

How could everything have gone so wrong so fast?

The memory is still vivid, yet ingrained in my head. My hands were pressed against Ani's stomach, applying as much pressure as I could to stop the bleeding.

"Just hold on! You're going to be OK, I *promise!*" I said through tears, still struggling to comprehend what had happened. "Ani, *please!*"

She didn't respond, only staring at me blankly, her eyes shaking in their sockets. She coughed up a chunk of blood in her struggle to breathe. "D-did...we get it...? D-did w-we win?"

"Yes," I managed to smile, the tears still streaming down my face. "We dispelled the Eldine...all thanks to *you.*"

Through her pain, she managed to return a weak smile, a ghost of the bubbly smile I'd grown so accustomed to seeing everyday. "I'll...I'll m-miss you, W-wendy...."

At first, I felt nothing as she goes limp on my knees, her head rolling to the side lifelessly. It's only seconds later that a horrible hollow feeling filled me as I wailed like a banshee, unable to come to grips at what had just happened. It felt unfair, unjust for it to happen to Ani. I could feel the screams of loss inside of me, clawing my mind. I couldn't- didn't *want* to believe it, scared to confront the truth; My partner had died.

Her dying moment continued to haunt me, even days after I'd lost her, my best friend and partner. The rest of the team had tried to speak to me about her, but it was difficult to open up about anything. None of them blamed me for what had happened nor believed that there was more I could've done. After all, it was just a duo mission gone awry. I'd asked them to give me some time to myself to think, to which they'd agreed to, but in all honesty, it was a mistake. If anything, my thoughts were the greatest enemy I'd faced, as all my conscience wanted to tell me was how much of a failure I was and how Ani's death was my fault.

Maybe if you were better she wouldn't be dead.

I glance over at my shelf, Ani's medallion resting at the centre, a constant reminder of who I fight- fought with. Before I can stop myself, my mind starts creating imaginary scenarios in my head, cruel recreations of Ani's death, tailored to make me feel every worse.

If only there were something I could do to bring her back.

Almost on cue, memories of my late nights at the library come rushing back to me, hordes of information on magic and its properties. One page stood out in particular, a page from an old tome of Eldritch legends, a page about bargaining with the Ancient Ones.

What if I-.

I shake my head, the mere thought of the idea sending shivers down my spine. It was forbidden by the Guardian code, condemned for being Eldritch magic. But, if I used that magic for a selfless cause, it wouldn't be wrong, would it? Perhaps I wasn't thinking straight because of my loss, but I could feel temptation curling a finger at me, enticing me to do

whatever it took for Ani. I couldn't mope about her death for the rest of my life. The Guardians of the Stars fought for life and justice, all of which was taken from Ani unfairly. It was time that I *had* to take things into my own hands..

As the clock strikes midnight, I grab the medallion and sneak through the corridors, careful not to make any noise to wake any of my teammates up. What I was about to do felt wrong, a betrayal to my teammates and the ideals we fought for, but...I couldn't let Ani's death be in vain, not when it was within my power to rectify her unfair death. I sneak downstairs underneath HQ, spiralling down the steps that led to the Well, the cavern that essentially served as a way to replenish our magical powers. As I approach the centre of the Well, I grip onto the medallion tightly, warmth radiating from it. Our souls were bound to them, preserving our life essence and tying them to the stars. I take a deep breath, setting the medallion down in front of me as I sit down on my knees and begin reciting phrases from the Eldritch books I'd studied.

“*yap llw / egdeip / ni grab of eht nommus / ulunt / dro / lno*”

I let out a heavy breath as I suddenly feel drained, the Well corresponding to my sudden fatigue with a loud howl of wind. The usually neon-lit Well goes dark as the lights dim, darkness creeping in. The circle around me lights up as malicious green markings begin to inscript themselves into the floor, forming the insignia of the creatures we'd sworn our entire lives to fight against. Fear creeps into me, but I knew I had to be strong, strong for Ani. I continue the recital, channeling whatever courage I had in me to finish it.

“*de / llut / erised / isepeed / ym / evah / of / ym / hum / ppo / na / em / inarg / of / red / ro / ni / kees / uoy / ecim*
re / ver / tahw”

A deep and sinister laughter begins, echoing throughout the cavern and sending a chill down my spine. I clench my fist, steeling myself as the laughter dies down.

“*Ironic.* I never thought a *magical girl* would need *my* help,” A voice taunts. “Tell me, what do you seek?”

I gulp, stricken by a sudden fear. “I-I’ve have a bargain!” I manage to stammer, my eyes searching the room for the source of the voice.

“What is it you seek, daughter of the stars?”

“I-” I trail off, knowing that now there was no turning back for me. “I want you to revive Ani,” I assert, holding her medallion up with my hands.

“And *what* do you offer?” The voice rumbles softly.

This was it, the point of no return.

“I offer *my soul*,” I proclaim, trying to stop my voice from shaking.

"A soul for a soul," the voice chuckles menacingly, obviously amused by my mortal offering. "It's...*sufficible*. Leave the circle."

I obey, leaving the medallion in the centre, standing at the outer ring of the circle as green markings begin to glow, energy seeping into the medallion. It slowly floats up, spinning faster and faster as it absorbs the magic, leaving no residue in the air around it, glowing brighter the more it absorbs. The light becomes blinding, a bright flash following as I shield my eyes from the rays. Slowly, I lower my arm, my heart racing as my eyes fixate on the girl in front of me; Ani. I rush over beside her body and though unconscious, I can see her drawing breath. I feel ecstatic, struck by disbelief at the return of my friend. Placing a hand in her cheek, I can't help but shed a tear, one of joy and not sorrow.

"She's- you actually-"

"We are many things, but we are beings of our word," the voice echoes, satisfied. "Now, *your* end of the bargain." "

"R-right," I stammer, hesitantly pulling my medallion off my uniform, clenching it tightly in my hand before setting it down in the centre of the circle. "Is- Is that all?"

"Move your friend and stand in the centre," it commands.

"*W-what, why?*"

"Perhaps you'd like me to undo my favour, girl."

"No! No, I- I understand."

Quickly, I move Ani out of the circle, taking in her calm and mellow face for what could be the last time. Sighing pensively, I slowly tread back to the glowing centre, the radiating light making me feel woozy.

"Ok, *now what?*" I huff, obviously tempting fate.

"Your soul becomes *mine*."

Without warning, a bolt of Eldritch energy strikes me, surging pain through my body as I scream in agony. The beam persists, holding me in place as I helplessly struggle.

"*NNGH!*"

The beam stops as abruptly as it'd struck me, leaving me on my knees gasping for air, my skin still blistering from the attack. I open my hand, eyes widening as I realise something was amiss with my medallion. It'd gone an eerie purple, a far cry from the bright yellow it was before I'd been hit by the bolt.

"What did you-" I begin, though I stop as the words fail to leave my mouth, a growing pain in my stomach hindering me. I glance at my trembling arm, my heart skipping a beat. "W-ha-No..."

My hand was darkening, fingers twitching unnaturally as my nails turn to claws, ripping out of my gloves. Dark purple patches of scales start to form across my arm. I try to rub it off in desperation, my skin now slippery to touch, but it proves fruitless, rather spreading the scaly infection onto my other arm.

"*NAH!*" I scream, the changing of my body spreading pain throughout.

My ponytail comes undone, as lengths of my hair turn into a slimy mush, dripping the vile liquid down my shoulders.

"W-what are you *doing*?" I say through gritted teeth.

"Your soul belongs to me now," the voice purrs, obviously taking pleasure in my torture. "You are no longer a daughter of the stars, you are a daughter of *mine*."

Before I can respond, my hips start to throb violently, the pain crippling me as I fall over onto the floor.

"**STOP!**"

A pair of tentacles emerge from my hips with no warning, tearing themselves out of my skin and shredding my skirt, resting beside me, dormant but obviously a part of me now.

"*M-make it **stop!***" I plead, the tight and painful feeling starting in my waist once again.

"We're only *just* getting started."

I feel my face, tears of pain and regret streaming down my now slimy face. The nightmare felt like it was never going to end, more tentacles ripping their way out of my body. Shrieking in pain, I grasp my leg as fangs start to grow up from my ankle to my thigh, each tooth stinging more than the last.

"You did all this to bring back your loved one," the voice rubs in. "And your team will *hate you for it*."

"NNNGHHHHHH!"

I can suddenly see from places I didn't recognise, vision obscured and an eerie hue of red. My heart sinks further than it already had as I wave a claw, seeing it move in different angles. My body had sprouted extra eyes, eyes of the very monsters I had slain. The pain eases, leaving me to rest on the floor like the mess of tentacles and slime I was. My new body aches as I struggle to calibrate with it, my new body parts uncoordinated with my old.

"*Back, beast!*"

I didn't know how much more my heart could take, the words piercing through my chest. Ani holds her wand out at me, holding her usual battle stance, though klutzy from her resurrection. My eyes widen, a heart of broken glass inside me.

"Ani...it's *me*..." I say, though my voice is different, a garbled reverb accompanying my words.

Her eyes quiver, obviously recognizing parts of me underneath the creature I'd become.

"W-wendy? Is that- Is that you?"

I take a step closer, my new mass weighing me down as I reach my monstrous hand out to her. She hesitates initially, slowly reaching her hand to hold mine. She drops her face of intimidation, changing to one of concern. "Oh, Wendy. What did you do?"

Tears had found themselves welling in my eyes again. "I- I did this- I did this *for you*."

She glances down at the ground surrounding us. "You used Eldritch magic, didn't you?"

The words ring in my head, reminding me of the lengths I'd gone for her resurrection. Though I'd succeeded, I'd paid a price that I didn't realise the extent of.

"Y-yeah."

"You didn't have to do that for me," she laments, shaking her head sympathetically. "You didn't- You didn't have to turn yourself into an Eldine."

"I couldn't let you stay *dead*," I argue, desperation in my voice. "You're my *best friend* and I couldn't think of a world without you..."

"I couldn't either," she says, tears of her own welling up. "But you *can't* stay here. If the team finds out, they'll *kill* you."

"Maybe we can explain to them, or something, right?"

Ani shakes her head. "You used Eldritch magic, that's a crime in and of itself. Look, if it were up to me, I'd- You're still the person I love most."

My heart aches more and more as I converse with Ani, the dire consequences of what I'd done setting in. I look at her, my eyes wide and pleading. I didn't want to accept that I'd brought her back, only to lose myself in the process.

"*Please*, Wendy....you have to go," she begs.

"I don't want to leave you," I weep.

"You won't," Ani soothes, caressing my cheek with her gloved hand soothingly. "I'll look for a way to turn you back, I *promise*. Until then, *please* keep your head low."

"Is this goodbye?"

"It has to be this way, for you especially....I'll miss you, Wendy. Stay safe."

She's holding back her tears, trying to be strong for my sake, which only makes the moment more shattering. I reluctantly let go of her hand, trudging my new body away from her. She twirls her wand at me, directing the energy at my feet and opening a bright pink portal, the destination unbeknownst to me. I take one last look at the person I gave it all for, the woman that I'd respected so deeply that I ended up losing my humanity for her. I step into the portal, knowing I wouldn't see her again for what could be an eternity, the consequence of my mistake. I'd fought the abyss for years, but when it tempted me in my most vulnerable state, I looked back at it.