for the weapon, and the healer didn’t want him to feel guilt over the act.

It was a potential solution, however, and must be tested. He didn’t have to like to know the test was necessary.

He thought about the conundrum for a while longer as Licorice shifted uncomfortably, mistakenly believing that the healer was disapproving of his rude remark.

There was another possibility that could be the difference, and Pure Vanilla was more sure of it the longer he pondered the problem.

While the sword was a physical weapon, it was also a curse, and therefore a spell in its essence. Spells, whether it be a vow or an ordinary levitation, would factor in intent. If there was a lack of intent the spell would be unaffected by physicality, and if the sword sensed intent to destroy it, then the aspect of indestructibility forged by its creators would come into play. If this was the case, then he must commend its creator for being clever. In most circumstances, the wielder of the sword one would be the only one touching it, and they weren’t going to intend to destroy it. Pure Vanilla would not be able to hold the Strawberry Jam sword and destroy it at the same time, since his intent would be read. Someone else must wield it in the meanwhile.

If the test took two people, then it was truly opportune that Licorice decided to join him. He patted the reaper on the back. “Just for that, your life is spared.”

The reaper was confused and rather freaked out by that statement.

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It was night again. It seemed that only during this time Pomegranate would choose to meet him. While he lived in the castle had found a particularly large window to sit by, which he used to look out at his empty city, illuminated by the moon. On particularly lonely nights he would go and sit by the window and simply take it all in. This was where the priestess would accost him, to try and convince him to accept his deal, and where she would sit in silence when he failed to be persuaded.

This was the first time that he had sought her out, rather than the other way around. She stood up

and away from the windowsill as he approached, seeming unsurprised that he had arrived.

He bowed to her. "Thank you, Pomegranate."

"What are you spewing on about?"

"That time, when you said to put on a show for the Dark Enchantress, or the other time, with the warning about Dark Choco jumping from the edge of the clouds, and when you told me to leave the castle. You've been helping us all along, even though I never agreed to the deal."

She gave her lap an analyzing look. "I did help. It's nothing personal; I don't care about you. I am simply doing what it takes to create my ideal future."

"I'm still grateful for the advice."

"If you're so grateful, then pack your bags and leave the cookies of darkness," she grumbled. "Your very presence deviates our fates from the ideal."

He had always been rather curious about her relationship to the notion known as fate. She had asked him about it and he had never quite forgotten it. It was the first thing she had said to him.

"Pardon the inquiry, but what exactly is an ideal fate to you?"

"The most ideal fate is a timeline that clashes with chance. Think of our potential future as a numbers game: Each possibility is made up of a large pool of variables that must occur to bring that future to pass. I can influence them to some extent through my actions, but I cannot perfectly manipulate the other cookies into fitting the variables. People are inherently too complex for that. On top of that, finding the best possible future is like picking one among millions of choices and having everything line up perfectly- it's near impossible. I'd like to think I am more realistic than that. I tend to choose my "ideal" path based on only a few favorable variables, that also occur in enough futures to have a high chance to occur."

So this was the basis for Pomegranate's control. It was truly a detached perspective, where she viewed the people in her vicinity closer as pawns than people in their own right. He could understand how that would be the easiest way, especially considering her power. When she knows every possible way a cookie reacts or responds to things, they are reduced to a malleable cog. Every word, every act, would feed into the variable, the roll of the dice.

He could extrapolate some facts from her explanation of her ability. Pomegranate used her powers in a far more analytical manner than he expected. It seemed that of all the characters in the cookies of darkness, the priestess was the true mastermind.

Pure Vanilla brought instability, brought change. The most stable state for a person to be in was an established pattern (a hierarchy), and by arriving, he had drastically shifted every cookies' behavior towards themselves and each other. Pomegranate would be hard-pressed to predict everything to the same level of accuracy when such changes take place. No wonder she wanted him gone.

It had also become clear to him now that she was, at least in some limited capacity, manipulating the Dark Enchantress. There was no way that the sorceress was aware of this. He was confident that she would not tolerate having strings on her. The notion of having someone lesser successfully trick her would be repugnant to her, even before her change.

Pomegranate and Dark Choco were the only ones old enough to precede White Lily's transformation. During the argument, She had said that she was the first of the cookies of darkness,

but that still didn't give Pure Vanilla much when the priestess formally joined the sorceress. He was grateful for the aid that the priestess had given, sparse as it tended to be, but there was one final hurdle for her to pass.

How much of what the Dark Enchantress had done was of her own conception, and how much of it was you?

Was she responsible for the fall of his kingdom...? *Don't jump to hasty conclusions*, he berated himself. *Think about whether she would have orchestrated that tragedy.*

If he was Pomegranate, what would he have done? He needed to know all the variables, he needed to have full control of the situation. The Dark Enchantress, he can maneuver, but all other things are left to circumstances. He needed to weigh the chances that he would choose to destroy an enemy kingdom in the way the sorceress destroyed his.

Control. If she wanted control over the circumstances, then the result must be decisive. She must have either a near-guaranteed loss or victory. The sorceress had to face the rest of the ancients, four against one. Although they had eventually prevailed in that instance, and only thanks to Pure Vanilla's hidden dark magic, the battle could have gone either way with a toss of a coin. Fifty-fifty was the worst kind of inconclusive, no matter which side Pomegranate would have played for, and with the kingdom destroyed and the Dark Enchantress sealed, the result could be considered a Pyrrhic victory on both sides. Only the chaos of battle reigned that day, with strategy and tactics falling to the side. The conclusion was completely left up to chance. It was too uncontrolled.

He doubted that she was responsible.

Pure Vanilla felt rather relieved. Though he wished for an opportunity to shift the blame from White Lily, knowing that the deaths of his people weren't coldly pre-planned by the woman before him was a weight off his chest. Her probable innocence also absolved him of the guilt of his next question.

"Then, if I were to give you a better future than the Dark Enchantress, what would you do?"

She covered the lower half of her sleeve. "Of course, I wouldn't leave the side of my Mistress. My loyalty belongs to her, and her alone. I do not foresee any future where you can provide on such a claim." The sleeve dropped. "...but on the slight chance it happens, I have always been impersonal when it comes to the cookies around me."

So he did have a chance to turn her.

"I shall try my best to impress."

Chapter End Notes

Healer flashback next!

Healer: Origins

Chapter Notes

TW: Buried alive, minor descriptions of injuries

There were two backstory chapters for the Dark Enchantress/White Lily, and this is the first of two for Healer/Pure Vanilla.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Several years ago...

His first memories were of darkness and pain.

He had drifted to consciousness and tried to stand up, only to realize that his lower body was trapped underneath a large rock. His side was burning with pain, and when he struggled fruitlessly to get out something wet seeped out from the cracks. He groaned. A part of his body had definitely been crushed. The feeling subsided somewhat as magic tried to fix it, but when he (a healer, surely, with magic like this) tried to cast a formal spell, nothing occurred.

He was trapped in a cave-in of some sort, with a severe injury, and had no idea who he was. Great. This is about as bad of a situation as one could be in.

At least the crevice he was stuck in wasn't in complete darkness. There was a gem near him, glowing a brilliant blue. Tendrils of magic swirled from it, encompassing the healer. He knew, deep in his gut, that he could not let go of this strange and powerful gem. It was important. Even with most of his memories gone, he understood that. Unfortunately, when he attempted to use it to cast a spell, it still didn't work.

He slowly clawed away at the vanilla plaster, until his nails wore away to nothing and he was bleeding from the tips of each finger. He could not use any spells, so devoid of any sustenance that even his magic was directed at keeping his organs functioning. Without spells he couldn't get free, and without being free he couldn't do anything about his health and magic. The terrible cycle kept swirling.

He was completely trapped. There was nothing he could do except wait. A rather indeterminable amount of time passed while he was trying to dissociate before he heard the faint sounds of movement. It was rather far from him, but something was moving above him!

He tried to speak but only made a breathy cracking noise. The healer gave up on trying to call them and instead dragged himself closer to where the noises were coming from. He pounded on the rocks, desperately praying that whoever was out there would hear him.

He hit the broken pieces for several minutes, until his fist was burning. Just when he was starting to believe that they must have passed by him and moved on, someone knocked back. The noise was muted, through several layers of castle and rock, but it was still audible. Three hits, with a clear second of pause after each strike. Healer took a deep breath, overcome with relief. He returned the pattern, three times with a moment to tremble in elation between each. It was the sound of hope.

There was a drawn-out silence, and something in the distance creaked. He waited as it grew longer, joined by a symphony of cracking, grinding, and crumbling of stone and waffle plaster. The debris was being cleared, not quickly but not in a lethargic manner either. Someone was mechanically breaking through the rubble to get to him. The knocks sounded again, and he returned it, loud and clear as he could. They were getting closer. He carefully listened as they carved their way to him, nearer and nearer until the scratching was practically beside him.

The first crack appeared on the knocking rock. The man withdrew as much as he was able and covered his head with his arms. The rock shattered, small pieces flying in the cramped space as a glint of light invaded the space. The flower squinted at the sudden change in light level, its leaves twisting in discomfort.

His dark-haired savior pulled herself through the break, peering around for whatever poor wretch was trapped under all this junk. Healer slipped the strange gem into his ragged robes. He quickly got out of his defensive position and shifted closer to the opening, into her view. More problems may occur, but at least someone knew he was here.

The woman gasped and yelled for someone to help her. *He must look as bad as he feels, for her to panic like this.* A few other cookies clad in gray came down the tunnel, moving the wreckage away as she slashed away the large piece pinning him down. A few cracks cleaved open along the piece, and he felt the moment that it loosened slightly around him. He pushed his palms into the rocks under and tried to push his upper body from the debris.

She dismissed his weak attempts to extricate himself. His savior and one of her aides grabbed his arms, pulling him from the rock. Something caught and they muttered among themselves before coming to some kind of conclusion. They pulled again, not stopping when they hit that point of being stuck. Healer bit his tongue as they tore him away, bit by bit.

His body had grown back around the sharp edges of the piece of debris, and when pulled, the wound ripped open again. It was thankfully a much smaller and less severe injury than he originally had, so even without his healing in effect, he was able to keep from being overwhelmed by the pain and loss of jam. The dark-haired woman muttered under her breath and took out some kind of rag from her cloak, placing it against his side. He automatically took over, applying pressure to it and curling into a posture that reduces bleeding.

She supported him while they half-stumbled, half-crawled towards the light. He got about halfway there before his vision began flickering and he felt sure that his sight wasn't moving. His flower was still in the crevice. The healer let go of his rescuer, attempting to worm back into the cave.

"What is it? No, don't try to move too much or talk right now. Let's get back to the village."

He shook his head.

"Something you need?"

"Staff. My eyes," he rasped, opening his eyelids and showing her the murky pupils within.

She patted him in reassurance, before yelling over. "Someone search the place! There should be a staff inside. Don't get trapped!" The cookie in the rear shuffled backward and into the rock prison. They waited for a tense minute, close by in case any of the rubble collapsed, but thankfully, everything went smoothly. The healer's sight twisted around furiously before the cookie came back out and held up a rather wilted staff in triumph. The woman asked him if there was anything else he lost, and when he confirmed that there wasn't, they all went in a packed line back to the surface.

He settled into a seated position and took a deep breath of the relatively fresher air, coughing as the scent of ash flooded his senses. The healer looked around with his wilted staff. They had come from a small tunnel on top of a massive heap of garbage and ruins, filled with rocks and dirt and massive pieces of crumbled buildings, as though they had fallen from the heavens. Above them was a floating cloud with an entire city, though something about it appeared to be empty and hollow. There was even a castle tower poking out from the pile on the bottom, which sparked something in him. The faint hint of recollection faded quickly, replaced by an uncorrupted view of desolation.

He was among the remnants of a civilization.

“We were foraging around for resources when we heard some banging. Good we found you- travelers don’t ever pass by, so nobody else would be around for a long while.”

Travelers would likely go around to avoid this place. The land around only flaunted ashen hills and the husks of dead trees. He really was fortunate that the cookies had heard him, and more importantly, chose to rescue him.

Still unable to talk, he clasped the woman’s hands and bowed to express his gratitude. It was easy. he was already on his knees so he wouldn’t fall over.

A faint smile graced her face. “Hey, no need for any of that. I’m glad to have been here.”

She had to practically carry him back to the village, since after so long he was not able to truly walk. The village welcomed him, even if it was with downturned eyes and whispers. He was carried into a ratty tent and placed on a cot filled with a couple of other cookies who were suffering from ailments. There were quite a lot of injured people here.

Healer wrapped his staff and then proceeded to sit next to a jug and scratchily wheeze until one of the villagers told him that he could drink it if he wanted to. He inhaled the water like he was a man dying of thirst, which he was, so hopefully no one would think too badly of him. Everyone else in the tent was preoccupied with their own pain.

Being able to eat and drink, however sparse the amenities were, made a significant difference in his constitution. He rested and recuperated from his injuries for the next few days. Afterward, his health was decent enough that a glow of magic was finally redirected from being broken down for his physical preservation to being readily usable again.

He called the familiar warmth to his fingertips and a soft glow of white magic rose in the center of his palm. It floated for a moment before flying around in action.

The magic twirled around him, fixing the damage it found. It undid the atrophy around his legs, the tears in his vocal cords from dehydration, and buried into the pulverized mess in his side. To his surprise, a large scar had replaced the rather fresh wound. He was sure that he would be able to heal something so severe without leaving a trace, but with his magic permeating him he could still sense the patched skin and missing parts of his internal organs. Thankfully the crush injury had not fully taken anything out of function, but despite that, he couldn’t completely undo the wound he had originally sustained. He mulled over the issue, confused. Why wouldn’t he be able to heal himself fully?

Even the best healer can’t bring back the dead, his own voice whispered in his head.

Healer cookie froze. *What was this about death?* The thought that he had...he clutched his chest, where the gem had been hidden. *Who- what am I?*

The voice did not respond. Wherever it had come from, it didn't give him any hints.

He might as well take his mind off the grim topic. Other people around could use his services. Healer got up from his bed, stretching his legs. He made his way to the cot of the cookie closest to him, who whimpered at his sudden closeness and started to shift away. He was suddenly aware that everyone in the tent was carefully watching him. You could hear a pin drop.

He crouched next to the cookie. "Don't worry, I am a healer. I can help with your injuries and ailments if you give me permission." The other cookie was wary, apparently struggling with what to answer. They had been lying there in pain for a while, and the prospect of relief was overpowering their stranger danger. "Fine," they spoke. "But don't touch me."

There was no need for contact with magic. Everyone observed with bated breath as burns on their legs disappeared under the warm glow. The cookie thanked him. They were much less afraid of him now that he had demonstrated an act of goodwill and the same seemed to apply to the others.

"Umm..." someone asked haltingly. "Could you heal the cuts on my back too?"

As if the question had unlocked a barricade, the others all started to pipe up too.

"If you would like, please take a look at my ribs?"

"I think I ate something poisonous..."

"My arm is bending the wrong way. Could you fix that?"

"Me too! I'm also pretty injured!"

When Black Raisin arrived to check on everyone, she had come across an amazing sight. All the formerly injured and suffering cookies were chatting amongst themselves, as Healer's magic surrounded them, lightening their burdens.

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Over time, he earned about the state of the village and the world.

The Raisin village was destitute, due to no fault of their own. They had been one of the earliest villages that the sorceress (that's how they referred to her) had destroyed, and in the following destruction, they had wandered around searching for a place that didn't belong to any other kingdoms and was free from the fighting. By the time they had reached this place, the kingdom had been abandoned, even as fires still burned in the corners. Ironically, they were safest around the base of the castle since there weren't any cakehounds patrolling around. It was simple to understand why- living in these ashen plains, it was impossible to thrive. They would never become a threat as long as they remained here. Despite their lack of resources and quality of life, they stayed on the plains complacently.

Unfortunately, the wafflebots were a recent development. For the last several years, the bots had been revived and started patrolling around the base of the castle, attacking the village. The people were not able to rehome due to their already sparse belongings, and abandoning what little they have to move again would certainly lead to death. So they tried to hold out, with Black Raisin at the helm of the defense. The one-armed warrior was the sole guardian of the village and the only one who wasn't afraid of him.

You see, the villagers had become so accustomed to attacks from the wafflebots and the hardships of living in the wasteland under the castle and its surrounding area that they had become a very

tightly-knit community, where everyone looked after each other. They automatically began to associate anything unfamiliar as threatening. Although the healer was treated with kindness, this fear was still prevalent throughout. They would often scuttle away when he made any movement, leave the place as soon as they could politely do so, and rarely spoke to him except in pairs.

They wanted someone meek, someone who wasn't a threat. This was doable for Healer, so he was alright with fulfilling this role. He made his voice softer than before, smiled at everyone, and worked tirelessly to heal any injuries they accrued. He could not remember any offensive magic but he would do everything he can for them as a healer; he was every bit the messianic and dependable cookie, a small glint of hope for the villagers that made their lives better than before. It bothered him, how easily he fit into the expectations and hopes that they had for him- almost like he was cheating his former self- but the villagers were happy, so he dismissed the disquieting notions. They grew to like him, and with their reservations cast aside, he became a crowd favorite.

There weren't any blondes in the village, so the villagers would often marvel at his hair. This embarrassed him so much that he spelled it black for a full month, which they were very distraught over. Then someone realized that, hey, Healer can change people's hair colors. The village had a sudden burst of color after that.

While interacting with the villagers, Healer also learned of his own relation to time from their conversations.

According to the cookies he spoke to, it had been years, decades even, after the fall of the kingdom. Healer was disturbed by this information. Although being in a cramped space without any hint of the passage of the days would throw off anyone's measurement of time, he had been awake for what he predicted from ten days to a month. And the latter measurement was a liberal estimate. It was nothing in the face of a year, let alone twenty. And he must have been there for that long- it was practically impossible to be trapped so deeply under such a large rock by simply falling into the wreckage.

If what they said was true, then he must have been buried for decades. There was absolutely no way for him to have survived that- from sheer lack of drink and sustenance alone, even without the wounds that he had awoken with. The only aspect about himself that he was sure of was his identity as a healer, and with that came the certainty that his wounds were fatal. He shouldn't be alive. Healer was also pretty sure that there had been no magic around him, except for the glowing crystal. It must have been that- from what the voice earlier had said, the gem must be capable of revival from the dead. What a terrifying power.

He made the right decision by hiding it. Despite believing that the villagers were harmless, he would rather not explain nor reveal this card to anyone.

"What is this to me?" he murmured. The gem sat in his lap innocently, twinkling.

He always felt a kind of familiarity with the strange crystal. That destabilizing sensation was present sometimes when he did certain things, but it was always strongest when he thought about the kingdom floating in the sky.

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He was staring off at that castle again.

Black Raisin settled next to him. She didn't need to ask why he was always so captivated by it- he had lost his memory, but his visage still marked him as a Vanillan. Of course he would yearn for his past. She would often do the same, but for a different reason- the castle was the source of the

wafflebots, the problem that constantly plagued the village. She often considered going to the teleporter herself, but the rumors of the powerful sorceress residing in it deterred her. If she passed, then what would the rest of the villagers do?

Healer, strangely enough, didn't hold any grudges against the wafflebots. Everyone understood they were machines, but that didn't take away from what they had to endure. Healer cookie, though- she wasn't sure if he even had the capacity to hate anyone.

"Thinking about your past?" she asked.

"There's nothing much to think about when I can't remember anything."

"Really? If I had no memories of who I used to be, then I'd be wracking my brain all the time to try and find out. The idea that I am just a hollow shell of my former self would be eating me alive."

"I worry more about my memories returning."

"That's rather strange, but I guess I can get why. You'd be saddled with heavy memories of your home's destruction." She framed the floating castle with her hands. "Still, it's quite grand, isn't it?"

"It's not," he said with intensity. "The kingdom is a mere ruin of what it used to be. All that comes from that castle are wafflebots that cause ruin for everyone below! Those machines have been twisted from their original purpose as protectors by whatever had caused me to be trapped underneath the wreckage in the first place."

"Are you...remembering the bots from before?"

"I don't need memories to fathom any of that." The healer seemed disgusted with the bots and with himself. Black Raisin couldn't really understand what he was going through.

In the following months, they went back to their usual routine of fighting and gathering sparse resources, neither of them talking about that conversation. The exchange still bothered Black Raisin, though. She was no therapist and certainly didn't have the most stable life herself, but she began to question something about Healer.

She stayed by the village because she had known its residents her whole life. Healer had no such connections. He could have spent a couple of days recovering and then used his healing powers to speed up the rest of the process, and leave for a better future. There was nothing keeping him in the squalid little village, especially when he had first been rescued, except his compulsion towards the floating and whatever resided within.

The kingdom had fallen long ago. It was probably in his interest to move on.

She wasn't going to be the one encouraging him to leave, however. Raisin cookie would try to keep him in the village. Healer had made friends with a speed that one would if their life depended on it. She wasn't able to decipher if he was actually as meek and quiet as he appeared, but it did the job of being suitably non-threatening. The others, curious about this remnant of the once-flourishing island above them, would go and talk with him. They quickly became comfortable in his company

The residents have grown attached to the blonde now, and they took comfort from knowing that there was someone nearby who could nurse their injuries away. The reassurance of living without being in constant pain was a very powerful one. If she wasn't selfish enough to keep him here, if he chose to leave, and that hope and comfort would flutter away with him.

She didn't want him to make that choice, so she wasn't going to say anything.

Yet, even without her interference, time continues to drive on relentlessly. They continued to survive, and Healer slowly pieced together pieces of who he was. He would change ever so slightly. There wasn't any big difference that she could decipher, but he was sadder and more withdrawn. She didn't mention the change, despite it the non-action making her feel like a bad person. Black Raisin worried that his old self would have different aspirations than being a small village's healer.

And finally, something pushed him over the edge. Even without her interference, Healer stepped away from her, a bird leaving its open cage. She had run herself ragged trying to find him. Her crows tracked him until she was half a day's travel away, on the border of a forest. He was perched under a tree, holding something that shimmered with light blue.

"Healer...?"

He turned to her, putting away the thing he held. "I know who I am now." He didn't sound happy, not really.

She stayed silent, curious yet slightly dreading the answer to his question.

"I'm Pure Vanilla cookie."

He was the fabled ruler of the floating kingdom? His connection to the city was far closer than she had even expected. And not only that, she was in the presence of a king!

She dismissed her inner monologue and cut to the question that mattered most.

"So...what are you going to do now?"

He shuffled uncomfortably. "I'm...not sure, exactly. I know that I want to move farther from the village."

"Why?"

"It's complicated."

"That's not much of an answer."

"If I go, then Hollyberry or Dark Cacao or even Golden Cheese could be the one to fight her. They can end her without ever knowing who she was. And besides, I don't have a kingdom anymore. I don't have anyone who needs my protection in that way, so there's nothing to fight for. I can't... give any more to the world." He muttered all of this, quietly enough that she had to strain to hear it.

The portion about nobody needing his protection struck a chord in the wrong ways, and she must let him know. "Does it have to be your kingdom for you to care? Raisin village needs you, Healer! Why can't you stay with us? I'll even storm that damn castle if it means you'll keep residing here. The others feel safe when you are around. Do you have any idea how much that means to us?"

"I don't want to stay, not with the castle over my head, not with her. Why can't you just let me do this? I'm not just another resource for the village to continue surviving on a cliff's edge!"

"Are you accusing us of exploiting you!? I just want to understand, why you're being such a fucking bastard-"

"I don't want to die!" he cried. He was breathing heavily, stunned that he had admitted his fear so openly.

Black Raisin blinked. So that's why he was running away. What a simple reason. She wanted him to stay for the village, but knowing what she did now it felt like too tall a request. Healer, no, Pure Vanilla was her friend, and she couldn't ask him to die for her village. He had already sacrificed himself once and ended up buried under his castle for so many years.

"Go then," she said angrily. "But don't ever look back. If you come back to the village and try to make amends after taking away our hope, I'll chase you out."

It was callous, but she would do all this and more if it meant that Pure Vanilla wouldn't regret departing. If he was barred from coming back to the village, he would also be farther away from the castle, since there was nowhere else to stay that was close to it. If it meant his survival, then she wanted him to go. She wanted him to run to the ends of the earth.

Pure Vanilla's staff averted its gaze from her. He left without a word.

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The castle in the distance had been a compulsion to him. Pure Vanilla had lived so close to it that it would be easy to simply take the teleporter and go back to the castle. But he had to resist. He wasn't going to go back. He didn't want to go back and see how grievously he failed, he didn't want to continue to sacrifice himself until nothing remained, he didn't want to end up crushed under wreckage and utterly alone, again.

So he left like a coward.

*Vow to me, Pure Vanilla, that until the day I die...*

Of course, as luck would have it, he ran across one of the Dark Enchantress's minions. He wasn't spotted but resolved to follow the other and see what he was scheming.

"I'll use those bears as fodder and make even a tiny jelly worm into a fearsome dragon. Think of the implications, Licorice, the number of minions I could gain. The Dark Enchantress will finally respect me!"

Pure Vanilla sat behind a tree, absently listening to the cookie of darkness hype himself up. Fate must be making a real jester out of him, to create such a temptation when he was trying to leave it all behind. The healer steeled himself. He was resolute in his determination. He just needed to get up, and walk the other way.

A struggle broke out from behind. The blonde peered over with his staff, curious at what was happening. A couple of jelly bears had ambushed the reaper and dragged him over to the river. They shoved him under the water, holding him under for a few seconds before leaving.

He sighed. Well, that man got what he deserved, with the way he telegraphed his nefarious plans for every single passerby to overhear.

The healer left the shade of the tree, away from the river. Pure Vanilla walked a couple of yards then paused and hurried back to check the water. A few bubbles floated to the surface and popped wretchedly. The reaper wasn't coming up for water in a while. At this rate, he really risked drowning.

He should help him.



## Chapter End Notes

This is actually the second time we've seen an ancient's soul jam do something wild. The first is kinda spoilers if ppl didn't figure it out yet.

mfw I thought I had put a scene into the story but I deleted it in the drafts. At least it wasn't an important plot point... ಥ\_ಥ

## Pure Vanilla/Dark Choco: Two Birds, on a Wire

### Chapter Notes

Tis been a while dudes

I've been thinking of making a bloopers+worldbuilding chapter once a finish this story. Not that that'll be soon, but I think it's a good idea.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They spent another few days testing the limits of the cursed sword. Pure Vanilla tried to work on his first hypothesis, but every time they tried to get Dark Choco to destroy his sword, he would simply shut down, like a program that received two conflicting programs. Illusions, trickery, and even mind control failed, yet Dark Choco could only change the curse's structure to hone it. The sight of the prince peacefully sharpening his sword became vexing to both of them. He wished to pursue it further, but Licorice pulled him back and said that he should know when to give up. The healer begrudgingly moved on to his second theory.

This theory was that the sword, which was created for use, must have a wielder that does not long for its destruction while someone else attempted to destroy it. Pure Vanilla, as the more powerful of the two, decided to be on the offensive end while Licorice held the sword.

Licorice, in all his pride, insisted that they experiment in his room. Perhaps he wanted to lavish in the security of his place, but Pure Vanilla didn't think it was the best idea.

"Licorice, I'm not sure whether we should be trying this inside."

"Don't worry, I've moved my fragile belongings away and reinforced the door."

"He'll just break through the wall next to it," he protested.

"This whole place is spelled from top to bottom! If he can't break through my shield, then he can't get in here either."

The healer didn't know where Licorice got the notion that Dark Choco wouldn't be able to pierce his shield. Licorice was a beginner, even if he was studious in his practice, and the prince, despite lacking his sword, was strong.

Well, if he really wanted to decide the location, it wouldn't bother Pure Vanilla. He relented and began preparing for the experiment. He handed over the sword and the reaper stood to the side, holding the blade as far from himself as he could without his grip becoming unstable. Pure Vanilla started gathering his magic. He instructed the other to not think about destroying the sword.

"Asking me not to think about that is like asking me to ignore the pink dragon in the room. You know what people say about pink dragons..." he grumbled.

Of course, the more one tries to stifle thoughts of a pink dragon, the more prevalent it is. Licorice couldn't control his intent just because Pure Vanilla asked him to. But he had planned for this. A neutral intent would suffice, so he only needed to take the reaper's mind off what he was holding.

How did Pomegranate use her mirror again? It felt like taffy, magic pulling and siphoning through an infinitely small space. She had pulled him into his mind several times now, and he was reasonably confident in his ability to replicate her. He knocked his staff against the ground and its pupil flashed, bringing him to another's mind rather than the reverse.

The world fizzed away, and suddenly they were in an empty classroom. Chalk and abandoned books lay around him, and beyond them, the reaper was standing in front of a blackboard full of concentric circles. Licorice's avatar was dumbfounded. "H-huh? How did-?"

Pure Vanilla walked up to him and tapped him on the chest. "Chew on this." He gave the other man his memories of destroying the small kingdom. The heat from the flames, the hallucinations, and the scope of the healer's destructive potential was all shown to Licorice. Then he broke contact. They returned to the physical world, with the reaper holding Dark Choco's curse while he gathered energy to attack.

"P-Pure Vanilla...hey...that's a lot of magic, y'know." Licorice was suddenly regretting being on the other side of the blonde's power. He had been unceremoniously reminded that both his master and the man across from him had a similar capability to bring ruin to those around them.

*That's right. Focus on me, and forget all about the sword you're holding.*

He pointed his staff at the reaper, who eeped. He didn't move out of the way, however, steadfastly holding the sword in place as the blonde let his magic release. A thin point of cold, efficient energy cut through the gleaming blade as easily as butter. Pure Vanilla gasped softly, reigning in his magic.

A few shards of metal fell to the ground. They both looked toward the blade in Licorice's hand. It was chipping now, pieces snapping off and falling into the carved circles in the ground.

"Huh...? Did we just succeed?" he stammered

"Yes," the healer told him triumphantly. "I finally understand this curse! It would be simple to break now."

The rain guard of the sword came alive, gnashing its false designer teeth together and making the whole thing tremble. Licorice dropped the Strawberry Jam sword and it clattered to the ground.

Something hit the door with a bang. They both snapped to look at the entrance, but the baked wood didn't budge. They both quickly realized that it was the prince, trying to break it down.

"Haha, see? I told you he can't get in-" Pure Vanilla started shushing him, but it was too late.

The wall next to it caved slightly inward with a loud noise. From the outside, Dark Choco was ramming the wall in with the force of his body, denting it more each time he slammed himself sideways into the fragile crackers. The spells along the room glowed with each assault, distorting and crumbling as cracks formed along its length.

Pure Vanilla put a hand on Licorice's shoulder, turning them both invisible.

With a powerful kick, the whole section crumbled. Dark Choco staggered through, surging to the sword on the ground. He picked it up, cycling between blankness, outrage, disbelief, and then hope. The warrior studied it for a moment. He looked around at the empty room and then the hole he had created in the room, then exhaled with something resembling exhaustion.

"You both can stop hiding. I'm back to myself."

The healer slowly let go, and both of them fizzled back into view. Licorice, with the belated realization that Dark Choco could have broken his shield if he wished to (both when he was insulting him a while back and now) positioned himself behind Pure Vanilla.

“Dark Choco, are you feeling any different?” the healer asked.

“Not really, but this time I think that I would have attacked anyone around the moment I broke in. I think the sword understands that we are making progress, or at least recognizes the harm done.”

“It does possess some kind of sentience. Its maker put quite a lot of care into it.”

“No offense, but I hope its maker rots.” The prince sheathed the sword across his back.

There was a period of silence. It seemed that no one quite knew what to do, now that the monumental task had been accomplished. Licorice was the first to break the strange air. “...What now? Should we be on our way to the Dark Cacao kingdom?” He gave the healer a side-eye. “Will the Dark Enchantress chase after us?”

Pure vanilla pursed his lips, in deep contemplation. Because he understood how to destroy the sword completely, that would be the natural course of action. Once Dark Choco’s enchantment was broken, both of them would be free to leave. Licorice may even bring the children if he wished, but there would be little more than the fear of change imprisoning them in this castle.

The Dark Enchantress, on the other hand, will be furious. What they were doing would be considered justified desertion by him, and something likely akin to betrayal by her. She may want revenge. But most of her forces were manned by Red Velvet, so if the general were to feel uncertain about slaying a former companion, then she would have to do it herself. That was, most likely, beneath her.

Pure Vanilla could feed into his conflict. He had been considering doing something for Red Velvet outside the manipulation, but it could very well be a bonus for this purpose. The healer briefly pondered when he had passed the threshold where he tolerated using others in this way, but dismissed the thought. It was for the sake of protecting Licorice and Dark Choco.

So, by all means, he should tell the prince to go. The sooner he can set off, the better. It made complete sense for them to leave.

But the healer didn’t want to let him go.

No, he can’t impose such a selfish will on him, especially because the prince holds him in such high esteem. He would probably listen to anything the blonde wanted of him, and obey without hesitation. That is precisely why he cannot ask him to stay.

*But then what will I live for?*

He pushed the crying voice away. “This is an opportunity for you to finally get out of this place. Please, take it. If The Dark Enchantress finds out what we have been doing, then the chance will slip away.”

“No.”

Pure Vanilla was surprised. He was going against his advice? “But your promise...”

“I heard you out before but never agreed to anything. It’s my choice to stay. No one here can truly raise a hand against me and the Dark Enchantress has never paid much attention to what we get up

to, so there's no danger." Dark Choco shrugged. "Besides, I've been here for so many years, what's a little longer?" He stuck out a hand to him. "Let's all go together."

Licorice stood to the side as they interacted. He personally didn't care when they left the Dark Enchantress's service, but for Dark Choco to reject his awaiting freedom so readily was also startling to him. Licorice valued self-preservation above all else, yet what the prince was suggesting went against his continued existence. Didn't he have a kingdom waiting for him? Even Pure Vanilla wanted him to go while he can. "Pure Vanilla, surely you aren't going to just let him do this?"

The healer shakily took the offered limb.

"Seriously...?" Licorice muttered, throwing his arms in the air and leaving.

Dark Choco waited until he exited, then turned back to Pure Vanilla. He was grinning goofily, a wide smile of the kind that the healer only remembered seeing when he was a teenager. "You did it, Pure Vanilla! You both did it!" The healer yelped as he was picked up and spun around in excitement, but quickly joined in the infectious joy. They stumbled around giggling for a while. The prince couldn't remember the last time he had been so happy.

"I can't believe you succeeded in chipping the sword! I've had it for so long and it's always been quite pristine, so I thought I would never be able to escape..."

"I have to ask again, are you absolutely sure about staying?"

The prince gave him his determined assurance. "I'll wait until you are ready, and then we can break the enchantment."

"Okay." Pure Vanilla accepted it with hidden relief.

Dark Choco was quiet for a moment, though he seemed like he wanted to say something. He glanced from him to the floor to somewhere over his shoulder. Pure Vanilla let him take his time. Dark Choco sat down on the carved ground and the healer joined him. Finally, the prince spoke.

"I see you as something resembling a father."

The thought made Pure Vanilla a bit happy, but he was stricken at the same time. He didn't want to replace Dark Cacao- that was never his intention. It felt too much like betrayal. While the healer was unaware of the scope of their relationship, even a blind man can see its cracks.

"D- Dark Choco...I'm not quite sure what to say to that."

The other man wilted. "It was presumptuous of me. Sorry."

"No wait- I mean..." He struggled for a moment about how to approach this. "I am very happy that you are comfortable coming forward with this, it's just..." There wasn't any way he could get this across perfectly. "Dark Cacao is a good man."

He could practically see the cuts that his words inflicted and quickly proceeded with his speech.

"But I don't think he's a good father." The prince slowly rose his head again. "Even so, I know that you still yearn for him, so please just give your old relationship another attempt." Pure Vanilla cradled his cheek with a hand. "You are much changed from before, and a few decades older. Perhaps you both have some common ground now. Perhaps that can be a road reconciliation."

“I don’t know, I don’t want to hold out hope. What if I am disappointed again?”

“I can’t guarantee that everything will work out, or that it will be easy. But I want to hope, for the sake of my friendship with him and who I believe him to be as a person, that he’ll step up. Even if you’re old enough to not need his support, that doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be there.”

“There’s no way he would welcome me back. I have so much of my life under a curse, serving the Dark Enchantress, going against his honor and his ideals for so long. A hero wouldn’t forgive a villain.”

“We would both be villains with such categorization, and besides, I don’t intend to leave you to the wolves if Dark Cacao chooses to cast you out for what’s happened. If he fails to try and mend his wrongs, then come to me. I’ll accept you as my son.”

The other man exhaled shakily. He gently grabbed Pure Vanilla’s arms, speaking to him with an intensity that left him nervous. “Say that again. Please.”

“Dark Choco. My son.” The title rolled off his tongue easier than he expected. “My son.”

This wasn’t the kind of thing a grown cookie would do- clutching onto him like he was afraid that what was before him would disappear. It reminded the healer of Strawberry Crepe, and the way that they would hang off him and Licorice sometimes.

The healer patted his hair. He was a little damaged, wasn’t he? Considering what Dark Choco had been through, it was honestly surprising that he wasn’t worse.

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Pure vanilla desired to have some kind of celebration for the prince. Dark Choco was in a good mood, so he agreed to something simple. They settled on a picnic, and everyone else was invited. The healer specifically asked him who he wanted to join, and he said that he was fine with everyone coming- even Pomegranate, as long as she didn’t sit too close to him.

So with a light heart, he gathered everyone to celebrate.

Neither of the children knew what they were throwing a party over, but were happy to have a picnic regardless of the reasons. They quickly became sidetracked, since Poison Mushroom wanted to play with the pink-haired child, and quickly resorted to vice.

While setting up, Pure Vanilla glanced over at what they were doing. Strawberry Crepe was sneaking behind Poison Mushroom, who had made away with one of their mechanical arm’s plates. The purple child was giggling and enjoying himself, flexing his ever-so-slight height advantage to keep it out of reach. They ended up tackling him, both of them rolling around on the overgrown pavers until the plate was eventually dropped and forgotten.

Pomegranate placed down the sheets while Pure Vanilla unpacked the sandwiches he had made. Dark Choco helped them where they allowed, cleaning up the wreckage around them until the spot was clean and cozy.

Licorice, meanwhile, was currently having his magic lessons next to the picnic spot. He had wanted to be able to learn how to do instant magic like the rest of the powerful mages that he knew of. However, his perception of how the training would go and how the healer chose to teach him didn’t match at all, and he was currently struggling to dodge the fireballs being hurled his way.

“Visualize the circle!” Pure Vanilla called over.

The reaper threw himself to the ground as a streak of fire went over the tips of his hood. He couldn't spare the concentration to visualize much of anything at the moment.

"Is this how his training usually goes?" Dark Choco asked.

"No, but instantaneous magic is more about being able to use magic in the heat of the moment. So I brought him outside to train!"

The prince suddenly felt lucky that Pure Vanilla never acted as his teacher. If waking up before the sun was hard, being pelted by fireballs by an innocently-smiling ancient would be agony. He usually did not have projectiles hurled his way during his workout. Dark Choco went back to watching to other man struggle.

"Hmm, he's actually working very hard."

"Actually?!" Licorice screeched, peeved. "Pure Vanilla- are you sure- *pant* there's no better way?"

"This is the first time I am teaching someone else instantaneous magic, so there may be a better method. But this is what I believe to be the most effective for now."

Pomegranate added her unwelcome commentary. "I've never had to do anything like this, since I've managed whatever I set my mind to on my first few tries. It's the same for you, isn't it? She smirked at the man beside her, who chuckled awkwardly.

Licorice spent a moment wishing ill on those stupid prodigies.

"I feel a bit awkward sitting around while someone else trains," the prince said. "I should work on my sword forms later."

"Since you've mentioned it, I have a wonderful idea."

Dark Choco proceeded to chase Licorice while the poor mage yowled about his plight.

Pure Vanilla turned to Pomegranate.

She huffed. "I won't partake in this embarrassment."

He wouldn't ruin her fun if she wanted to pretend that her speed-boosting magic around those two didn't exist. He flicked a finger, and the number of fireballs doubled. They began to target both of the cookies at random, making the predictable scene of Dark Choco chasing Licorice far more chaotic. This went on until Licorice flew up to avoid some of the blasts, without being aware of what he had done. He whooped, then instantly fell out of the air from breaking his concentration. Pure Vanilla caught him with a swirl of air.

The children had been tired out from their playing and the adults from running around. When they all congregated on the blanket, Pure Vanilla pulled out some sandwiches, cake, and steamed buns, the latter kept warm through magic. He proceeded to receive more praise and declarations of love than he had in a long time.

Licorice stuffed his face with gusto while Dark Choco and Pomegranate ate with the grace of someone who was taught etiquette from a young age. They still evidently enjoyed themselves though, as they slightly broke said etiquette in small ways in their relish. It was a surprisingly idyllic evening, a group of outcasts playing at family, and, for just a short while, fooling themselves.

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The soft swish of pink-red-gold robes moved beside him. Dark Choco kept his gaze on the fading light. The sky was a burning orange over the flat planes of the ashen land below. The way they stood together and absorbed the landscape reminded him of when Pure Vanilla first joined them. The view from the height of the cake tower was similar, but he failed to enjoy it then. Now, he could spend his time watching the sunset, and it didn't feel like a waste.

It was all thanks to Pure Vanilla. Back then, he had begged for the healer to help him. His desperate plea, which he didn't truly believe in himself, was supported and made real by this hero, this now father figure who swore to protect him. Even when he had been asleep, Dark Choco had searched for ways to accompany him and unintentionally found bits of meaning in his life. He had started to notice little but significant things that gave him joy: A good swing of his sword, a pretty fish, a berry that tasted sweeter than usual.

*Who had his ramblings helped more?* He thought with amusement. The blonde had thanked him profusely, but it was because of him, that Dark Choco could now say it with conviction and believe that-

"The sunset is beautiful."

The mage beside him remained silent. That was fine, since for once Dark Choco wanted to do most of the talking. He wanted to express the depth of his gratitude for what the healer had done.

"I wouldn't have looked at it before, but you would, and I think it is good, to enjoy some simple thing in life.

"I'm not leaving without you, of course, because the moment that my absence is gone then the Dark Enchantress will understand that her enchantment is broken. Straying from her means madness if my curse is active, which I won't risk. You must know that." he shuffled, a bit guilty. "I cannot in good conscience abandon you to her wrath. Especially after you had worked so hard to save me." He took a deep breath.

"Pure Vanilla...thank you for finding a way to break my curse. I genuinely hoped that it could be done, but to fully believe that freedom is possible...after so long...it feels like nothing more than a dream. And yet, you managed to do it! So much time spent on my worthless self..." He was trailing off now, pouring his heart out to the man who saved him. "I don't remember the last time someone had done so much for me. It's almost too much. Is there any possible way that I could repay you?"

"I think paying some attention to your surroundings would be a start."

Dark Choco nearly jumped as the perception-altering spell dropped. Pomegranate, standing next to him, didn't spare his startled act a glance.

"Pomegranate- !" He calmed himself down and scowled. "What are you doing here?"

Dark Choco thought that the priestess was too pragmatic to simply sit down and watch the sunset. She would never approach him like this without some sort of agenda. He was sure about this fact, even as she traced the setting sun with an intensity that rivaled his.

"You don't sound too happy."

"Why would I be? None of that conversation was meant for you."



“Oh, I’m well aware.” She smirked. “Congratulations on your freedom.”

Dark Choco glared at her, slightly fearful of what she may do with everything he told her. “Don’t tell the Dark Enchantress.”

She flicked some dust off the cloud’s edge. “Why not?”

“...” Give the priestess an inch, and she would take a mile. The prince was not giving her any weaknesses to target, or at least no more than those she was aware of.

“Whatever, that was a rhetorical question. You don’t want Pure Vanilla to get in trouble. But you also don’t want to be without him, because he is your support. Is that accurate enough?”

She had pinpointed his motives exactly. He kept from commenting, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of being correct.

She seemed to judge her success anyway, not bothering to hide her smirk under a silken sleeve. “I know you, Dark Choco. After everything, you’re still that same *noble prince*. A prince with loyalties that do not align with mine.”

“Waste your life serving the Dark Enchantress, then. This time, I can make my own choices. There won’t be any enchantment shackling me to these ruins.” *You don’t have any control over me anymore.*

The thought brought him incredible relief. Dark Choco hadn’t even realized when, but sometime during his years as a cookie of darkness, he had accepted that this was all he would ever be. Serving as the sword of the sorceress until he gave up everything and dying with no one to mourn him had become the only future left to the prince. The thought disturbed him now that he put it into a clear train of thought. How could he have ever accepted that?

“Good.”

“What..?” That was not the reaction he expected.

She held up both hands, thumbs at a right angle, looking at him through a picture frame of her making. It would be a silly gesture on anyone else, but Pomegranate had a way of making anything dignified...or pansophical. “I predicted that you would behave this way. Still, a couple of months back you would never dare be so bold, without being spurred on by the closeness of escape. Even the options that make up the illusion of choice are formed by one’s pro-activeness.”

Her terminology made him feel stupid and vaguely objectified- not in the physical sense, but rather a kind of insignificance- like a pawn to a player who only cared for better pieces.

“I don’t care about all your fate bullshit, or whether my ‘choice’ is an ‘illusion’. Even if I do things according to your predictions, it’s still within my right to stay or go. And I will leave when Pure Vanilla is ready to come with me.”

“That’s a terrible decision.”

Dark Choco felt something in his chest crumble out of disappointment. Of course he made the wrong choice. Even so, this was Pomegranate, the priestess that had tortured him, so he was not prepared to accept it without a reason.

“If Pure Vanilla’s company is what it takes for you to go, then both of you will remain here forever. Pure Vanilla will never be able to escape the Dark Enchantress.”

“Why?” He wanted to discard her claim but couldn’t do it. If nothing else, her words were dependable. “What’s chaining him down?”

“What clipped the bird's wings...” she muttered. “That remains to be seen.” If Dark Choco could hazard a guess, he would say that she didn’t know either. Having said her piece, she swept away in a flurry of her robes. His question remained unanswered. The prince was left to stew over her vague words in worry.

The sun slowly dipped under the horizon, leaving him in solitary darkness.

## Chapter End Notes

Keep in mind that PV still doesn't know Dark Choco tried to kill his dad lmao. That omission's gonna end so well

## Misc: A Bitter Cascade

### Chapter Notes

Welcome back! This story has officially hit 100k words, which is a big achievement! Woohoo!

Hope you enjoy this chapter :>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Dark Enchantress had returned with Red Velvet in tow. It was not a happy or sad occasion, at least for the majority of the cookies of darkness. Pomegranate was the only one to really welcome her. Strawberry Crepe couldn't care less. They had always been on the fringes of the cookies of darkness anyway, as the only one other than the general who lived away from the castle. And besides, today they had something else to accomplish.

“Okay, first meeting with Raisin cookie...” They made sure that they were well-dressed, perfectly symmetrical, and that their mech arms were functioning at full capacity.

Sure, they could have picked someone else to talk with first, but facing Raisin cookie was inevitable. She was the guardian of the village, and therefore would make sure to scout out any potential threats, including them. Crepe wanted to make a decent first impression, even if they had spent quite a while attacking their village. If she didn't hate them, then maybe they'll be spared when it is revealed that they were the creator of the wafflebots.

She was also cool- like an action hero! A muscular woman in a mysterious dark cloak who protected the people she cared about. This had nothing to do with the fact that they wanted to see her.

They weren't some fan. How dare anyone accuse them of such?

Landing smack in the middle of the village would draw more attention than even they were comfortable with. So they made a little adjustment to one of their bots to guarantee a one-on-one interaction.

Raisin was attentive and protective of her village. Of course she would investigate when something appears to be going wrong. A bot that looked like it was malfunctioning lured her away from the tents, farther out into the wastes of ash. It stopped near Strawberry Crepe, who paid no heed to the way that sparks flew from the gaps in its hull.

“A child..?” the woman muttered to herself. She approached the pink-haired cookie, careful not to startle them, crouching nearby so that she was on their eye level. “I don't know how you have managed to get lost in this barren land, but don't worry. I won't harm you.”

Strawberry Crepe didn't say anything. The “malfunctioning” bot filled their reticence with whirring and grinding noises. The guardian, much more concerned about the potential danger, pulled out one of her feathered blades.

“That bot may not be safe- step away. I'll take care of it.”

Raisin absolutely would attack the bot to protect them, even if it was, in reality, counterproductive. Strawberry Crepe, at this moment, was hit with the thought that perhaps they were being too careful. They were the brilliant, the loud, the sweet candy of the castle! They shouldn't hide what they were capable of.

"It's not dangerous for me." Strawberry Crepe sent it a few commands through their screen, and it made a beeping noise and moved away from the.

Two mech arms rose from the dirt where they had hidden. Raisin backed up a bit, recognizing the waffle pattern of their limbs. "That technology...are you perhaps...?"

"I am the creator of the bots, yes."

She made a disbelieving noise. "I can't believe this. All this time, and the one sending so many machines after us was a child?"

"Hey, I'm not just any kid!" They regretted the retort the moment they spoke.

"*Oh, I can tell.*" Crepe withered a bit at her tone. "And that original wafflebot with Healer's robes- he went back, didn't he? She answered her own question, as though it was obvious. "I guess he couldn't resist. And after I yelled at him too! That infuriating man. I take it he's the reason the attacks ceased?"

They nodded.

Raisin stared them down. "Well, I'm glad that he managed to stop you." She turned with a flap of her dark cloak, retreating in the direction of the village.

Strawberry crepe remained among the ash, feeling very contrite.

~~~~~

Upon stepping foot in the castle, Red Velvet was immediately accosted by an excited healer. He was quite stunned by how happy the healer had been at his arrival considering the last time they had been on a mission together, but was quickly reassured by Pure Vanilla's excited proclamation:

"This is the first opportunity I get to genuinely study you!"

"...I'm not going to be able to weasel out of this, aren't I?"

He proceeded to be quite thoroughly interrogated on every portion of his anatomy. The general had never been one to be shy, but somehow this experience was more awkward for him than for the blonde. Red Velvet began to wonder if healers had any kind of shame when it came to things like this. Why did he need to stick cotton into his ears? How was he supposed to know how fast his toenails grew? What the hell kind of instrument did Pure Vanilla just take out?!

During this, he managed to be stripped of his jacket. Pure Vanilla went circles around him and ended up finding something that he had forgotten about. On his side, closer to the back, there was a small bandage that he had placed to stem the cut of an arrow.

"Red Velvet! How come you didn't tell anyone you were injured?"

The hybrid winced, remembering what he was referencing. "It's not a large injury for one, and it's not that new. I got this right before we were assigned to take care of the small kingdom, and there wasn't much of an opportunity..."

Right. Red Velvet returned directly after the healer's meeting with the Dark Enchantress, and then ended up putting him in a situation where he destroyed a kingdom and then immediately collapsed into a coma. There probably wasn't a time when the general felt like he could easily ask him to patch a "minuscule injury". He also probably didn't want to ask any of the other cookies of darkness either.

"Well, even if you only sustained a relatively small cut, if it hasn't stopped bleeding for that long, it is a wonder you're alive. I suppose your unique physiology can be thanked for the fact that you're still standing."

As Pure Vanilla tried to heal it, the magic present around the cut rebelled against his will. The blonde poured more of his power and snuffed out that dark, familiar, residue. It was only due to the strange similarities to a certain kind of magic that Pure Vanilla had been testing for some time that allowed him to easily counter and patch him. It may just be paranoia, but he was not naive enough to ignore the ringing alarms.

"Red Velvet, may I be told who and what caused this cut?"

"It was Pastry cookie, the mercenary that had tried to storm my tower. She had been spewing something about righteousness and the witches, and then tried to shoot me with her weapon. Luckily, she only managed to graze me."

"I would like to know about her weapon too."

"She had a crossbow called 'the holy fork', I believe."

Pure Vanilla halted. A holy fork and a holy sword. No way that could be a coincidence. He had initially dismissed the organization that Red Velvet had mentioned, since it seemed like an afterthought to the hybrid, but if they had already affected multiple people, then investigation was more than warranted. Pomegranate may be able to check, even from the seclusion of the castle.

"Pure Vanilla?"

The healer quickly went back to fixing him. "Y-yes, what is it?"

"Back then, when you asked what life would be like without my arm...I've done some more thinking about it. Removing it was not an option, because it's not as though we had any healers. And as much as I believe that Pomegranate can do the job, I don't think she would support me."

"...Red Velvet, what prompted this?"

"Nothing of your concern."

Fair enough, he supposed. If this was borne out of some hatred for his animal parts, his complacency may be unhealthy, but it is ultimately his decision. Without the arm, people likely wouldn't recognize him as a hybrid or as the Dark Enchantress's "loyal general", and that only benefitted the healer.

"If you are willing, then I shall help."

For all his expertise, Pure Vanilla couldn't use his healing to simply cut off and regrow an arm. Then they would be back where they started. For a mutant, they would need to make something artificial. Luckily enough, Strawberry Crepe was the exact kind of expert who could make a mechanical arm from scratch.

The child was sulking in their hangar, and he was a bit hesitant to request something of them. They heard him out, though, and seemed revitalized at the challenge he presented them with.

“An arm...yeah, that could make her more amenable...”

Strawberry Crepe agreed to join him in the endeavor. They pulled Red Velvet back and let him listen in on the ensuing discussion- letting the patient into the discussion was good practice, especially since neither of them had done anything like this before. They drafted up plans, beginning with the amputation and resulting in a metallic work of art that could theoretically surpass anything of flesh and cookie.

Red Velvet looked faintly sick as time went on.

Pure Vanilla assumed that this could just be nerves- people were usually squeamish about these kinds of things. But when they had started detailing what to give him during the procedure, he shot out of his seat, breaking the springs of his self-control.

“Wait, I changed my mind! I don’t want to get rid of it! I don’t want my arm to be amputated. It’s just as much a part of me as everything else.”

The two cookies exchanged a moment of silence.

“..well, that’s much easier to take care of.” Strawberry Crepe said.

“We could make a brace that covers his other shoulder. That will even the weight distribution.”

“I would rather practice making a real arm, but this is still better than nothing!”

Overwhelmed, Red Velvet got up and ran outside, ignoring the exclamations of the other two.

He turned the corner and collapsed into a sitting position. What was he doing, asking so frivolously to be mutilated?! He couldn’t genuinely live without his arm, the physical manifestation that ties him to his cakehound roots. Even if he hated his furry appendage, even if the drag on his shoulder caused him pain, it was far more terrifying to be rid of it entirely. For what was the general, but an aggregate of all his pain? Nights of cursing his own existence *made* him.

As if fate decided to mock him, a barking Truffle trotted past him. When the cakehound noticed his presence, it doubled back, wagging its tail.

He lightly grabbed and held the puppy tight, more for his sake than anything else. It yipped in alarm but didn’t try to run away. “I’m sorry that I wished to discard this...” Red Velvet whispered.

Following somewhat behind the puppy was her caretaker, who trudged behind with heavy steps.

Dark Choco halted at the scene. The warrior noticed the mess that Red Velvet was, stopping beside him to wait until he let go of the dog. The familiar sensation of sorrow that always accompanied him was gone, and this notable lack made him appear like a whole different person. He had brushed back the hair that tended to fall in his face and clipped it into a short ponytail. He wasn’t smiling, but still undeniably happier.

The general felt a bite of resentment. *The last several months have been good to you, hasn’t it?*

The thought itself was rather unfair. Red Velvet understood that the cookies of darkness were generally a collection of people who hated themselves and their predicaments. He could smell their discontent and pain, an acrid bitter scent that he went out of his way to avoid. It was part of why he

stayed at the tower, even beyond the simplicity of living where his hounds were born.

Recently, though, the circumstances seem to have reversed themselves from the time when Red Velvet was eavesdropping on Dark Choco's conversation to now, when the other warrior seemed to express sympathy for his wretched state.

Of course, who could have helped him so much, except for Pure Vanilla, the mysterious, kind cookie who turned out to be his mother's former friend? He captured the hearts of those around him, including his. He couldn't get the memories of Pure Vanilla, bleeding and sitting blankly in his room, out of his head. Red Velvet was a bit irrationally angry at the man for exposing the fact that the Dark Enchantress was capable of doing such things to someone she loved.

It wasn't his fault, the general knew, yet he couldn't help his emotions. Pure Vanilla ruined his illusion that the Dark Enchantress was- well, not good, but decent. Pure Vanilla was also helping him with his arm. He couldn't even be mad without being mad at himself, because the healer had never done anything to him.

The pup squirmed out of his grasp. She went to Dark Choco, winding around his legs with her tail wagging. The warrior picked the cakehound up and placed it on his shoulder. He then tilted his head in the direction of the hall, a sign for him to accompany him. The general had an inopportune image of being grabbed, just like the puppy. He shook the concept off and followed.

He inquired about what Dark Choco had been up to lately and why he seemed different. The Cacaoon was reticent at first, but opened up relatively quickly. He told the hybrid all about how his father untangled his curse, and how much work he had put into the feat. Red Velvet congratulated him on being free, expressing how it must be nice. The prince then made an offer for him to do the same, which was promptly shot down. Red Velvet wished to prolong the time he had before the inevitable blessing, and Dark Choco was more than happy to brag about Pure Vanilla, and Licorice on a few topics.

They chatted until the healer came to take him away for his fitting.

The augmentation was made very quickly. With Pure Vanilla's pre-existing knowledge of the body and Strawberry Crepe's skill with mechanical parts, they managed to cobble together a brace by the end of the night, which Red Velvet tried on. The brace was sleek and moderately heavy, a crutch that encircled the upper half of this hound arm and connected to a pad on his other shoulder. It took a lot of weight off his constantly stressed arm and balanced both sides, creating a strangely light feeling that almost had him stumbling the other way.

He flexed his arms experimentally. Though the metal couldn't be considered soft, it wasn't grating either.

"So, how is it?" the child pestered. "Does it hurt? The brace looks kind of awkward, I won't lie. But I think this is mounds better than having one really heavy arm. If you weren't kinda scary, I would have made fun of it."

"...thanks, Strawberry Crepe. This is significantly better than having a constant tearing sensation at the junction of my arm."

"I'm so awesome," they whispered.

"I'm reasonably sure that this simple design won't cause problems, but tell us if any issues arise. We'll adjust the brace for you."

“I am truly grateful, Pure Vanilla.”

Red Velvet was quickly let go afterward to enjoy his new balance. He swung his arm in circles, the motion not something he was previously able to do before. Despite the joyous occasion, discontent still nibbled on the corner of his consciousness. Pure Vanilla had interrogated him about his cake-hound traits, but only for the betterment of his hounds. He hadn't done anything deserving of the massive improvement to his quality of life, and that notion was cloying his painless existence. The world didn't give out blessings for free, so he could only wait for the other shoe to drop.

And the world did not dawdle. Pure Vanilla approached him as night settled within the castle, slinking from the darkness as though he was a part of it. When asked about what he wanted, the healer revisited their earlier conversation. “If you worry about paying me back for the brace, then I have a way for us to break even.”

“I would be glad to hear it.”

“Do not be involved in Dark Choco's affairs- such is the price of my help.”

Another wave of jealousy washed over Red Velvet. *That lucky bastard.*

The healer had never been loyal to the Dark Enchantress, more to her memory, but the general didn't care. Pomegranate was the one who got hung up about that stuff. Yet somehow, the way that Pure Vanilla looked after the warrior chafed some long-healed scab in his heart, eliciting thoughts that conflicted with his sense of honor. The general believed that he was an honorable person, strived for it even, and these dark things bothered him deeply.

“He does not need to be protected from me, even in the absence of our master's command. But if you still wish it so, then I will swear to that.”

Red Velvet's animal eyes could pick out the fakeness of the healer's smile in the darkness. “I'm only asking this because I believe that you are the type to keep your word, so please don't disappoint me, okay? Prove that being a hybrid doesn't make someone a monster.”

In that moment, Pure Vanilla reminded him of his mother. He was softer and more polite about his command, sure, but the refusal to allow him any other option was intimately familiar. Would the general become a monster to him if he harmed Dark Choco? Would he have said the same to the other cookies of darkness?

As if he hadn't divulged something deeply hurtful, he clasped his hands and bowed. Red Velvet passively let him because he was unsure about how to react. The healer had given him an older gesture of goodwill, one that he only recognized because the Dark Enchantress had taught him.

When Pure Vanilla left him, a gentle grasp and a shiny new brace in his wake, the general was more conflicted than ever.

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Pure Vanilla went to the open window by the high floor. He sat on the sill, the wind buffeting his back. After a short while, Pomegranate walked by, just on the dot of the staccato schedule that neither of them planned but had come about anyway.

“What is it?” she snarked. “Here to beg now that the Dark Enchantress has returned?”

“Not at all. I simply wish for you to check on a particular cookie I find suspicious.”



This was merely a precaution. Red Velvet had revealed that the mercenary had the second of the three holy weapons, the first of which had been the cause of Dark Choco's plight. The healer doubted that his fate was purposefully planned (since it had happened so long ago), but chances were that the Strawberry Jam sword originated from the same organization that she was from. He had already decided to investigate who had created such intricate and powerful curses, and asking the seer may yield an accurate impression of the mercenary and her organization.

"Someone whom you find suspicious...they're not anybody living in this castle, I take it?" Upon Pure Vanilla's nod, she hmm-ed. "Interesting. I'll indulge you. Have I encountered them before?"

"Most likely not." He passed on the description of Pastry that he received from the general.

The priestess agreed that she had never met this woman before, and then made a claim that she would purposefully pursue the enigma she represented. She proceeded to do a slow dance for the sake of honing her focus, since looking farther than a couple of months or so into the future required great effort. Pure Vanilla awkwardly stood to the side as she gracefully maneuvered a sapling bough in the air.

"Usually, there are multiple dancers and musicians," she explained. "But I perform alone."

Her movements were obviously meant to serve as one of a quad. The quiet tapping of her shoes in the void accentuated the pointedly missing string accompaniment.

At the end of the pre-magic routine, she bowed and put away the bough. Then emerged the mirror, flashing as magic coalesced around its scarlet finish. Pomegranate was still for a couple of minutes as she scried into her future.

### *Crash*

The mirror fell to the ground, shattering a starburst of glass shards around the point of impact.

"Pomegranate cookie!?"

The woman was hunched over the floor, sweat dripping from her face. "Why...why did I do that? I don't understand..."

The healer hovered over her, unsure of how to comfort her. What could she have seen in the future? Pure Vanilla could only hope to guess. He settled next to her until she was able to recapture her usual coolness of bearing.

"This Pastry and her organization are strange. It's quite far in the future and I don't have context to my vision so I must make some blank assumptions about what they are and where they originate, but if I'm correct..." She made a strange, uncomfortable face at him. "The mistress would be *ecstatic*."

"I do not have the best record when it comes to things that make the Dark Enchantress happy."

"You don't," she agreed.

"Pomegranate, what did you see?"

"I saw a man, younger than I. He held a staff and tongue of poison. My future self, or whichever version of me I was looking through, made him a bargain."

"What does this have to do with the mercenary?"

“The bargain I made with him was bartered on Pastry’s life. Among others.”

It was a plenty shocking type of realization, and Pure Vanilla reacted with the expected surprise. Even so, both of them knew that she had given him but a small scrap of information. There was nothing he could truly do with this revelation, especially if (as the priestess now suspects,) the Dark Enchantress has Pure Vanilla under some sort of mental lock.

“I won’t be getting any more than this, right?” He confirmed with some disappointment. “You’ve only confirmed that Pastry and this organization are some kind of threat, and that they may become personally involved with the Dark Enchantress or me.”

“I do so enjoy conversing with intelligent people.”

She repaired her mirror, borrowing Pure Vanilla to siphon some magic for the task. Luckily, there was nothing special about the mirror except the fact that Pomegranate wielded it, so reparations were easy. She waved him off when her tool had been reverted to its original state, and he went without much fanfare.

Now, she had some unencumbered time to ponder.

There was more to her visions that Pomegranate didn’t tell him. She had no reason to disclose everything, or even most of what she had seen. What had rattled her so was not the blasé gambling that she had done with the lives of others- such was a familiar game- but the sheer amount of futures that she had to search through just to find one which was viable.

Pomegranate can see the way her fate intersects with others and change accordingly, as she had done for Red Velvet, and she can also look for futures where certain things happen, to better tailor the one she wanted. When she is looking for a variable that has a small chance of encountering, then only those futures would be displayed. But she had rifled through so many possibilities just now that it was easily determined that the chance of her having an influence on Pastry's life was practically guaranteed. Yet most of her visions were of pure darkness.

From experience, she knew that a black future signified a singular, sure factor- Pomegranate’s demise. In her premonition with the mysterious poison user, the priestess looked the same as she did now. She might have been a couple years older, at most.

She hadn’t seen so many black futures since her time at the Pomegranate village.

(A two-way chain, but only Pomegranate had her wrist encircled. The beast on the other side had torn away from the links binding it.)

She moved a sleeve over her mouth to hide her frown, suppressing any demonstration of emotion even when no spectators were present to see her.

*So, the shadow of death looms above me...*

## Chapter End Notes

Red Velvet:

Red Velvet: Did I just experience a micro-aggression?

Pomegranate: \*Internal screaming\*

So excited for the next chapter y'all don't even know :)

## Misc: Saccharine

### Chapter Notes

WARNING: gore, abuse, serious bodily injury.

Pure Vanilla fucking dies lmfao

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's sweet like saccharine~  
What I'd do to have you sitting here next to me~  
Looking at you makes me wanna gouge out my eyes,  
Bloody surprise,  
Like cherry pie,  
Will you be mine?

True to what the priestess had said, Pure Vanilla didn't leave the castle. It wasn't really known what was keeping him there, whether it was a fear of the Dark Enchantress's retaliation, a delusion that he could save his old friend, or some mysterious other reason. The end result was that no more changes occurred within the cookies of darkness. Only the boiling froth of discontent present among everyone, hidden under the surface of everyday life, truly showed the precipice they danced on.

After the Dark Enchantress returned, she continued to call Pure Vanilla to meetings so she could enjoy her newfound delicacy. The healer let it happen, no longer struggling against her.

The Dark Enchantress was stronger, and the enchantments around her were a testament to decades of preparation that he lacked. Resisting was not worth the fight and energy that would ensue, so he just let her do as she wished. Even if she gradually increased what she asked of him, it was "in moderation", as the sorceress said. Pure Vanilla could just fix himself up. That by no means lessened the toll that the repetitive abuse took on him, which he successfully hid from everyone but Pomegranate. When the sorceress would cannibalize him, he would sequester away to that high window, where she would pass by.

The priestess tried to barge in and protect him on a couple of occasions. She would appear in the nick of time or right before, tempting the Dark Enchantress with magnificent visions and playing on her hatred of the witches to draw her attention away from Pure Vanilla. She entered her master's mind with the excuse of keeping information away from the healer, so she could do her work without interference. But parlor tricks could only work for so long. When she was telling the Dark Enchantress more about an organization of interest, she interrupted her.

"Pomegranate, do you think I haven't noticed what you are trying to do?"

In the end, The Dark Enchantress did leave to investigate the St. Pastry order. She returned quickly, though, and the priestess ceased to help from then.

Strawberry Crepe began spending more and more time away from the kingdom in the clouds.

Pomegranate, if she had been affected by the death flags over her head, kept from showing any outward indication. Licorice was becoming impatient, not understanding why weren't leaving. Dark Choco was diligently waiting.

Someone was inevitably going to break. It was just who would be first.

Red Velvet, on account of Pomegranate's influence and his own internal conflict, happened to be the one to fall. He went to the Dark Enchantress, bowing low, and confessed what Dark Choco had revealed to him. The hybrid had nothing against him- he generally liked him by now- but he needed the Dark Enchantress to be decisive over his worth. If there was any propelling force for the hybrid's actions, it would probably be...affirmation. Not for his loyalty, but for his cause.

The Dark Enchantress sent the general to collect both of them. They instantly picked up on his rigid, becoming suspicious, but followed him on account of the sorceress's command. He led them both into the throne room and shut the grand doors behind him. Upon Pure Vanilla's throne, the Dark Enchantress smirked down upon them.

"Are you two aware of why you were called?"

"We aren't," Pure Vanilla said. "Please enlighten us."

"I had been told about of activity that you two were devising behind my back. I had never expected it- what an out-of-character act for our resident healer! had never thought you would be the type commit such a betrayal to a friend from beyond the grave."

"Pardon me?" Pure Vanilla was confused.

"Do you know why Dark Choco was exiled from his kingdom?"

The prince's eyes widened. "Wait, don't listen to her!"

"He was thrown out because he had killed his father. And all this time he had left you in ignorance and let you fix his curse."

Several things fell into place at once. The prince had never told him why exactly he had been exiled, and though Pure Vanilla had expected something bad, he hadn't quite thought about the possibility of Dark Cacao's death. It would take more than a stab wound to kill an ancient. He suddenly thought about Red Velvet's cut. If the wound was severe, and unable to heal without some serious monitoring...

That malignant magic prevented the body from fixing itself. It would be akin to death from a thousand cuts.

"I didn't kill him!" Dark Choco cried. "It was the whispers- my sword- and we were having an argument. But he was still alive when I left...when he cast me out. He's alive!"

That proved nothing. The holy weapons caused long-term damage, like a parasite. Pure Vanilla shoved down his emotion and tried to speak to him in a level manner. "...have you ever gone back and checked?"

"No, but-"

"S-see, I'm willing to help you regardless of what happened under the sword's thrall. But you have to tell me these things, Dark Choco."

“You don’t believe me...” Dark Choco whispered.

Pure Vanilla was giving him the benefit of the doubt that he attacked his father from the curse’s thrall, but he could only suspend logic so far. Dark Choco had lied before, about the teleporter, and he had purposefully omitted the events of his exile. At the moment, the healer wasn’t sure he could trust him. The Dark Enchantress, on the other hand, had a habit of revealing the truth for the sake of causing him grief. Currently, he was more inclined to believe her sadism than his spotty affirmation.

“I’m not claiming that it was purposeful-”

“You trust the Dark Enchantress over me?” he interrupted.

“It’s not like that!”

The Dark Enchantress was thoroughly enjoying the scene before her.

“How else am I supposed to interpret it?!”

*“Please, let’s save this for later.”*

“Like hell I’m shelving this conversation! What the fuck had the Dark Enchantress said that make you act this way? Did she ensnare you as well?” He prepared to attack, incensed that she managed to sway someone he cared about against him. Even she shouldn’t be able to attack him, so what did he have to fear?

The healer called for him. “Dark Choco, stop!”

He raised his sword at the sorceress and-

slashed Pure Vanilla.

*Huh? He was standing over here?*

Scarlet splattered across the tile. The healer touched his gushing wound, almost seeming like he didn’t process the slice he inflicted. Pure Vanilla’s wound was a courtesy, repaying him for his audacity to attack his master.

“Aah- ahhh...” Dark Choco made an incoherent noise, his greatest sin mirrored before him. He took a couple of halting steps back, horrified at his actions. The Dark Enchantress grabbed him before he could do anything else, leaving the room as the healer crumpled to his knees.

She carried him out as he fruitlessly tried to scratch and tear away from her grasp, searching until she found a spot suitably far away from him. The Dark Enchantress set him down harshly in the hall. Circles of magic swirled around him, a physical chain binding him to the castle just like his mental counterpart.

“Ten feet.”

Dark Choco tried to chase after her, but crashed into an invisible wall after a couple of steps. He slammed both arms into the barrier, desperately wanting to return to his father’s side, to try and fix the damage he wrought. “No no no this can’t be happening, not again...” The barrier did not give. He shakily took out the sword again, disgusted at wielding the weapon stained with Pure Vanilla’s jam. It went cleanly through the air, unencumbered by the prison trapping him. He had no way to break the spell.

The prince threw it aside, nearly to the point of weeping. He was a sitting duck, trapped in this container until the Dark Enchantress deigned to deal with him. Someone he cared about may be slipping away from him, and he could do nothing.

The voices became more agitated, filling his splintering cracks

*Burn kill wreck destroy bleed you slew him again-*

Everything went red.

He came to at the sound of a voice calling his name. It was not the one he wished to hear- in fact, he would prefer almost anyone else. As he became aware of his surroundings, Dark Choco took in the circle of carnage around him. Everything was broken or scratched and gouged.

Red Velvet had his back against the wall, standing outside the circle of devastation, rather daunted at the sight of something far more animalistic than he. If he could move his pointed ears as dogs could, the prince was sure that they would be flattened. Good. Dark Choco had not forgotten that he had been the one to indirectly cause him to raise his blade. The warrior lunged at him, only to be stopped by the bindings upon him.

That wasn't going to keep him from expressing his anger at the general. "Red Velvet, what the fuck have you done?!"

"I never expected this," he justified.

"Well that's too damn bad. Get me the fuck out!"

Red Velvet was regretful enough to try despite the potential of his wrath. He entered the circle and tried dragging him out of his invisible prison, with no success. Once the warrior hit that set distance away from where he was dropped, he simply couldn't get any farther. It was like fighting against gravity. By the end of the struggle, they were both panting, and Dark Choco looked about ready to maul the general.

"I'll find someone else to break the spell," Red Velvet said. He sprinted off and left the prince to seethe.

Dark Choco sat down in a meditative position, not that it really calmed him. Really, what did Red Velvet think would happen if he told the Dark Enchantress about what Pure Vanilla did for him? Pat him on the head and then say that she forgave their insurrection? *Well, maybe he wanted that pat*, he thought uncharitably.

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By the time she had returned to the throne room, Pure Vanilla had managed to stitch himself up to some extent. He struggled for a second but managed to stand. "Lily," he greeted, with no little animosity.

"Pure Vanilla," she purred, "Have you forgotten how I like to be referred to? Even if you don't think of yourself as my subordinate, at least practice some etiquette."

"I don't want to address you with any hint of respect anymore," he hissed. "You planned all of that on purpose. I said some unspeakable things to Dark Choco, things that he wouldn't easily overlook. I *hurt* him."

She laughed lightly. "You did. Though he did repaid that experience in full."

It took all of his self-control, curated through centuries of experience, to keep from yelling at her.

“How much Red Velvet tell you?”

“He said enough.” The sorceress leaned forward from his former throne. “I honestly didn’t think you had it in you, to find a way past the sword. It was a wonderfully complex curse- you must have poured a lot of effort into doing so.”

He could tell that, despite her laid-back tone, she was very upset.

“I am simply doing what I think is best. The vow will stop you from physically keeping him here.”

“Hmm...I can simply threaten him with imminent harm towards you.”

The somewhat-healed cut of the sword stung as it brushed his robes. It was abundantly clear that she knew that she could play them against each other. He should have just pushed the prince into leaving earlier. That would have avoided a lot of conflict.

The Dark Enchantress continued. “But that won’t be necessary, would it, Pure Vanilla? I only kept him in the case of leveraging him against the Cacao kingdom, and a single kingdom is nothing in the face of my ambitions.”

“There’s more to it than the witches, isn’t it? I would believe that you truly would wish them dead for the sake of cookies if you hadn’t wiped out so many people during the Flour War. Barring a simple reason like revenge, I cannot comprehend your final goal.”

“My goal...I have never verbalized it fully, now that I think about it. It’s so much closer than what I had originally imagined. The cult organization that Pomegranate showed me- you would be shocked at the acts of blasphemy that they commit. But even their experiments are incomplete. Imagine what we would be able to fashion!”

He wasn’t sure what she was talking about. He didn’t want to know. The sorceress ignored his apparent lack of comprehension, too caught up in her grandiosity. She proceeded to switch to a topic that he understood and hated intimately.

“These soul jams of ours, which grant us the curse of eternal life- so many years and I have only just begun to realize what they are capable of! Imagine what we could have accomplished with them if only the rest of you decided to give them to me without struggle. They can transform us into beings far superior to what we are, break the laws that govern the world- it may even be possible to resurrect someone from the dead...or bring life to where it doesn’t exist.” She turned to him, something undefinable within her expression. “This time, we’ll do it properly.”

“White Lily, you’ve lost your mind!”

“I’ll be *god*, Pure Vanilla.”

The healer remained silent at her proclamation.

“That will be the reason for my existence in this world,” she breathed. “I’ll be the one who takes, who consumes, and no one will be able to stop me.” She turned to him, waiting for him to validate her delusions of grandeur.

“...I suppose you were right after all.”

The Dark Enchantress beamed.

“If the way you act is a representation of the witches, then I can understand how creation can be apathetic,” he spoke spitefully, “After everything you forced me through at the Blueberry Institute, do you expect me to do it all over again? I don’t want to play with people’s lives. The notion of violating the laws of the world more than the pre-existing powers that our soul jams grants is abhorrent. As if we didn’t have it bad enough already!”

“Watch yourself, Vanilla-

“No. I am *done*. You are not my master, Lily, let alone my friend. My time, loyalty, and affection- all of that is at my discretion to give!”

In a flicker, the Dark Enchantress was in front of him. He stumbled back and she caught him, fingers snaking around his throat as she lowered them both to the ground.

“Oh, Pure Vanilla...do you think that I will let such words go? Spare some presence of mind for your situation. I could kill you for your insubordination.”

He doubted it. The Dark Enchantress did not want him dead- she just wanted him in pain. She wanted him to submit to her. He was quite certain that it gave her some perverse joy to obsess over the suffering that she could inflict on him. The sorceress will keep him alive until she gets tired of it, and he fears that her interest will persist for a long time.

“No, that won’t happen.”

She scrutinized him, looking for what could make him so sure. He twisted his face into that familiar messianic smile of his, his oldest mask. The remnant of long-past habits grated on the sorceress like chalk on a classroom.

Pure Vanilla didn’t think that she had the heart to do it. She couldn’t even tell if he was purposefully trying to antagonize her or expressing his truth, but both options amounted to the same outcome. Such a blatant expectation of vulnerability made her deeply furious.

“You’ve always been weak,” she spat. “The weakest of the ancients. Such feelings are worthless.”

He gagged as her hands tightened around his throat. His magic floated around them, wanting to attack but unable to pierce her enchantments. He could only use harmless spells, searching, searching, searching hopelessly for any kind of weakness.

“Do you want to die? Is that it? Finally put an end to our ‘plight’?” She sneered. “These powers that we have been granted, our immortality, it is only a curse for you! I am not nearly so pathetic. There’s little to love about these ordinary, short-lived cookies. I won’t miss them when they inevitably waste away.”

Cruel, but it had been long since she had cared for any others except for the ancient heroes. In the same vein, she was also dismissing her followers.

“This is why...the cookies of darkness do not follow you out of loyalty...”

“They don’t have to! If they stay as my useful minions, then that’s all that matters.”

“Including Pomegranate?” he whispered.

“That girl...she is a clever one. She knows who to choose in the end, for her sake.”

Pure Vanilla thought about his talk with her, where he offered her a better life.

“What has loyalty ever done for you? All those people who you have healed over the years, and none of them are here now. There’s no one left to hear you scream...”

The Dark Enchantress was all he had left. That fact made her so happy. Finally, her beloved, popular friend, that shining beacon in her life, was just as wretched as herself. She sought to strip the angel of its wings until it was as ugly a demon as she.

“After everyone else has been saved, Pure Vanilla, who will stay to save you?”

His beautiful blue-gold eyes were filling with tears. She reached up, nails around the socket, and dug in.

Before he fell victim to agony, the healer recognized a small glimpse of magic, buried deep in the sorceress’s body.

The soul jam...

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The general returned with the entirety of cookies of darkness in tow. That seemed a bit overboard, if he was being honest, and he felt a bit like a zoo animal to be gawked at for his humiliation. Red Velvet caught his glance. “They were together,” he explained.

Pomegranate was the first to come forward, tapping him. A faint golden shimmer revealed a binding magical circle, before fading back to nothingness. “What on earth have you been caught up in?” she inquired.

“Ask Red Velvet.”

The general scowled and looked away.

Instead of mocking him for this, the priestess frowned. After a moment, she pushed the reaper at him. “Licorice, find a way to nullify the spell on Dark Choco.”

“Hey, why me- “ Licorice turned toward her in outrage, primed to complain, but she was already gone with the wind.

The priestess hurried to the throne room. If what she suspected was happening played out, then it was in everyone’s best interest for her to stop it. If Pure Vanilla died or offed himself, then her master would go ballistic.

She swept in front of the throne room, deciding to listen in before she entered. It was always easier to sway the conversation when she knew where to pick off from. She placed one ear to the cracker-wood to better catch what they were saying. Unfortunately, what she picked up wasn’t anything approaching the civility of spoken word.

Those sounds...

Pomegranate changed her mind. Nothing in the world would be enough for her to interrupt the Dark Enchantress during...this. She could practically sense her few good futures crumble to dust.

Why, oh why, did Pure Vanilla always screw up everything? Everything would have been fine if he just bowed his head and accepted the treatment!

“Nothing good comes of fighting back,” she mumbled angrily to herself.

No, that wasn't fair. Pomegranate would have refused to be in his position. With the little facsimile of dignity that she had left, she would have held onto her farce of control with her dying breath.

She had never been a fighter, but she still had her limits. Her form of resistance would just be a different kind- anything was better than a lack of action.

That was her personal statute, a theory proven to her over and over even while she remained in her village.

They were passive idiots, all of them, peaceful sitting ducks waiting for their demise. Pomegranate was different, though. It had come of her ability- most of the village wasn't seers, and those who did dip into the practice only had vague, blurry images.

Since childhood, Pomegranate would be able to see her death in violent, excruciating detail. It was this power, a curse and blessing in one, that brought her to the center of attention. Everyone in the village saw heard her wails and heralded her pain as a mark of "genius". Those who sat on the sidelines could never understand how frustrated she was when they refused to prevent their inevitable destruction, because it was apparently against the rules for a prophet to change their own fate.

At the first opportunity, she had chased after a woman lost to the world and made her a demon, sooner than what fate had decreed. That woman had then gone back and seen the village of seers, cookies with fiery red hair like the one that created her and sought its destruction anyway- being able to venture across the fields of time was a dangerous ability, after all, and the Dark Enchantress thought to get rid of them before they became enemies.

Pomegranate was the one to go back and burn her village to ashes. Because if the Dark Enchantress had attacked them in her place, she would have left no survivors.

*Mitigation was the name of the game.*

She enjoyed the power that being second in command brought, make no mistake. Pomegranate was closer to her master than the others and that had its benefits. But then the healer came and turned her scrap of superiority onto its head.

He had gotten her master hooked on the taste of flesh. She had found the source of all her potential deaths, and it all stemmed back to their master. Should Pure Vanilla be taken out of the picture, then as the person that the Dark Enchantress cared for the most, she would take his place.

Fuck. That.

More and more, that seemed to be her eventuality.

She went back to the others. Licorice, not turning away from the enchantments, began with the insults. "Oh, finally decided to gift us with your presence rather than let me do the dirty work, huh?"

"Shut up, Licorice."

Something in her facade must have given her away, because he listened.

~~~~~

The Dark Enchantress wiped her face, an act that just smeared it more. She had showed Pure Vanilla that he was not a weakness of hers. Besides, having to take him bit by bit was getting

tiring. She had yearned for a genuine feast and finally got it.

Even so, the sorceress had to admit that she had lost control and made a right mess of everything. The room was going to take more than a couple of spells to return to its former cleanliness, not that that was a high bar to begin with. She kicked the healer lying nearby.

“Pure Vanilla, get up. You’ve played dead for long enough, now heal yourself.”

She sent an invigorating spell his way. Nothing happened. As if to accentuate her failure, he dropped his staff. It rolled on the ground stiffly.

The Dark Enchantress went and got his staff from the ground, a bit tense. She shoved it into his hand and wrapped it around the living wood, but it simply slipped out and rolled away. The flower’s pupil was blown wide, nearly covering the entirety of its iris. She had never seen that before.

“Damn thing...”

She went to get the flower again. Placing it on Pure Vanilla didn’t do anything. It wouldn’t, of course. Event sentient artifacts cannot truly act without a wielder.

(In some cases, without their masters, they become fragile or rot away entirely. Like a wilted lily, lying upon a high platter shelf.)

Of all the talents that the Dark Enchantress had, she had never been able to grasp healing. The warrior Dark Cacao and Hollyberry weren’t capable of any magic beyond their special skills and Pure Vanilla couldn’t cast nature magic, but they had complemented each other’s lack. But the sorceress was now confronted with her glaring mistake.

The flower trembled uselessly. The sorceress picked the staff up and threw the staff aside in a fit of rage. It snapped in half.

“Shit. Did I really use that much force?”

She could only leave the task of fixing Pure Vanilla to himself, and he wasn’t waking up.

A compassionate boy had once told her, *The worst part of being a healer was...*

“His soul jam should have activated by now, right? For me, it had been near the moment of death. That’s how it should work.” Despite her unknowingly true theories about what the soul jams were capable of, she was ignorant of Pure Vanilla’s power. She could only recognize that the magical failsafe wasn’t working as she had expected. There was an infinitesimal chance that this was some freak accident, or that his ability did turn out to be resurrection. But on the off chance that it wasn’t...

Will the Dark Enchantress risk Pure Vanilla’s life for that chance?

No, she wouldn’t.

The reticent girl held the pieces of a glass in her palms, and she wasn’t able to fix it. But the boy was not awake to do it either, and if he did ever manage to awaken, would he want to? She tossed away the dead pieces of the flower, deeming it beyond repair.

The healer was splayed right where she left him. The destruction of one of his senses hadn’t elicited any reaction. She went back over to her old enemy and shook him violently.

“Pure Vanilla..?”

...

The Dark Enchantress burst through the meeting room, too panicked to transform into her compressed form. She ran around the winding halls, looking for Pomegranate, knocking over lights and arches. The sorceress cursed herself for lacking a talent for healing.

She quickly found her priestess in some kind of discussion with the Cacao's child, who was still in his circle. The Dark Enchantress, in her state, failed to notice that her invisible barrier had been removed. She barged toward them, interrupting whatever they had been talking about as she dropped Pure Vanilla's torn body onto her closest aid. Pomegranate nearly fell over from the weight, but managed to right herself. She wrapped her arms around his limp form, a knee-jerk reaction. "...Mistress?" she said, shocked.

“Heal him!” Her voice cracked from the stress.

Red Velvet made a high keening noise, pinching his nose as it was assaulted by the sickly sweet stench of jam. The priestess blinked at her and then at the body. “Mistress...what is this?”

She asked too late. The sorceress was out of the hall the moment that he was in her arms.

“Is something wrong?” Poison Mushroom asked innocently. Licorice had his arms over both the children's eyes.

“Nothing. let's go,” he said tersely.

“I'll find out, even if you try and keep it from me.” Strawberry Crepe threatened.

The reaper didn't respond, ushering them both away.

“Witches, fucking hell...” Dark Choco looked like he wanted to take the healer's prone form away from her, but he stopped short, as though forgetting he was no longer bound by the barrier. His hand twitched over his sword and his gaze darted between her, the destruction around him, and the desecrated body she held. “...Pure Vanilla...”

Pomegranate was seriously worried that he would go berserk again, but this time without a spell circle to bind him. But even that concern took a backseat. She needed somewhere to put Pure Vanilla so she could work on him, and she wasn't quite strong enough to move him without risking further injury. Anything else would send his remaining foot into the grave. A quick survey showed that Red Velvet had gone off somewhere, and she and the prince were the only ones remaining.

Dark Choco was on the edge of a panic attack, freaking out at the scene before him. Pure Vanilla was dying in her arms. And she was agitated and soaked in his jam, the sensation making her sick to her stomach. Most of all, there was nothing for her except the darkness of oblivion.

All of this, all at once.

Pomegranate weighed her options and came to a decision.

She walked in front of Dark Choco, stood on her tip-toes, and slapped him. It wasn't a break of the vow that had been made for the prince's safety because as of this moment, Pomegranate no longer considered herself a cookie of darkness. She would sacrifice her stability and control if she could get rid of these self-imposed chains. At this point, putting effort towards the other path wasn't worth it.

The prince broke from his spiral from the dull pain in his cheek. “How did you...?” he warbled.

“It doesn’t matter. Carry him to my quarters, Dark Choco.”

She pushed his weight off and Dark Choco shifted him into his arms. He carried the blonde gently, as if he was something precious, then went after the priestess.

She quickly stripped some unnecessary sheets from her bed and they laid him on the soft sheets. They quickly became stained, but there was nothing that could be done. Pomegranate took over, peeling his clothing from his body. The soaked rags joined in communion in a pile, seeping red onto the cold tiles.

“Oh...” Dark Choco breathed.

It was much worse than expected, that's what it took to bring an ancient cookie to heel. Dark Choco queasily looked at him, but couldn't find much evidence for the slash he inflicted under everything else.

The man was barely recognizable as their Pure Vanilla. Most of his hair and face were stained, rendering the light blonde almost non-existent. He was littered with massive tears and crushed holes, as though a large creature had bitten on a toy and shook it around. The prince tried to find any sign of life, nearly hypnotized in his horror.

Pomegranate tugged on his sleeve. “Get some bandages. I can’t help him with air and prayers, as easy as that would be.”

Dark Choco nodded faintly and ran to aid her.

He’ll be back, but she needed to send him out for a little while to clear his head. She didn’t know if the prince was deluding himself or if he genuinely missed it in the chaos. He had carried the healer, so he should have been the first to notice that Pure Vanilla wasn’t breathing anymore.

She brushed his congealed hair aside and nearly retched at the sight of the large crack in his face. Had this been anyone else, she would have thrown in the towel at the first sight of such severe injuries. Trying to heal a corpse was a waste of her magic and mental facilities. She had buried more than enough people to know death when it stared her in the face. She should probably just leave the poor man alone and let him pass on. At this stage, it may be a mercy.

Am I willing to be the passive observer? Could I walk out of this mess and survive without being bogged down by regret?

(Dark Choco, Strawberry Crepe, and Licorice)

Pure Vanilla knew her more than the cookies which she had been around for years, whom she had facilitated into joining the cookies of darkness.

He had found out her motives, right after their mission to the small kingdom. Even if he hadn’t exactly complimented her for them, he had understood the nature of her sacrifices. No one else could boast that achievement- her village had called her mad for being the architect of their ruination, and the other cookies in the castle despised her, for valid reason.

Pomegranate would hate to lose that. There was some horror in the concept of being known, but at the same time, if someone can even glimpse of what she is...well, even villains craved validation. Plus, she also wanted to give him an earful for sabotaging her future by proxy.

Just once, I'll make an exception and choose the improbable choice.

“The legends of the past had practically worshipped you. They revered the ancient heroes as saints. So come on and prove it, Pure Vanilla. Show me a miracle.”

Dark Choco returned with a bucket of water, antiseptic, and enough bandages to drown in. She took the stuff and promptly kicked him out so that she could work alone. The prince may have wanted to help, but he was a bumbling oaf with no practice in healing and would only serve to get in her way.

She took off her outer robes and put on some gloves.

...

Twelve hours.

That's around how long it took for her to heal and stabilize everything. It was no easy task, especially when more of Pure Vanilla was outside of his body than in, but desperation and her skill at keeping a calm demeanor eventually won.

Pomegranate, though she was desensitized to violence in general, was not prepared for something like this. Nobody could be. Despite that, she labored, bandaging him over and over as the strips eventually bled through as she cast her magic that was never strong enough to be called proper healing.

Sometime during the process, she became aware of a blue gem, shining next to him. It hadn't been there earlier, and she hadn't seen how it had gotten to the healer's side, but she left it there. The soul jams functioned in incomprehensible ways, and if it appeared, then maybe there was a glint of light at the end of the tunnel.

Despite this faint sign of hope, as she continued to stitch him together with her magic, no signs of life showed. The priestess forced her way forward, though. She had already committed to it. Her clothes were gradually stained with blood as she slowly chipped away at the injuries until she could do no more.

Pomegranate was a seer, and though she knew the principles of healing, she was never meant for the role. Her work, no matter the effort, would be imperfect.

Healers knew not to touch the mind, and most of the injuries didn't heal properly, even when she had followed every procedure for proper care. He was left with large scars that spanned across most of his upper body, his legs, and a missing eye.

A pretty, preserved, dead body.

She checked him over once more, then wearily dragged herself to a corner and passed out.

...

Pomegranate was soon interrupted by someone's attempt at being silent. She got up to Dark Choco shuffling into the place, anxiously trying to ascertain his mentor's condition. Wonderful, she had to witness his inevitable sorrow. Pomegranate was too exhausted to console him or even fake being nice.

“Forget it,” she called over. “I did all I could.”

“What do you mean? He’s unconscious, but he’s still alive.”

Pomegranate shot up, sprinting over to his bedside. As the prince said, Pure Vanilla was lying there, chest slowly rising and falling. The gem beside him was no longer glowing. She sighed and sank into a squat, an immense sense of relief passing through her. Those terrible hours she had spent didn’t go to waste, and the Dark Enchantress won’t eviscerate her when she inevitably returned.

“Pomegranate?” The prince was actually *concerned*.

“I am exhausted, as anyone would be after a large expense of magic. Don’t make assumptions about me.”

“...Alright. Then what about Pure Vanilla?”

“Physically, he’ll live, though fine would not be a suitable word. He’s missing some of his brain. That doesn’t necessarily mean that he’ll be vegetative!” she interrupted before he could say anything. “Technically, someone in this state shouldn’t be alive in the first place. But...the soul jam revived him, so it may also keep his ‘self’ intact. Who knows.”

Dark Choco looked stricken.

“He’s about healed enough that we can check, so I might as well get it over with now.” She tapped him with a spell.

The healer slowly awoke, though it seemed to require a lot of effort on his behalf. He felt the blankets, then slowly got a sense of his injuries and bandages. Well, he still had the capacity for thinking, at least.

“Pure Vanilla...you’re awake. Does everything feel okay?” Dark Choco asked.

The blonde shifted toward the sound of his voice. “Who...Who are you?” he rasped.

Dark Choco was stunned. “You don’t remember me? I’ve known you since I was a child!” Dark Choco tried to embrace him but Pure Vanilla pushed him away, frightened.

“Don’t cause him to panic.” Pomegranate berated him. “My hard work will be undone!”

“I- I don’t...who are all of you? Where am I?!”

He truly did not recognize Dark Choco, even after hearing his voice. This wasn’t some measly gut reaction to waking up in pain.

Pomegranate needed to go into his mind and check the damage. His staff had been broken and he was completely blind, so she had no way to enter. As Pure Vanilla fretted anxiously, trying to move despite his injuries, she suddenly reached forward and grabbed him by the upper arms. He froze, moving as if he was going to run, not that he could get very far in his condition

“Listen to me. I’m the one who healed you, but I need to do some things that I am not capable of at the moment.” She sent a wave of magic into him, a soft pull that would draw him into her mind. Pure Vanilla resisted the pull of her power, as she hoped, and they both remained in the real world “Do you feel this magic?” she asked. “I need you to do the same, but in the opposite direction. Let me in.”

Normally, it would be inconceivable to expect a regular mage, let alone an amnesiac, to copy

instantaneous magic. But this was Pure Vanilla, one of the greats. If anyone could, it would be him.

There was a moment when it seemed like he would disobey. She was worried that he would be wary on account of his memory loss, but after that faltering second, he reached for her and reversed the flow. The world fell into darkness and she prepared to land among the flowers.

Instead, she arrived in an ashen field devoid of any life. The pillars around the garden had cracked and sunken into the dust.

“S-so, what do you want?”

The person that she met wasn't the one she wanted to find. It was that flicker she had seen so long ago, when he was in stasis- someone identical to Pure Vanilla, but everything above its mouth empty. The headless thing from before shifted uncomfortably under her apparent dissatisfaction. It didn't appear hostile, at least.

“There's someone that I seek within this realm. May I be graced with who or what you are?”

“I'm...not sure, actually.” The flicker said. “I think I'm a healer, so call me Healer cookie for now. That's about as much as I know.”

No, this *was* Pure Vanilla. It was the person that he was without any of his memories and experiences. Even now, his avatar remained, the unconsciously formed shadow of practiced habits.

Pomegranate had found him, but he wasn't whole. She should have anticipated this- an experience as physically traumatic as death would most likely impact the psyche. But hadn't he mentioned losing his memories once before, during his talk with the prince? When she had been driven away from eavesdropping on Dark Choco and Pure Vanilla's first conversation, she had scried on them instead. The point was, if his memories could return once, then it should be the same again. The brain damage hadn't screwed him mentally so much as to destroy his avatar.

And as long as a person was still present and living, their identity could be found. Just like Red Velvet's stuffed leg, or Dark Choco's set of white armor, she had to find the healer's counterpart. She needed to reach the center of Pure Vanilla's heart.

She spoke to the flicker. “Let us seek that man together. He must return, for he owes me a better future.”

Chapter End Notes

>In which everyone fucks up just a little, and now they all know that the Dark Enchantress is a cannibal. No one is happy with this. The amount of "... " breaks in this chapter is really something. These cookies are going through it.

I had quite the time deciding what this chapter should be called. It could have been Saccharine, Sins of the father, or Motive. Eventually, I chose the first cause that's the song that inspired this fic.

Alright, we are at a turning point in this fic! Old things are gonna slowly come back up and their role in the plot will be revealed. I'm so happy.

Pure Vanilla: Origins

Chapter Notes

A few made-up characters, just for backstory.

In which not wearing shoes takes on a new meaning and immortality is just as much a curse as it is a blessing. When someone lives that long, they're bound to be a little off, even if they assume all the behaviors and ideas of any other person.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I must confess. I must confess all of the sins I’ve ever committed in the face of everyone who has ever been kind to me so they know. So that they have the right to choose to love me. I won’t take it. I won’t take love that’s not mine.”

Janelleslocket

Prologue?

A flower was blooming before him, its petals pearly white. The person who had cast the spell had disappeared, but the still-glowing imprint of a circle was left before him. The young boy bent down and gently uprooted the flower. It latched onto him, a small and delicate, but giving the sense of having infinite wisdom.

He then studied the spell circle left before him, this wondrous magic that allowed him the gift of sight. It was the first thing he had ever seen, and he would imprint it into his psyche. He traced this spell into the dirt with his foot, copying it until it had been burned into his memory.

...

“Too early. He isn’t around here.”

Healer carefully put his first seeing aid back where Pomegranate had picked it from. “Be careful with the flowers, please. They are very fragile when uprooted.”

She had already moved on to the next object of interest. The priestess dug around in the sand and picked out a small blue cloak. She snapped the cloth around his upper arm since it was too small for him to properly wear.

...

Two children were hanging out in a glass dome within their secret corner of a garden. The boy was humming as he did his homework and the girl was holding a book, though it was obvious that she wasn’t really reading. She just sat there with the book open and not a single page turned.

“What do you want to be in the future?” she asked her friend.

The other child answered quickly. “I want to be a person everyone loves and admires.”

“That’s a bit dumb.”

The healer shook his head. “No, it isn’t!”

“There’s nothing wrong with your goal, but a ‘well-liked person’ isn’t a job that can support anyone. Unless you mean something like a famous researcher or celebrity?”

The boy thought about the options for a moment. “...that’s not quite what I meant.” He poked the girl. “What about you? Have you ever considered the fantasy of being admired by everyone?”

“I’ve never cared about what others thought, at least to the extent that you do. I don’t need anyone’s approval or praise.” The girl picked at her finger, feeling a bit vulnerable about the topic of conversation. “I just need someone around- one person would be enough.”

The boy grinned. “I can help you snatch a good-looking and reasonably pathetic man.”

“Eww, come on!” She waved him off. “It doesn’t have to be marriage. That’s such a narrow perspective.”

“I’m joking...” he whined. “But I understand what you mean. You don’t want to go through life by yourself. I’m sure that many other people will feel the same way. I, too, often feel lonely- even while being surrounded by people.”

She kicked him lightly, laughing. “You’re horrible. What if those other friends of yours heard us? They would be devastated!”

“My relationship with them is different from what we have.”

“Heh...”

There was a moment of comfortable silence.

“Hey, _____. If we don’t have anyone else to stand by our side, let’s be there for each other, okay?”

They linked pinkies and swore upon their highest conception of holiness; when they became old and tattered, they would find each other and brave the life and what came after together.

But those children never grew old.

...

“What darlings,” the flicker said affectionately. “I bet that they kept true to their word.”

Pomegranate ripped the cloak away viciously.

...

He left the other students shortly after his friend had fled. Intrinsicly, the boy knew that the teachers would not be able to combat the sheer number of monsters that had been released, but that wasn’t what had driven him away. The nail in the coffin was the pervasive guilt. He had a hand in what occurred, and if he had made different decisions, cut off his experiments earlier, or gone with White Lily to the barred-off observatory, then perhaps he could have stopped this.

Without the school providing for their needs, he had nowhere to go. He had no family and no friends beyond the few people at the institute, and could only lurk around where people lived.

When people weren't around, he would wander around the forests and forage. He had lived like that since youth and although he could try to go back to that sort of lifestyle, it was no longer for him.

He didn't want to steal, so he tried to eat grass and pick the trees from leaves like animals do. This only made him sick instead. Even if the boy had noticed that anyone else may have already starved in his position, it didn't make the hunger any less painful. He pawned off his little blue cloak, his hat, and his shoes. People often took pity and tossed him bits of coin, finding the blind child in torn robes and scuffed feet pitiful.

_____ hated this. He hid his flower to invoke more sympathy, but even as he did, this kind of life where he was grasping at straws made him despair. He hated having to expose and play up his vulnerabilities to strangers.

"I wonder what Lily is doing..."

He hoped that she was living in a beautiful cabin full of books and trinkets, where food grew in natural abundance.

"Oh, poor dear. What happened to you? Are your parents around?"

A small caravan was rolling by the town and one of the passengers had stopped in front of him. The person who approached him was an older woman, sweet and stout, whose necklace clinked against her chest when she walked.

"I don't have parents."

"They aren't around anymore, I take."

She certainly got straight to the facts. The woman handed him some money and started returning to the vehicle. He decided that she probably wasn't a kidnapper since she hadn't kept pestering him and called her back.

"Wait! Miss!"

"What is it, child?"

"I'll work for a place to live."

...

The woman and her husband allowed him to live with them, and they provided for him in exchange for his labor. They bought him what he wanted, though he asked for little because they didn't have that much in the first place. In return for a steady supply of books and soft objects, he would take care of their sheep. Eventually, they had come to care for him and vice versa, and he called them father or mother.

It was a simple life. He would go out every morning, get his hands dirty, have dinner with the couple, and rest when the sun crossed the horizon. He lived this way for days, which dragged onto months, which extended far beyond. The boy became a young man, bright and humble. The elder cookies doted on him and he was their pride and joy. But they soon collectively noticed that he ceased to change after reaching his physical and mental prime.

Once they realized that the man working for them did not age, they asked him to stop going to the markets and populated areas. _____ was rather unhappy about being confined to the farmland, but

he understood why they would do such a thing. He was satisfied enough by this form of living, so he listened to them. He stayed on the farm, tending to the plants with impressive shows of magic and wrangling the farm animals.

So there he lived, for sixty years.

The older cookies became gray and fragile, and he spent more and more time taking care of them. It was heartbreaking to see the once lively couple barely have the energy to express their love for each other, and that was not the worst of it. The elderly woman had slowly started losing her sense of self. She had grabbed onto him and torn his flower in a particularly severe fit of delusion.

She begged for forgiveness repeatedly and the healer had to console her. He wasn't sure if she managed to process his words and didn't get the chance to ever find out. She passed away soon after. With the healer unable to navigate easily without his sight, her husband had decided to carry out the last proceedings. Before leaving, he told his boy to use anything at his disposal to create another staff. He wished that his boy could experience the freedom that they had asked him to give away.

...

“...”

...

His father arrived to sets of precious china, old photographs, and keepsakes burned into charred pieces. Jagged lines of sacrifice blackened the ground, defacing the rich soil of their farm. The healer was distraught at the repetitive failures of his oldest spell and tried to apologize for it the instant the old butter cookie sidled next to him.

“I’m so sorry. I had done everything right, I’m sure of it. Perhaps it is time to give up. The next attempt is liable to fail too and I don’t want to ruin any more of-”

“I know that you aren’t telling me why,” he interrupted.

The blonde guiltily shook his head.

“_____. *Ask.*”

“...It’s not enough,” he said. These objects aren’t important enough to fulfill the condition necessary to create another flower.”

The old farmer stared at his broken treasures, and then at his fretting son.

The next day, Healer set out with a new flower and without a home.

...

“Why?” the man asked, sad for this person who was himself yet set apart.

...

“I didn’t want my son to watch me die,” his father said.

“Wait, this wasn’t supposed to happen,” he protested. The words were pouring out on their own, and even he didn’t understand what memories or emotions were driving him to speak. “You had driven me away, talking about how I had stolen what was most precious to you. I was told to never

return.”

“Perhaps that was what happened,” his father said. “But that’s not what he truly felt, is it?”

“How am I supposed to know? I didn’t want this to be true, but this...this ending isn’t perfect either. I should be at his bedside at the end.”

“What a shame~”

The visage of his father melted before him as the world crumbled again.

...

A journey, a retreat, a pilgrimage. Whatever others called his actions, it was a fancy dress for his cowardly escape from established life. Just like White Lily had traveled to the witches’ tower, the healer had also sought the meaning of his existence. He fled the barn seeking a reason that he was a part of this world, that he had been granted these special powers. He wandered aimlessly, crossing deserts, valleys, and mountains, and at some point even questioned himself over what he was doing.

His meandering did pay its dues eventually. At the edge of the world, he found an answer. In an ancient forest, hidden among the grove, lived a strange being that was a cookie, yet not. That creature had been altered to fit his limited comprehension, taking the form of a massive being with dark skin like wood and robes that melted into the foliage around him. In a place where life was abundant yet scarce, a lone god resided.

Millenial Tree, the origin of life itself.

The Tree had allowed him to pass unencumbered into his resting place, so the healer felt brave enough to ask the question that was burning him from within.

“Why was I created?”

The Tree sank onto his haunches so that he could be more level with him. “That is something I cannot answer. I may have been the first to bring life to this barren planet, but I do not control those who populate it. They have long been left to their own devices- I have only seldom awoken since the fall of the dragons.”

“So you cannot provide me with a purpose?” he asked softly, more than a little disappointed. He felt like it was incredibly rude to speak like this in front of an elemental, but he required this knowledge.

“Do you want me to?”

He gave his assent. At least with the god piloting him, he could be sure that he would be useful for something. That could be the reason for his blessing of immortality.

The entity peered at him, and the healer felt as though he was naught more than an ant receiving the attention of something far greater. Even so, it was not a bad feeling, because the Millenial Tree did not make him feel inconsequential. “Even if you give yourself up for my purpose, I refuse. The moment that I take control, ‘you’ cease to exist. My will is not something I could impose in good conscience.”

The Tree rebuffed him out of kindness. That made the bitter rejection softer, at least. And yet, he was still not satisfied.

“Then, what is the reason for my immortality? For my powers? If there is no great role in the world for me to fulfill, then why am I different?” When he was younger, he thought that being able to create life would be his claim to greatness, but that fantasy had been shattered thoroughly. “...and why are you tolerating such disrespect?”

“There is no reason, except the one you make; time is a fluid force that can change with the seasons. Just because one may be blessed by abilities beyond his peers, does not mean that blessing is an obligation.”

He touched the cool planes of his jewel, which glowed slightly in the shaded forest. The entity was correct- his soul jam had never made any demands of him.

The Tree brushed his face with a knuckle. Smile lines creased his face. “Besides, I am always happy to meet whoever comes to my doorstep without evil intentions. I enjoy seeing what kinds of life have propagated this world, and a cookie like you is a miracle!”

A miracle...

“Your life is yours to mold. Be patient and take your time to find a purpose, for you have it in abundance.”

“Thank you for the guidance, your grace.” He paused for a moment. “And for my seeing flowers.”

“You’re very welcome.”

...

Both of them stood in front of the wooden altar and its flowerpot, bewitched by the memories they had experienced.

“So that is the Millenial Tree,” Pomegranate said, voice trembling minutely. “If only I had known a being like him existed, rather than those abominable vermin...”

...

_____ was enamored by the Millenial Tree. The elemental had deigned to speak with him, despite how far above he was from a measly cookie. He had seen the healer as something wonderful, despite him being different than the norm, and that meant a lot to the healer. In the perception of life itself, he was something to be cared about, someone who may aspire to great things.

He had found something inspirational, and it will guide the direction of his life afterward.

An all-loving god whose attention made others feel warm and special...

I want to be like that.

At first, it wasn’t difficult to emulate the Tree. Pure Vanilla had always been kind and compassionate to others, so all he had to do was lean into those qualities. He would attempt to imitate his notion of what was truly good. And it worked, surprisingly well. When he slowly integrated himself into the villages of the plains, he waylaid the disturbing notion of his immortality by setting himself up as something special to begin with, even if the notion was slightly discomforting. He once again took the mantle of a person who was destined for great things, and like that, he dismissed the questions that were directed at him.

He began by teaching simple healing classes, to generally managing a village, then made it prosper and grow. The healer nurtured his growing kingdom from small decentralized places of residence

into a grand unified whole. He found friends- wonderful people who admired him and who he admired in return. Finally, he had achieved something amazing. He could look down from his castle and believe that he had improved the lives of others.

Yet for all of the ancients, they were slowly reminded of their own immortality in the brutal progression of time. The world bloomed and withered like a rose, changing with the seasons, an ever-growing wave of ethereality that they alone could observe for long enough to view from outside the looking glass. Cogwheels turned in cycles and people turned with them, rotting in the ground and being replaced with new ferns and flowers they walked upon.

Humans replaced elementals, dragons replaced humans, and they replaced the dragons. Pure Vanilla and the rest of the ancients were only around as the age of dragons neared its conclusion, but they had witnessed enough to be aware that cookies, too, would one day reach their inevitable extinction. They dreaded the possibility that they, out of the multitude of people that resided in this world, would be the last of their kind.

Pour your heart out in ecstasy, build altars to solidify the past, create a fantasy of material luxury, or try and make the most of those ephemeral lives, yet these were only temporary solutions to that burdensome nihilism- the knowledge that you will outlive your children and your children's children, that everything you treasure will become ash and dust and at the end, you'll still be there among the familiar faces that have become strangers.

There was nothing worse than expecting an old friend only for someone else to show by his side. Generation after generation of cookies faithfully served him, a king who could no longer muster up any care for his throne.

...

Pomegranate placed a comforting hand on Healer's shoulder.

...

The king would spend his time walking around the cemetery, remembering the ones he had lost. His presence within those grounds would increase, until one day, he had the realization that this benefitted nobody, and he was only harming himself by lingering around the dead. He swore that for every instance where he found himself thinking about stepping into the graveyard, he would take a walk in the gardens instead. He knew how to cultivate plants from his first family, so he created his own secret refuge.

Slowly, the association between the gardens and the graves faded, and tending to his plants became a task he genuinely enjoyed.

Even with his newfound hobby, he had only addressed the symptoms of a problem rather than the issue itself. The healer only continued to rule because he tried his best to care for everyone he met, a way of living that was ultimately unsustainable. He couldn't love and lose over and over again, not when every death and subsequent heartbreak made his hatred of his position more pronounced. Healer slowly receded from that projection of the millennial tree, from that joyful day when the priest had crowned him and for a little while that mask had been real.

I know who you pretend I am...

The people only saw the benevolent saint because that's what he wanted to be. The healer had served them with such devotion and it was natural that he wanted those relationships to be fulfilled, but he had the pervasive notion that he was somehow making a grand fool of everyone. The person

he portrayed was no longer truly him, so he must be tricking them somehow. Nobody was aware of the version of him that had caused the destruction of his school, left his old father, and wielded darkness with as much skill as light.

The real _____ was not nearly so deserving of their love. He should reject the kindness that they gave him, but he never did, because the healer was a man who thrived on the affection of others. He genuinely did not know how to live without it, because he would give his all to others and did not want to fathom a world where he was loathed for his efforts.

.
. .

The blonde tossed the crown away, rubbing his forehead as though the metal had irritated his skin. "I don't want to do this anymore," he mourned.

"We have to keep going. I'm certain that we are close to finding him." At the flicker's hesitancy, Pomegranate pushed him harder. "Healer, this is my only chance. I will be punished if we fail."

"...Fine. But please let me prepare before the next attempt."

This one was quite the people-pleaser, wasn't he? The current Pure Vanilla would not have folded that easily.

...

The flour war had come.

~~Four~~ Five of them were gathered together. It had been a while since the ancients had assembled, but it was not the time for pleasantries. They all had a singular cause- to stop the evil sorceress who had risen to prominence, the Dark Enchantress.

Their kingdoms have all suffered from her attacks. Hollyberrians have buffered invasions from within the forests bordering their bay, the Dark Cacao kingdom had been besieged by wave after wave of beasts from the sea, and Golden Cheese had stressed much over the constant ariel attacks that the desert cookies had little defense from.

His kingdom, unfortunately, faced the brunt of the enemy's forces. Creatures of cake had already invaded and overpowered the nearby villages and the wafflebots and warriors sent to their aid. His kingdom would be the first (and only) kingdom to fall.

As the twelfth hour arrived, "White Lily" fought by his side.

...

"Ma'am, do you hear that?"

"Yes, but I can't tell where the clicking originates. Let's just keep moving."

...

They were in the post-flour war era.

Back Raisin, although she knew not his past, had saved him in more ways than one. When he had been brought back, his memories wiped into a blank slate, he easily connected with the villagers and his dark protector. Without the fear of eventually losing them, he finally had what he had been missing for a long time previously- a simple connection to another person.

When his memories returned, the healer refused to write off the woman as another ledger in the cemetery. He had a nice friendship with her.

He would cherish the people around him. _____ had forgotten just how much he yearned for a genuine relationship until he had it. He wouldn't go back, even if it hurt him more in the long term.

That was why he could not remain.

The blonde would inevitably spell disaster for the village if he did not move on, and in all honesty, he was afraid of the castle and the sorceress that resided within it. Despite his immortality being a curse, he wasn't ready to truly die. Losing everything had made that abundantly clear.

...

The priestess poked around as Healer continued to meander. She dug around the objects in the sand and picked out something that interested her. It was her mirror, which caused her faint surprise. Was she important enough to be a part of his psyche?

She checked the memories of the mirror. It was a compressed film that showed herself and his changing regard toward her. She watched as he shifted between curiosity, hatred, and then a grudging sympathy and respect.

She buried the mirror back where it had been. It was done in good timing as well, since right afterward a worried Healer approached her.

"Miss, there's a creature moving under the sand. I'm sure what to do about it?"

"Strange. Only in exceptional instances of emotion can living beings appear. Where did you say this creature hid?" Nothing in this world would really be able to pose physical harm, but she was wary of anything that could be personified within someone who has been on Earthbread for millennia.

He led her to the site of the disturbance. As he said, the sand was moving in a way that suggested something underneath. After a bit of consideration, she tried to catch what was hiding. Chances were it probably just contained more memories.

Tendrils wrapped around her arm. She tried to pull away but they tightened. Healer yelped as something dragged his ankle into the ground.

"What..is this?"

That was all she managed to utter before the creature pulled them both into a vision.

...

The flickering forms of the Dark Enchantress and Pure Vanilla stood together. They were having some kind of conversation, taking place after the Dark Enchantress had transformed. Her hair was adorned with two black horns, recognizable despite the lack of clarity.

It was so cold in this memory, a wrong, shattered feeling. She was not supposed to be accessing this, and it would harm Healer to try and view it in further detail. The space around her was trembling, bucking from the weight as she drew out this memory, the lodestone that threatened to crack the very mindscape it inhabited.

The two cookies in the memory linked hands, their blurry glitching forms intertwining in a

kaleidoscope of nauseating colors. Thin cracks cleaved the space around them. She was running out of time.

“Vow to me, Pure Vanilla...”

...

She jerked Healer out of the memory with her. He took a few trembling steps back and sprawled out onto the sand, dazed. In the corner of his peripheral, he saw someone moving steadily across the landscape, a spot of darkness. He had the sudden compulsion to catch up to them so that he can...

...so he can what? He wasn't sure.

Pomegranate was still focused on where the creature had been.

“There was someone-” he nudged her and pointed into the distance, but by the time Pomegranate shifted her attention to where he gestured, the figure was gone. He weighed the options of staying and continuing to rifle in the sand or tracking the stranger lost among the ashes.

He chased after the after-image of the person.

The priestess followed behind, unsure of where he was going but determined not to lose track of this naive and clueless version of her acquaintance. The healer ran after the fading shadows, sometimes barely more than the color of a trailing cloak, through an ever-changing landscape of hedges and plains and mountains. They passed a cake tower with the figure of a young woman, melted like wax. The healer paid it no heed and Pomegranate shivered at her distorted visage, making sure to avoid the arms of the figure reaching for her with its spindly limbs.

The man came to a stop and Healer grinded to a halt behind him. Something was glinting on the ground next to the stranger's footprints. “Excuse me, you dropped your necklace!” he knelt down to the necklace but the sight of the pendant made him stop. It was a pretty and delicate craft, rose-gold carved in the shape of a sunflower.

Healer picked up the sunflower necklace. Pomegranate, who wasn't so distracted, managed to get a glimpse of the figure. It was a prince in a dark cloak and shoulder-cut hair. His job done, the embodiment of the man faded away.

“To choose someone who has only become familiar in this short time...you have the foolish habit of giving your heart to others,” she murmured. Healer paid the words no mind, not understanding what she meant. He picked up the necklace from the ground, admiring the sunflower pendant.

“...Mother...?”

She held his hand, retracing their steps until they were back at the Millennial Tree's altar. Healer combed aside some dirt from the pot on the wooden statue, burying the necklace in the soil. Nothing happened for a few seconds. She craned over to look, and suddenly, the pot shattered as a plant started growing and its roots breached the fragile clay. They both backed up as it grew larger and thicker, climbing heavenward, covering the arid sand with shade and allowing grass to grow upon the scorched lands of the healer's psyche. Eyes opened from the rings in the tree as it continued expanding, a cacophony of olive all directed at them.

She knew that it was just a facet of his mind, but it was unnerving to be seen by a primordial entity. Whatever he had been searching for, he must have found, for a cut was cleaved in the center of the trunk, revealing a man slumbering within. He awoke with the light and slowly turned to face them.

Pomegranate was hit with the familiar urge to bow and drop to a knee. She pushed away the impulse with a grimace.

This wasn't the man that she had come to be familiar with. Soft blonde hair swished around his face despite the lack of wind. He was like a cookie, but also something more- that strange magnetic aura of his had been spotlighted and magnified until it passed into the uncanny valley. He resembled the Dark Enchantress at the height of her power.

This was the immortal king of the Vanilla kingdom.

"I remember now," the flicker said.

The king descended from the wooden alcove, long cloak swooping around him like angel's wings. He grasped the flicker's face and fell into him, passing through as though he was ephemeral as smoke. The empty robes flitted to the floor. What remained was Pure Vanilla, stable and complete.

"Pure Vanilla?"

The restored man, who was only just regaining his senses, was confused by her presence.

"Pomegranate? What are you doing in my mind? I don't remember being pulled into my avatar. In fact, the last thing I recalled was-" he cut himself off with a wince. "...Ah. I died again, didn't I?"

She nodded. Again? This wasn't the first time?

"You don't appear to be any older, and I have no ability to tend to my injuries. If left alone, the process of resurrection may take decades, and I doubt that the Dark Enchantress would wait. She lacks talent for the medical arts, so it must have been...hmm." He seemed a bit sheepish. "My apologies for burdening you with this."

Pomegranate did indeed feel quite the burden healing him, but saying that now would be too cruel. Even so, she couldn't help but exploit the weakness for all it was worth. "I want compensation, but that can be dealt with later. Currently, you are too injured to accomplish anything or even cast any significant magic. And you shouldn't - everything will be used internally to keep you from dying from the aftereffects."

"Thank you for letting me know. And exactly what kind of injuries should I be prepared for once we leave the mindscape?"

"...The Dark Enchantress regretted the scope of harm that she inflicted and has left for the time being, so that's one less thing to worry about."

"Pomegranate, please just give me the damage."

She reluctantly relayed to him the severity of his injuries.

Pure Vanilla looked faintly ill. "If a part of my actual brain is missing, then how can I exist in the mindscape? This plane of existence should have been destroyed to the point of nonexistence."

"I don't know. You ancients are beyond fucking comprehension."

"I...fair enough."

Pure Vanilla stared at the sand for a moment. "We should be getting back, shouldn't we?" He was reluctant, but who wouldn't be, when they knew that a world of pain awaited them?

“Best of luck, Pure Vanilla.” The priestess disappeared.

The healer stayed for a moment longer. He took an imaginary breath and dispelled the mindscape.

Chapter End Notes

Did the ancients actually have birth parents? Who knows, they could have just spawned out of nowhere.

The parallels are paralleling, hehe. I want to make it clear that a big reason that Pure Vanilla ended up better than white Lily was due to the fact that he was lucky to find more supportive people at his most vulnerable. If he had been the one to meet the witches instead, then perhaps this would have been a reverse Au. Then again, perhaps not.

I considered making the two Pure Vanillas kiss to reform, but some people may take that the wrong way lol.

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