

Fracture

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She started her day with the scent of the freshly deceased: a fox shot dead close to a chicken coop, left behind as if whoever had killed it hadn't gotten around to discarding it just yet. Exposed in the sunlight and mixed with the dirt, its blood had a coppery glisten to it. With her heart suddenly throbbing, Nicola quickly gloved up and ran up to it. A fresh body, only its head disfigured: a good thing to carve into. However, as she was bending down to grab it and disappear into the woods again, a sudden shout of the word "witch" interrupted her.

Hours later — or perhaps even in the next day; as dull as the dehydration and abuse had left her brain, she wasn't able to tell — she was crawling along the road, her own blood infiltrating the ground. The sun was harsh on her head, which had hung from the pole she'd been tied to without any support. It'd boiled her brain. As she dragged herself away from the town, her body ached and her vision dimmed. Over the sheer, cold horror of the whole experience, anger sprouted up: being stoned to death was beneath her. That would be a ridiculous, unbecoming way to die. The last thought to cross her mind was that she didn't want her nameless corpse to end up thrown in the river.

Nicola woke to the vivid orange of the sun setting over the water. Since there was no pain, it was like her body was floating over the grass she laid on. When she looked down at herself, she found perfectly healthy skin and realized she was nearly naked. Ahead, the river was calm and there was a chill crepuscular breeze. Everything was too quiet, except for a faint creak of metal next to her. She rolled on her side to find where it came from: a fully

armored knight sat with her, mending her torn clothes despite their huge gauntlets. Even under the waning light, she could see that the armor was old and battered.

"Oh. I'm dreaming," she mumbled. She laid on her back again and let out a satisfied sigh. She'd always thought that was what dying would be like: a momentary flurry of happy thoughts and the feeling of floating. She could hardly be mad: being free from the pain from before was good enough.

"You're not." The voice came from within the armor's helmet. It was oddly deep. "I'm sorry for using black magic on you, Red Lantern."

Red Lantern? How did they know, with the state of her clothes? The cold wind made her aware of her nakedness again and she looked down at her tattooed ribs. Of course. "I guess I'd be too dead to object otherwise," she said. There was something more awe-inducing about the situation. "You're a mage? Walking around the way you are, I wonder how you haven't met the same fate as me yet."

"If I were you," the knight continued, unmoving aside from the sewing, "I'd never wear Red Lantern crimson again. It's not a good time to be one."

"That's rich." Nicola laughed a little. "You flaunt that long-retired imperial armor. Did you dig that up from a cemetery or something? You're either too gutsy or too stupid."

They didn't answer. After a while, they just lowered their head and changed the subject: "I'm also sorry for stripping you. Your clothes were hardly enough coverage anymore, though."

"I don't really mind. You should take off those gauntlets to sew, though. Would be much easier." Again, no answer. "You should answer when you're talked to, you know."

They lifted their head, turning it toward her. She couldn't see anything past the slits in the helmet. "I'm sorry." They paused. "I don't need to take them off."

Nicola sat up with a sigh and scooted closer to pry clothes, needle and thread from them. They didn't resist. She eyed the thread with doubt. "Did you take this from my satchel?"

Another long pause. She had to look up at them so they'd answer. "Sorry."

She took a deep breath and got to mending. Her stitching was much faster than theirs, unhindered by metal. Seeing stains of her own blood on the clothes weighed her down somewhat. "What business does an outlaw mage have here? Or are you really an imperial?"

The knight was very still. "I'm not. This is my country."

"Then you should take your own words of caution," Nicola mumbled, "Instead of picking up wounded strangers and healing them." The ensuing silence only frustrated her. "I should thank you. What's your name?"

"That doesn't matter."

Nicola raised her brow. "You pass off a terribly socially awkward vibe to me." The knight tilted their head, once again silent. "That's okay, you don't have to reply. At least tell me what pronouns I can use for you."

"You won't see me again. There's no need for introductions."

"That's really impolite. You can't save my life and immediately walk away."

Slowly, they stood. Only then did she realize they were quite tall. She feared they might actually walk away. "You're right. Are you hungry?"

She paused. Her stomach felt hollow. "Now that you mention it, I can't recall the last time I ate," she said.

"I'll do something about it."

"You know, I was mostly joking. You *can* walk away. You already did enough."

They just shook their head and turned around. Nicola just stayed where she was, ass on the grass, trying to grit her teeth through the nocturnal cold that was starting to settle in. As

reality came back to her, she realized all that she had left were those ragged clothes and the small utilities in her satchel. There was no going back. She reminded herself of the tattoo on her torso. That. She also had that. When she thought her knight in not-so-shining armor might have given up on her, they came back with heavy steps and a handful of berries. "I'm sorry," they said as they knelt before her, showcasing it.

"Why do you apologize so much? I think you've said 'sorry' all the times you've spoken so far," she said, taking some from them. She briefly analyzed the berries before putting them into her mouth, not too sure.

"Because it's very little."

"You have nothing to apologize for." She tried to sew even faster so she could shield herself from the cold and pricked her finger. "That's a wicked sense of responsibility to someone you found on the side of the road."

"Not that it matters, but you'd do the same. I know what you Red Lanterns are like." Before she could reply, they added: "You're shivering. Are you cold?"

"I'll be done with this soon."

The knight made a vague gesture and warmth shrouded Nicola. When she realized what it'd been, she shuddered. "Don't use magic so casually. I was going to be fine."

"There was no need for you to be cold." They said it flatly, turning their head to the river.

"You're damaging yourself now."

"Spare me your cult beliefs."

"We're not a cult." Nicola stashed the needle and thread away and put her tunic on, trying to cast a mean look the knight's way all the while.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have put it that way."

"But you still think we're a cult."

"Something akin to that."

"Just because you were good to me, I'll spare you." Nicola smiled again. "You have a death wish, using magic willy-nilly like that."

They just tilted their head again, sitting down and putting a hand back for support. "Do you have a place to go home to?"

"No," she said, frowning as she reassembled her pants. "Can't go back."

The knight shifted. Nicola couldn't help but personify the armor; they looked uncomfortable, awkward even. It at least brought a bit of humor to the situation. At last, it stood. "Is this when I'm supposed to walk away, then?"

"No. You're conspicuous, but you look battle weary. If I'm to keep wearing Red Lantern crimson, I'd like to walk with someone like you." She gladly ate the rest of the berries. "And I have the feeling you're the type to oblige."

"Are you walking anywhere in particular?" Their tone was soft.

"See, you don't even complain. No. I just need to come across another Red Lantern. It'll be alright then."

"I don't mind. It's the little things."

Unsure of what they meant, Nicola simply nodded. "I'm Nicola. Sorry for taking advantage of you. You were acting too defenseless, though."

"Me?" Sounded like bewilderment.

"You're very willing."

"It's my duty."

"Are you trying to act like a fairytale knight?" Nicola laughed. The blank stare she projected onto the knight's helmet just made it funnier. "Like Living Armor?"

The knight went very still, much like a steel statue. They stayed quiet until Nicola snapped her fingers with a frown. "I don't condone glorification," they ended up saying.

"I was *joking*. You're too stiff."

"Sorry." They moved a little, as if taking the comment literally. "I'll be walking west if you want to tag along. There's a rumor I'd like to check out."

"What kind of rumor?"

The knight stared at her listlessly for longer than they should. "The productive kind, but not for you. You've already decided you want to stay a Red Lantern."

"Fair enough." Finally fully dressed, Nicola stood and straightened her clothes out.

"What's out west?"

"Fairview."

"Works for me." Although she'd prefer steering clear of big cities, she was bound to find another Red Lantern there. "So you really don't mind protecting me?"

"I have all the time and capacity in the world."

"If you say so."

To her frustration, the knight lit a magical fairy light and guided them to the nearest train tracks. They walked along it in silence under the moonlight until Nicola's steps grew slow. "Do you need to sleep?" the knight asked, pausing.

She looked up at them, contemplating the seeming hollow beyond the slits of their helmet and the vast nothing covered by the tracks. It still felt like a fever dream, like she'd wake in her cot any time, brew a cup of tea and get back to studying. Instead, all that was once hers was inaccessible and she was walking farther and farther away from land that was known to her. "You don't?"

"No. But I can watch over you."

"There's no need for that. Walking around in heavy armor must be tiresome. We can both sleep."

They didn't answer. What a terrible habit. Instead, they just led her away from the tracks and stood awkwardly under a group of trees. "I'll watch over you," they repeated.

"Yes, that makes me feel *so* safe." Nicola sighed. "Do you have a blanket or something? You don't carry anything. How do you sleep?"

They looked down. "I'm sorry. You'll have to sleep on the ground." Nicola didn't argue. It took a long time for her to find a comfortable position. She ended up hugging her knees, dirt on her cheek. Still, it was hard to settle down. The knight remained unmoving. "Sorry. I'm not the most equipped to help you," the knight said. Next, in a low, hesitating tone, they added: "Are you sad?"

"No."

"You have nowhere to go home to." It sounded distant.

"Anywhere there is a Red Lantern is home."

"What happened today..." The knight paused and knelt a distance away from her. She didn't turn to look. "Does it make you resent your fellow Cruvalians?"

"Not at all. I'm not so interested in my country as I am in humanity. Or should I say... Everywhere's the same."

"Hmm." It sounded more like a distant whistle carried by the wind than something produced by a human throat. "You really are a Red Lantern. Good night, Nicola."

The sun was uncomfortable on her eyes and her body ached. She stretched on the dirt as reality caught up with her; when she turned to confirm it, the knight was sitting exactly where they had been when she'd fallen asleep. She snapped her fingers. "Hey, you."

"Oh," they said, looking down at her, "You're awake."

"Yes. Have you been sitting there this whole time?" She frowned. There was no answer and, of course, no reaction either. They just faced each other until she grew tired of it. "I feel so secure right now. Homeless and watched over by a freak while I sleep."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to make you feel unsafe."

"I called you a freak and you hardly reacted. Even you have to admit you're a little freakish." It was almost like she was justifying it to herself.

"Yes." They stood. "You've slept and now there's sunlight for your eyes, so it's time to walk."

The way they said it gave her a full body shiver. Surely they were more than a *little* freakish, she realized. Still, she followed them as they led her back to the train tracks. Her stomach was so empty that it hurt, but she kept quiet. She hadn't seen the knight eat anything yet; surely they'd do soon and she'd have the opportunity to as well. They walked close to the rails, the sun heating her head up, for what seemed like the whole morning. She stepped away when she heard an incoming train; however, the knight just turned their head to it.

"It's headed our way," they said, bending down a little, "Come on, climb on my back."

Nicola's whole face heated up. "What?! You want to get on a moving train?" she asked, to which they nodded. "You're insane. I'm not walking near that thing. I've seen what can happen."

While they argued, the train became visible, albeit still distant. "Nothing will happen. You're with me."

"Being in a suit of armor doesn't make you immortal!"

"I'll use magic. You'll be fine. Come here," they begged, arms outstretched.

Nicola crossed her arms and took another step back. "If you want to go that badly, go without me." She closed her eyes and turned her head away.

There was silence for a while and the air was still. At last, it moved in a gust of wind as the train rushed past them, obscuring the sun. She reopened her eyes. The knight remained where it'd been, still reaching out for her. They let their hands drop. "I understand," they said, "We'll walk so you feel safe."

Nicola looked over their shoulder to see the train proceed in the direction of the mountains, becoming a tiny dot. As they walked endlessly, she'd remember that moment and regret it, even though the thought of getting on the train had been so dreadful. As the day progressed, her legs became sore and her stomach, a black hole; at no point did the knight mention food. "You... Knight," she said, stopping. The knight stopped as well. "I'm hungry. You haven't eaten anything either."

"I completely forgot. I'm sorry," they replied, straying away from the railroad immediately to look for something edible.

Even though they found a little, the knight refused it. "You can eat. We'll share," Nicola insisted to no avail. At last, she gave up and they got back to walking. "You don't sleep and you don't eat either. You abuse magic. You're not human, are you?"

More silence. A bird chirped gleefully above them. "Is it that obvious?" the knight asked, looking straight ahead.

"You're not great at hiding it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to make you uncomfortable."

The deadpan way they said it was almost funny. "I'm not uncomfortable. You helped me, but I'm not allowing you to use magic on me again. As long as we're clear on that, the trip will be alright," Nicola said, keeping her voice stern.

"I can say that I have no intentions to violate your boundaries. However, I didn't think someone like you could stand the company of a magical creature or believe its promises."

"That's a misconception. Humans and magic can coexist, but they're fundamentally incompatible." She readjusted her satchel. The strap was starting to dig into her shoulder. "It's impossible to avoid things like you entirely when the fabric of our existence is so thin and breachable." The knight turned their head to her and tilted it, reaching an unnatural angle. They watched her like an owl. It made her shudder. "What? What does that stare mean?" Nicola asked, frowning at them.

"I don't want to argue."

"You might as well. We're in the middle of nowhere."

The knight mm-ed. "No, I'd rather not. There's no swaying the mortals."

"You're immortal?" Nicola choked slightly on her own spit. The knight just stared at her and she thought there was an embarrassed look on their helmet, even if it was impossible. "And you'll act high and mighty about it," she added.

"No. Forgive me."

"... Weirdo." She gave them a cautious side glance, but they just turned their head back to the horizon.

The trip grew endless. Nicola had forgotten how impossible it was to traverse land on foot; she'd gotten used to her pleasant hikes covering short distances. The prolonged hours of walking led to rigidity in the muscles of her legs and, to top it all off, there was no proper rest, only the dirt. So, she moved on by dragging her feet behind the knight, whose posture and pace was ever the same. Every time a train passed them by, Nicola gritted her teeth. At some point, the knight stopped and just looked at her for a long time. "Did I say something?" Nicola asked, a little hazy.

"No. You look miserable. I can't tell how far human tolerance goes. Are you at your limit?"

"Yes," she admitted, grimacing. "But I don't have a single coin on me."

"Hmm. So you'll accept hitching a train ride with me this time?"

"Were you waiting for me to break?" She squared up her shoulders.

"No. I can walk forever. I don't mind it in the slightest. You can't, so you make the decisions."

"I'm fine with the insides of trains, especially when they're not moving. But that's about it." The fact the knight had no visible expression was just more maddening.

"Will you let me carry you?"

The offer surprised her enough to make her eyes widen. Under normal circumstances, she'd refuse, but she hardly felt like she could take another step. "No magic?" she asked, eyeing them cautiously.

"I am one with magic, but I won't use any spells on you." The idea of just letting her body rest was too appealing, even if it was on a weird creature's arms. She mumbled an affirmation and stepped closer only to freeze in place when the knight stretched their arms out to her. "Is it that you prefer a piggyback ride instead of being carried princess style?" They tilted their head, once again mimicking a curious bird.

Nicola's face warmed up at the silly words. "No... It's just..."

"You don't have to be embarrassed. I'm not a person," the knight stated plainly.

"Right. Go on, then," she mumbled, closing her eyes and lifting her arms so she could be picked up. The knight obliged, hugging her back and the back of her legs; it held her against its chest with stable inhuman strength. Nicola thought it'd be awkward, but it was just strange. Comfortable, though. She closed her eyes and turned her face to their chest so the sun wouldn't sting her eyes. "Your armor feels warm," she mumbled.

"It's the sun."

"Right." It was a blessing for her tired muscles. She let her head drop on their arm and just relaxed. The knight picked up the pace, walking much faster without her to slow it down. Without needing to walk and psych herself up, her thoughts had too much room to wander. "If you're not a person, how can you say this is your country?"

It took too long for them to answer. "I'm *currently* not a person," they said hesitantly.

"Were you a person once?"

"Long ago. Not anymore." Their answers came with caution.

"Interesting." Nicola smiled, swaying her feet in boredom. The knight didn't seem to have a problem with being kicked a little. "So you're a cautionary tale of what magic can do to a human being. That's exactly what I've been talking about all along." There was no answer, so she enjoyed her small triumph. "What kind of creature are you now?"

"You can ask, but I won't answer anymore."

"Boo. Just when it was getting good. Why not?" She kicked a little harder, wishing they'd react somehow. Still, she got nothing.

"This might sound like I am fueling your beliefs," the knight started, pausing, "but I prefer not telling mortals what I am. That could encourage someone to follow this path."

"So you do agree with me," she teased, only to receive silence. "Hey. If you were a human once and you can still do magic, does that mean you still have your soul?"

Even longer silence. "I do," they said at last, almost whispering.

"Well, then I should have been embarrassed to let you carry me. You tricked me." She kicked them again.

"What? No. Why?" They sounded flustered.

"Because that means you're a person."

"Are you speaking against your sect?"

"Being a person philosophically is not at all like being a person physically," Nicola argued.

"Are you trying to humanize me?"

Somehow, Nicola imagined that they'd have disgust on their face right then. Why?

"Maybe."

"My human version died a long time ago."

"*Physically*," she pointed out.

"No, Nicola."

The knight sounded grim. It was like bullying a child until they cried. She was starting to feel a little bad about it. "Whatever, weirdo. I'm going to nap in your non-human arms." That was her way of offering them a little respite. She managed to fall asleep lulled by the pace of their steps.

After her long nap, the knight stopped so she could eat. While she dug up dirt in search of an edible root, she entertained herself by bugging them further. "If you're a person, you have a name."

"When I was a person, I had a name," the knight replied in correction.

"Sure. What is it?"

"There is no reason for you to know." They looked down on her patiently as she dug. Well, at least she thought they were being patient.

"I need to call you something." She lifted the tuber she'd been digging for with a smile and tried to scrub the dirt off with her clothes.

"I don't want to be called by my human name. That is why I won't tell."

"Then I'll just call you Knight, since you insist on depersonification," she said with a sly grin, pausing to remove the dirt from under her nails.

"I was never a knight." They quickly added, as if rethinking it: "Though I suppose that's fine."

"Really? You look like a Lunarian knight from the past century, sword and all."

"No." The word was heavy.

"Alright. Whatever, Knight. Pick me up." So they did and she ate her unpleasant meal in their arms.

Though they passed by smaller towns on their way to Fairview, Knight didn't mention stopping. Nicola kept quiet too; after all, she was more likely to find a fellow Red Lantern in the city. So she napped and kicked away at Knight until they got to their final destination. They found themselves on top of a hill, looking down on the sprawling city that developed around a quarry. A train rushed past them, loaded. Busy. "That huge crater really ruined the fair view," Nicola remarked.

"Things have drastically changed in the last decades."

"Oh yeah? Are you a nostalgic old fella?" Nicola grinned at them.

"No." Knight put Nicola down and they got back to walking alongside each other.

"Work relations are changing too fast." Even if Nicola teased them, they always replied in that serious tone. She wondered if they even noticed the humor in her tone.

Soon they were walking the dirty streets of Fairview. The city was overcome by smog and the air smelled like burning. All around them, people went along their routines, most hurrying past them without sparing a glance; coal was being lugged around, possibly to later generate more of that smog. Whoever wasn't hard at work did look at Knight differently. It seemed like a mix between caution, fear and hostility. The latter chilled Nicola's blood. She took a step away from Knight, separating them just a little, not that it changed much.

Though it seemed as if they were walking aimlessly, Knight soon stopped beside a bridge. The stream that ran under it was tainted by soot. Nicola followed their gaze to find a vagrant man sitting against the railing, his clothes as ragged as hers. The man squinted at them. "I don't want any trouble," he said at last.

"No trouble," Knight confirmed, bowing their head solemnly. "I was wondering if you'd have some information." Because the man just stared, Knight went on: "The ongoing strikes. Who can I look for to organize?"

"Asks the man in Empire colors."

"I'm not an imperial."

"That armor does look too old and beaten. Only a senile veteran would lug a sword around."

"They're not an imperial. Just an old revolted soldier. A bit out of sorts, but I vouch for them," Nicola interrupted, lifting her hand.

The man pursed his lips and looked up and down at her. "Red Lantern," he stated, hmm-ing, "Let's do it like this. There's another one of you here. He's solid. If he says you can be trusted, then he can point you out some people."

"That's perfect," she agreed. Out of the side of her eye, she saw Knight tilt their head at her.

"His name's Adam Summit."

As they walked uptown to the informed address, Nicola softly elbowed Knight's armor. "You can't harass vagrant people like that," she said, hissing it under her breath.

"What? He had the information."

"That's such a dumb assumption. I'm a vagrant and I don't know shit."

"Vagrants have a clear perception of the world," Knight insisted.

"Because yours is clearly warped."

"It's a class conscience matter."

"You're ridiculous." She rolled her eyes, suddenly unwilling to argue. "Anyway, it worked out for me. Here's to hoping this Adam guy really is solid."

They ended up in front of a well-kept two story house. It wasn't grand or anything, but it, along with its close neighbors, looked quite upscale when compared to the rest of the city. Nicola knocked on the door and it took a while for it to open, revealing a pallid man. He was

about Nicola's size and wore the same Red Lantern tunic, though his was whole. He raised his brow at her and then looked up at Knight, who stood much taller. "Interesting," he said, dragging the syllables out.

"Adam, I take it?" Nicola asked, bowing her head slightly. She wouldn't make him shake her dirty hand.

Adam protected his body with the door. "Yes. Who's asking?" He narrowed his eyes.

"I'm Nicola Silkweaver." With her hands behind her back, she straightened her posture and smiled at him. Knight turned their head unnaturally to stare at her, but she ignored it.

His eyes widened. "You look quite forlorn for a Silkweaver. Were you attacked by an angry mob?"

"Something like that." She chuckled.

"I'll always be open to talk to a fellow Red Lantern. Who's the big guy, though?" He eyed Knight with suspicion.

"I'm not a guy," they said plainly.

"They may wear *that*, but they did literally save my life. Could we come inside?" Nicola's smile turned pleading.

"It would be best," Adam said, stepping aside. "Your friend's attracting too much attention." They walked in. Nicola immediately noticed the blatant lack of furniture. Even peeking at the living room beyond the hallway, she could only see bare necessities. Adam shut the door behind them and turned to her. "You understand I have to ask for proof," he added.

"I wouldn't expect any less." She lifted her tunic up to her ribs, showcasing the lantern tattoo.

It got a visible sigh out of Adam. He crossed his arms. "You're very welcome here, sister."

"Thank you." A flood of relief washed over Nicola's body, pumped by her heart. She could fall to the ground right there. "By the way, how are you so well established here? I got lynched and called a witch."

"I walk a thin line." He started walking upstairs and gestured for them to follow. Soon they found themselves in a studio. Nicola had to smile genuinely at the many drawings and pinned insects hanging on the walls. "The general populace treat me as a medic and are glad to have me. I keep myself accessible. As for the rest..." Adam paused to put gloves on. "I have my connections."

"You're a noble," Knight spoke up. It came out like an accusation.

"So is she. How does a Silkweaver get lynched?" He turned his attention to glass vials of a rough powder on his workstation. Nicola watched over his shoulder, trying to make out its nature.

"By virtue of not using my family name or connections."

"You *are* far from home. What can a brother help you with?" His voice was devoid of emotion, as if having two weirdos knock on his door was a normal occurrence.

"I don't mean to impose on you, but I'm currently homeless. Do you know of a place I could go to until I get my bearings?"

"No family influence to pull?"

Nicola paused. Although the phrase could only mean he was hesitant in helping her, it didn't sound like that at all. "Not an option."

"I see." He exhaled slowly. "I have a spare room."

"Really?" She instantly smiled wide. "You're fine with that?"

"It's hard to come across another of us these days. Besides..." He raised the glass vial he'd been manipulating. Its contents were dark. "There's a lot for a Red Lantern to do here. I could use an extra pair of hands."

"Of course. By the way, what's that material you're looking at?" She took a step forward and sneaked another peek over his shoulder, not even attempting to hide her excitement.

"I'm not sure yet. I extracted it from the lungs of a dead local miner."

"Did you get consent from the family?" Knight's sudden voice rose behind Nicola, who nearly jumped. Somehow, she'd forgotten about the tall armored knight, even though she was literally standing in their shadow. She looked at them over her shoulder and arched her eyebrows.

"Of course," Adam replied. He sighed. "A lot of them are becoming increasingly ill and it's more than likely that this is the cause."

"The lungs," Nicola started, trying to get his attention, "Was that residue embedded in the tissue?"

"Yes," he said, lowering his head. His tone was somber. "Would you like to see?"

"Oh, that'd be much better! I'm a visual learner. Got gloves?" Nicola clapped and held her hands out.

"I can see that you're on a roll. I don't mean to interrupt, but the subject is sort of similar," Knight said.

"Oh, yeah, we found our way here because of Knight. Should listen to them." Nicola nodded.

Adam turned to them, arms crossed and hands still in the huge gloves. Upon further inspection, there was an odd texture on his cheek. She wondered if it was some sort of chemical mishap.

"I heard about the strike situation and I wanted to organize and be part of the local movement. Now, if there are miners really dying the way you're insinuating, it adds weight to our demands..."

"But you're not a local," Adam stated. "And you stand out too much. What are people going to say if you try to get into their risky movement, especially when you dress like that?"

"I know no one is entitled to trust, even if I spend many words on it. I'll accept whatever anyone offers me for a chance to protect the strikers or whatever else," Knight said, blank as always.

"With that armor on, people will at the very least be uneasy. Wouldn't you reconsider your attire?" As he talked, he looked for extra gloves for Nicola.

"The armor stays on."

"Then sorry, but I don't play games. This is a serious matter," Adam said, frowning at them.

"It's not a game. It's magic. The armor is part of me. I swear I don't mean to make people uncomfortable." It sounded like pleading. If Nicola could see the expression they were making, she'd definitely cherish it.

Adam went still for a moment. When he recomposed himself, he casually gave Nicola the gloves. She slipped them on. "Interesting," he repeated. "Can you take your helmet off?"

"I'd rather not."

"I can't vouch for someone I know nothing about. Let me see your face."

Knight stood awkwardly. "I don't think you want to see it."

"Just show him. He won't be bothered," Nicola said as gently as possible. To be honest, she was just itching to see it as well.

Begrudgingly, Knight placed their hands on either side of the helmet and slowly lifted it. At the first flash of white, Nicola hardly believed it. But, when it was fully revealed, the full image struck her: their head was a skull, only some desiccated ligaments left to cover it. "Sorry," Knight said, their jaws unmoving.

She quickly steeled herself, unwilling to let Adam know it was also her first time seeing it. "I see," he spoke up beside her, "The armor stays on." He sighed again.

A squeak came from within the armor. Something fuzzy stuck its head out by the new opening, its twitchy little snout greeting them. Knight quickly, albeit carefully, hid it back inside the armor and put the helmet on. "Was that a rat?" Nicola asked, feeling a light smile form on her face.

"Don't think about it," they said.

"What kind of creature are you?" Adam asked, unmoved.

Knight put their head down. "The undead kind," they mumbled. It kindled some kind of flame inside Nicola. They shouldn't have answered. After all, they hadn't answered her in all that time they'd spent together.

"Why would the walking dead care about the plight of the living?"

"Knight was obviously alive once," Nicola said, pointing at their now concealed face. "They have their human set of beliefs as well."

After an odd moment of silence, Adam took a deep breath. "What's your name, then?"

"What?" Knight stammered.

"Your name."

"I don't go by my human name anymore."

When it looked like Adam would insist, Nicola interrupted yet again. "Adam, I don't see how knowing the name of a long dead person would change anything. They're very particular about it."

Adam went still for a moment, but soon softened. "Very well." He focused on Nicola. "Do *you* trust them? If you do, I'll trust them by extension." He closed his eyes and crossed his arms. "So is the promise between us."

She went cold, her fingertips numb. As she hesitated, she eyed Knight, who stood by her side. She imagined the hollow within their skull. Well, Knight *had* saved her life. *And* carried her to safety. But did she have to bet her image as a Red Lantern on it? She swallowed hard. "Yes," she said.

"Good. You'll find Armless Dan at the Yellow Dog tonight." He gestured for Knight to wait and got pen and paper. He signed a blank paper and sealed it with wax before handing it to them. "Give him this. He'll know I vouch for you."

Knight tilted their head. "You didn't write anything."

"Dan can't read. He'll recognize the signature and the seal."

"I see." Knight accepted the letter, keeping a weak grasp on it as if afraid to bend the paper. "Thank you, Adam. You're very reasonable."

Adam smiled. It seemed out of place. "One last thing. Are you by any chance Living Armor?"

Their shoulders went up. "Maybe," they said, too cautious.

"Weren't you the hero of the coastal provinces? What are you doing here?" His tone was almost mocking.

"Sometimes things don't go to plan."

"I thought that was a fairytale," Nicola mumbled, recontextualizing her image of them.

"No. It's just an undead creature stuck in an armor instead. Or so it seems," Adam said. "You two can stay in the room under the stairs. As for you," he turned to Nicola, the light-hearted smile still there, "Want to see those lungs?"

"Fuck, yes." She joined her gloved hands, mimicking a begging gesture.

Adam led them back down the stairs and through the hallway, stopping in front of a door. "They're in the basement," he said, producing a key from his pocket. "It's easier to keep

the temperature cool down there. You arrived at a good time, actually. They were harvested yesterday."

As Nicola bubbled in excitement, Knight took a step back. "I'll just be up here," they said.

"Are you sure?" she asked. Knight's hesitation helped her curb her enthusiasm.

"I'd just get in your way."

"Aren't you super old? Like, wise?"

Something that sounded like a light chuckle came from under the helmet. "I'm sure you're more capable than me when it comes to this."

"Oh! Is it that you're squeamish?" Nicola teased, putting her hands on her waist.

"I've literally torn my own organs out of my body," Knight stated, nonchalant.

Nicola's smile disappeared and her cheeks went cold. "Ah. Okay, then." She turned to find that Adam had been standing in front of the open door for a while. "Let's go."

"Sorry," Knight muttered behind her.

She shook the mental image off and descended into the darkness with Adam. The sound of his steps was enough guidance and soon there was the spark of a lamp being lit. The smell of oil filled the air as the flame rose. Adam took it with him as he lit the others, none too close to the refrigerator — a huge wooden cabinet on the opposite wall. Aside from a table in the center of the room, there wasn't much else.

"Oh, you're rich-rich," Nicola commented.

"Have to invest in what matters," he said, hanging the lamp he'd been holding on a wall. "Don't your parents have one of these?"

"Probably. Not for organs, though."

"Can't study anything without slowing down decay." He pulled the refrigerator's doors open. The shelves and lining were made of zinc. "Help me pull this out."

They pulled one of the shelves out, revealing pallid lungs with solid dark dots plaguing the flesh. After elbowing the doors shut, they placed it on the table. Nicola realized Adam was staring at her. "I've never seen anything like this," she confessed.

"I hadn't either." He sighed. "Now I've seen it more than I'd like to. A shame."

She bent down and touched it carefully, trying to make out the texture and see the finer details. "From the way it meshes with the lungs' own composing fibers, it must be inhaled. Something that can become airborne. You say only miners have gotten this?"

"Yes. Coughing, shortness of breath, fever. Look at that inflammation."

"And the scarring. Did the other lungs have scarring, too?"

"Indeed."

"This is years worth of exposure, then."

"Very likely. I fear we'll see it more and more as time goes on. There are plenty of live workers with the symptoms." Adam chuckled. "Of course, I can't carve them up to check their lungs for confirmation."

"Not that you'd have to. There is no such thing as coincidences," she said. "Do you plan on making a cut?"

"I guess it's the perfect time now that you're here." He smiled at her and pointed at another cabinet with a nod of his head. "Would you fetch us the instruments?"

Their investigation only served to verify the widespread nature of the disease. The scarring was everywhere, like spider webs. Adam made some diagrams in his sketchbook as quickly as possible and then they put the lungs back in the refrigerator. While he jotted notes down, Nicola took her gloves off and leaned on the table with a question on the tip of her tongue. "Living Armor. You seem to know more about it than me," she said.

"Only dumb stories. People would say they were a fallen Lunarian soldier, like some vengeful spirit type." He didn't raise his eyes from the paper.

"What about being the coastal provinces' hero or something?"

"Don't you know them well enough to say you trust them?" Adam briefly flashed her a knowing smile. "Why not just ask them?"

Nicola averted her eyes, her face warming up. "You're right."

Adam provided her with spares of his own clothes, which surprisingly fit her well enough. He was a small man. After being reassured that she could eat anything she found in the kitchen, Nicola found her way back to Knight, who had holed themselves up in their new room beneath the stairs. They were standing awkwardly, a little bent so their helmet wouldn't scrape the ceiling. "Thank you," they said as soon as they were alone.

"For what?"

"Helping me keep my name."

She smiled, finding some humor in the way they said it. "I'd be chagrined if you revealed it to Adam after denying me for so long. It was for me, so you don't have to be thankful."

"Oh. Why do you want to know so badly?"

"I had to put my word in for you and I hardly know anything about you. I didn't even know you were Living Armor." She leaned on the wall and crossed her arms. She watched Knight as if she'd be able to make out their expression.

"I don't go by that. As I've said, I don't condone glorification." No expression, of course. Just the ever empty metal.

"Yeah, yeah. But that's what people call you, so that's what you're recognized as. You could at least tell me about it. There's plenty of time to kill until nightfall." Nicola smiled. On the opposite side of the room, Knight looked actually trapped.

They put their head down. "Alright. I'll tell you about that, but nothing about my time alive. Will that make you trust me enough?"

Somehow, Knight sounded desperate. To be honest, Nicola already trusted them. It'd be hard to be nursed back to health by someone and carried across the province in their arms and *not* trust them. "I'm sure," she said anyway, biting back a smile. "What's that about you and the coastal provinces?"

They paused. "I was born on the coast. I stuck around after my ascension."

"You call it an ascension." She couldn't help but sound snarky. Before Knight could answer, she continued: "I heard you killed lots of Lunarian soldiers. Is that part of the tale true?"

"It is." There was weight to the words.

Nicola looked at the sword they carried. It seemed mostly decorative. "Funny. I can't picture you killing anyone."

"I don't think you have a clear enough grasp on what magic can do. Especially for a being like me."

"I don't doubt it. I was talking about your personality."

Knight lifted their head and froze, as if staring directly at her. "My personality?"

"You don't seem the type."

"Sometimes there is only one way forward."

"Killing people?" She smiled again.

"But it wasn't enough."

"To do what?"

"Free our country." Slowly, Knight knelt and took a gauntlet off. Two rats emerged to happily explore the room around them. "I was young and foolish. No amount of power concentrated on a single person can accomplish that."

"You died young?" Nicola asked, but Knight focused on the rats and ignored her question. Well, they had indeed said they wouldn't talk about that. "Oh well. I don't have a horse in this race."

"Of course you do. You're a Cruvalian. You may see yourself as more of a Red Lantern, but reason and empathy don't walk separate paths." Knight's skeletal hand tickled one of the rats' bellies.

Nicola sighed, suddenly pitying them too much to argue. The feeling seemed to come out of nowhere. "What are their names?"

"They don't have any." Another rat jumped out of the armor.

"Why not? They're your pets, no?"

"There have been many generations of them. They live too little and I, too long. Everyone whose name I learn dies."

"Downer."

"It is the truth."

"You're a lonely little undead thing. So sad," Nicola teased. Knight didn't answer. She sat on the floor and offered one of the rats her hand. It sniffed her. "Do you think they see you as a living creature?"

"Probably not. I have no warmth," they said in a low tone.

"That's sad."

"Stop projecting sadness onto me."

"Why? You were human once. You know emotion. You were just lecturing me about empathy." Nicola gave the rat little pats behind the head. It was soft.

"Of course. But sadness would imply regretting my choice."

"You're undead by choice?" She held the rat up carefully. It was a chocolate point, dark nose and ears; its coloring made it look like it wore socks. She stopped appreciating it to raise her brow at Knight.

Somehow, yet another rat emerged. Knight sat there unmoving, looking like an abandoned armor with a long dead fellow inside, just that skeletal hand sticking out. "It's not a choice made lightly," they said at last.

Nicola stayed quiet, realizing pressing Knight was a bit like holding soap too tightly. The rat climbed up her arm and she allowed it to explore. It barely had any weight. "Are you lonely? Is that what the rats are for?" she asked instead, keeping a soft tone.

"I initially got them to feast on my flesh." They talked as if it were obvious.

"Of course." She played along.

"Accelerating decomposition was in my best interest. Rotten flesh smells terrible."

"That's why you tore your organs out, too?"

"Yes."

"Of course. That makes perfect sense. You definitely were a perfectly mentally sound human being," Nicola said. She was unable to hold some of the teasing back.

"As I told you, emotion and reason walk hand in hand. I don't think I agree with what you're implying." The flat way they had of saying things matched the helmet's same old metal face too much.

"Sure." She rolled her eyes. "What did you do with your organs after you tore them out?"

"I discarded them."

"What a waste. Even as you are right now, I'd love to study you. I've never seen such extensively decomposed human remains up close before."

Knight didn't respond anymore. In a way, it was almost as if only Nicola and the rats lingered in the room.

Night at last fell upon them and Knight stood, collecting their rats and buckling their gauntlet back on. "I'll be going," they said simply, standing by the door.

"I'll come along." Nicola jumped to her feet, feeling refreshed simply for having clean clothes.

"Why? You've found what you wanted. You don't need to accompany me anymore."

"I don't mind your presence. Besides, there's something I want to see for myself," she said. "Also, having a huge knight with me makes me feel safer."

Knight halted, their hand still reaching for the door handle. "I make you feel safer?"

Did they have to make it sound like a big deal? That just made it embarrassing. Still, Nicola smiled. "Does that surprise you?"

That listless stare again. Then, Knight just turned the knob and walked out. Nicola walked behind them, a spring to her step as she caught up with their large paces. "You need to get rid of that nasty habit of going silent out of nowhere. It's freaky!" she said, hopping beside them. "Then again, you're probably not used to talking."

"I'm sorry. It's been a while." They turned their head away and their voice lowered. "You made me happy."

She couldn't contain a giggle. She held onto their armored arm as they walked, completely aware that all that was beneath the metal was a desiccated corpse. "If it makes you happy, then I guess being honest doesn't hurt," she said, pausing to sigh. "Even if I'd survived that attack, I'd be lost right now if it weren't for you. Of course I trust you... Though your desperation to prove yourself is useful. To squeeze things out of you, that is."

By then, they were out of the front door and facing the night air. The streetlamps' light shone on the smog above them, making the sky seem much lighter than it actually was. "I appreciate your honesty. If you want something out of me, you can be upfront. There's no need for subterfuges like emotional manipulation," Knight said. They tilted their head, probably staring right into her eyes. "Because I can't grow tired. I'll take every burden I can out of human hands."

Nicola laughed. "You're such a diehard! Well I, for one, enjoy taking care of my own burdens with my very capable human hands. What I want to squeeze out of you is other things."

"Other things?"

"I don't need your silly magic."

More silence. Knight's steps were heavy on the stone pavement. "You confuse me."

"Humans are responsible for their own fate. We are quite capable of resolving our own issues."

"I know just how much human hands can do," Knight said. Their voice had turned grave. "Even so, I was human once. This is something I set out to do even when I was alive and it must be done by any means necessary."

"It's funny how you embrace or deny your humanity when it benefits you."

Knight stared at her, their head turned on that unnatural angle. She still clung to their arm. After inspecting her taunting smile for a while, they turned back to the way ahead. They were already walking over the bridge again. Knight just let out a grumble.

"You can't just go quiet when you're beaten," Nicola teased.

"I don't feel beaten. There's too much on my mind to put into words and your time is too little to entertain them."

"Gods." Nicola snickered.

Knight must have kept Adam's directions in mind and paid attention to their route, because they got to the Yellow Dog somehow — not that Nicola had contributed in any way. The exterior was as dirty as the rest of the downtown buildings, soot marking the bricks and rendering their original color undistinguishable; a poorly drawn sign of a presumably drunk mutt hung beside the door. Nicola bent to look at the back of it out of curiosity, only to discover another drawing of the dog pissing with a leg raised. The windows, also tinted by filth — which looked like the residue of bodily fat —, emanated a warm glow and faint laughter. "Charming," Nicola said.

"Brimming with people," Knight muttered. Still, they pushed the door open. The air inside was remarkably warmer than the open streets, heated up by the many bodies — well, the grease on the windows had to come from somewhere.

Some patrons immediately raised their heads to them, displaying that same cautious look as the rest of the townsfolk. However, when they saw Nicola clinging to Knight in her Red Lantern tunic, their expressions softened somewhat. At least that's what she thought. Knight paused, scanning the room for the person they were looking for. They didn't take long to find him; he was called Armless Dan for a reason, after all.

Knight walked between the tables with very little in the way of delicacy, cutting their way to Dan's table. Nicola followed the fresh path laid among the sea of bodies. As they approached, Dan and his drinking buddies grew visibly tense, holding onto their drinks and frowning. When they stopped, Nicola interceded before the air grew too thick: "Dan, I presume?"

Dan raised his beer glass and took a sip, never breaking eye contact. "Red Lantern. Who is that you've brought to us?"

"Someone I owe my life to. They'd like to speak to you." She smiled, taking a step aside and placing a gentle hand on Knight's back to nudge them forward.

"Do you have to speak for them like their mother?" One of the drinking men interrupted, causing a ripple of laughter across the table.

Nicola felt their smile sour, but soon let it go when Knight produced Adam's letter. "Where were you keeping that?" she whispered.

"Don't think about it," Knight whispered back. They bent down to hand the letter to Dan, who cracked it open and held it against the light for a moment.

"I guess we can have a chat," he said, shrugging. "Pull up some chairs and sit down, you two."

Nicola pulled up a chair and sat among them. Someone immediately poured her drink into a smudged and probably already used glass. "I can't pay," she said, waving it off.

"Can't let guests go with their mouths dry."

"Charming," she repeated. The glass felt greasy on her palm. She lifted it close to her face, considering it. Normally, she wouldn't drink, especially not from a dirty cup. However, it had been so long since she'd last had anything with any flavor to indulge in that she gave in.

Knight was still standing up and didn't make any mention of pulling up a chair or accepting the glass that had been handed to them. "I don't drink," they said instead, "Or sit."

"You could stand to be friendlier. Serious business only, eh?" Dan asked. His smile didn't look so friendly either.

They put their head down. "Sorry. I'll sit." So, they pulled a chair up and sat at the crammed table with everyone else.

"It's okay. You can get straight to it if that's how you like it."

"I want to help with the miners' strikes in any way I can," Knight said. Dan and his friends, who had all been looking at them in amusement, lost their smiles.

"I'd usually say, 'nice try, imp', but no imp parades around looking like *that*," Dan said after regaining his grin. "What are you getting at with that old armor?"

"The armor always stays on."

Dan eyed Nicola. Despite the purple-ish bags under his eyes, he still managed to smile at her. "What's this guy's deal, Red Lantern?"

"My name's Nicola." She omitted her surname with a casual sip of beer. "They're eccentric, but I can promise you they don't mean any harm."

"Well, it's your word and Adam's. Gods know we need all the hands we can get." He leaned back on his chair and put his glass down with a thud. "Tell you what. If you can do one little thing for us, I'll feel more open to chatting, yeah?" He shared looks with his friends while saying it, eyes narrowed. There was some snickering. As always, Knight didn't seem bothered.

"You can ask me whatever."

"That's the spirit. Alright, here's the deal: tomorrow, first thing in the morning, a huge shipment will be sent out to the Lunar Bay by train." He fidgeted with a coin as he spoke. "Stop it and make sure it can't get back on its way. You don't need more information, do you?"

His obviously taunting smile made Nicola furrow her brow, sending prickles down her spine. She thought Knight would feel the same, but instead they just answered: "I understand. I'm glad we could reach an agreement."

The others choked back laughter. "Great. I'll no doubt hear about your success," Dan said.

Nicola sighed and crossed her arms, successfully diverting his attention to herself. Though her blood was boiling and she wanted to just drag Knight out of there, she still hadn't done what she wanted to. "I'm here for another reason," she said. "Adam shared the details of

the disease assailing many miners with me. We have yet to ascertain which substance causes it, but we believe it's something present in the mines." She paused to drink some more, trying not to grimace at the state of her dirty glass. "Possibly something that can fragment into tiny particles when struck."

"Bottom line is?" He didn't sound too patient, but Nicola did recognize that he was right to interrupt.

"This only strengthens all the reasons you have for striking. In fact, if we can prove this, you can make other health related demands. Adam and I think the disease stems from long exposure, so smaller work journeys and retirement should definitely be discussed."

Someone chuckled. Dan just sighed. "There's a long road ahead of us, then. I haven't been breathing too well myself, but my lack of an arm has already made me retire." Indeed, he didn't look that old, but certainly weathered, his hand rough and calloused. "Thank you for your work."

"It's not done. If you could facilitate our communication with other afflicted people, that would certainly go a long way."

"I'll definitely pull those strings for you, doctor. The only problem is these people don't have much in the way of free time."

"I'm aware. Thank you for yours, then." She emptied her glass, frowning at a bit of sediment that was sitting at the bottom. Then, she stood and pulled on Knight's arm to leave.

Once they were walking outside, out of that bubble of warm air, she threw her arms up. "Being dead must have killed your mind!" she exclaimed, bursting at Knight.

"It did. I got my brain pulled out by my eye cavities," they said nonchalantly.

Nicola eased the tension on her nose bridge, hand on her face. "No! I meant that you're going crazy! Dan is obviously baiting you. He knows what he asked is impossible."

"But it's not impossible. I can do it easily."

"Right, because you're a magical freak. But he doesn't know that." Nicola got back to walking with her hands on Knight's arm, tugging on it to accentuate her point. "He either thinks you're some kind of spy, which would mean your success would be proof of it, or a complete idiot."

"If this is what it takes, I'll do it."

"He sent you on a suicidal mission! Don't you care?"

"I can't die."

"Again, he doesn't know that!"

"I know I look suspicious. It's alright, Nicola." Knight turned their head to her, looking down. They didn't seem to mind having her cling to them.

"I'll go with you," she blurted out.

"*You* can die."

"You'll keep me safe."

"I'd probably have to use magic on you."

"Now that I know your magic doesn't spend you, you can use as much as you want."

"Only vitality leeching and abuse can spend the user," Knight said, hopping to another subject entirely, "You Red Lanterns have a baseline misconception about magic."

"How would you know? You're not a human caster."

Knight just mm-ed, possibly not wanting to argue again. They just walked back to Adam's in silence. The metal of Knight's arm was cold under her hands, chilled by the night wind. Still, she held onto it. Inside, she was fuming, hot enough to compensate for it. Dan had mocked Knight's obvious naivety without a thought. If she didn't care, then no one would, because Knight seemed to have some kind of inferiority complex when it came to humans.

They were already in Adam's house when that thought hit her. "Why do you just let humans walk all over you?"

"They don't. In any case, I am the one disturbing the natural order, if you want to think by Red Lantern standards."

Nicola opened her mouth to counter, but the Red Lantern bit shut her up nicely. It was true. Upon walking into their assigned room, she discovered that Adam had prepared a bed for her. Knight stood beside the door, arms on the sides of their body. They watched as Nicola took her crusty shoes off. "Good night, Nicola. I can go stand outside if you'd like," they said.

"No. I'm used to you standing there like an owl by now. Wake me up for the suicidal mission, will you?"

"You should eat before leaving."

"Yeah, yeah." After closing her eyes, she started regretting her promise.

She was a bit surprised to wake to Knight standing beside her bed, looking down on her. Before falling asleep, she'd started thinking they wouldn't really bring her along. "Good morning," they said.

"Hi, Knight. It feels really early," she grunted.

"Yes. You still need to eat."

She obeyed, getting through a simple breakfast in a haze. Beyond the windows, it was still noticeably dark.

"Are you sure you're comfortable with this?" they asked as she ate, their voice starting out low.

Something stirred inside her. "I feel like something terrible might happen if you go alone. You're so inept." She got rid of the breadcrumbs around her mouth with the back of her hand.

Knight was slightly knocked back. It took a while for them to answer. "I may be inept at certain situations you've observed. Not at this, though." They tilted their head and bent down, taking a closer look at Nicola. "Are you worried about me? Are you projecting humanity onto me? Nothing can happen to me that hasn't already happened."

"Many would agree there are fates worse than death." She stood and put her chair back into place. "Let's go."

They walked out the front door quietly. The stars were fading out of the sky and what remained of the moon coexisted with the sun. "You worry about me?" Knight asked.

"Sure, why not?" Nicola shrugged. To be honest, she'd calculated her response to sound the most standoffish possible.

"Maybe it's good that you're coming with me. Seeing will make you understand."

"Ominous," she muttered. She put her hands in her pockets to shield them from the cold.

"Sorry. I just meant that you don't have to worry about a thing like me. There's very little in this plane that could do me harm."

"Other things like you?"

Knight crooked their neck to stare directly into Nicola's eyes. They were walking uphill, out of town. There was brief silence. "Nicola, if you ever see another *thing* like me, run."

Yet again, an ominous warning. She decided to ignore it and just mm-ed so Knight would feel acknowledged. "The station is the other way," she said after a while.

"We're going to catch it moving out west," Knight said casually.

"What's your fixation with moving trains?!"

"It's easier that way. No one will be looking out for us. I have something in mind." They walked past the railroad and hid under foliage on the other side, officially out of Fairview. Knight peeked past the leaves, looking at the sky. "I figure we have a little time until it runs past."

They did. Knight just knelt there while Nicola braced herself, cold radiating from her guts and spine. Her fingertips started to feel sparkly. "I'm getting cold feet," she admitted.

"I wouldn't like to leave you behind here, but you can run home right now if you'd like."

"No. I'm doing this. Just need to psych myself up." She took a deep breath.

"Think about it. Trains aren't even that fast. It'd be worse if it were a boat, because then there'd be water all around you." Knight said it in a quiet voice.

"What kind of logic is that? Are you stupid?" As she spoke, Nicola overheard the distant grind of wheels on metal.

"Here it comes. I'll be using magic on you. Don't be afraid."

"I'm *not* afraid." Nicola hissed, only to be interrupted by gravity suddenly losing part of its hook on her. Knight grabbed her by the wrist and she floated onto their lap easily. She couldn't help but squeak, no ground under her feet anymore.

Knight stood under the shadow of the train. They ran some steps forward and leapt a great height; Nicola closed her eyes, bracing for impact while her organs stuck to her throat. Impact never came. There was only the softest of thuds as Knight landed on top of the train. "It's not so bad, Nicola. I'll dispel it and put you down," they said, their voice somehow carrying over the sound of the wind despite being so low.

Nicola gripped the armor. "Don't put me down!" She squeaked again.

"Alright. I'll carry you on my back then." So they switched positions and Nicola got a nice viewpoint over their shoulder, which was also a negative point, considering she could see the moving ground beneath them. The wind whipped her hair back. Knight drew their long sword, brandishing it. "This wagon is dedicated to passengers," they said, turning and walking to the next one.

"How are you sure?"

"The others have no windows."

"You might kill someone!"

"I won't. I'll be precise." They crossed to the next one and raised their sword. A flash of light extended in the form of a much longer blade and immediately cut through the air downwards, severing the connection between the cars. The train continued ahead blissfully and the wagon they were on, along with the ones behind, stopped at a slow pace. Nicola had no doubt that there was magic in that as well.

"How-" she started, immediately stammering due to the queasiness in her stomach.

"The magic you turn your back to. It won't cease to exist because you ignore it." As if cutting butter, Knight slashed the top of the wagon open. "We don't have time to talk right now, though." The extension of the blade seemed like pure unadulterated light; a faint warmth reached Nicola. With a hand gesture of Knight's, the edges of the slashed metal folded outwards like a blooming flower, creaking. Knight jumped inside without hesitation. The only light inside the wagon came from the hole on top of them. Nicola could only discern vague shapes of containers. "Whale oil," Knight said, apathetic.

"How do you know?"

"The scent is engraved in my mind." They lifted their free hand towards the outer wall. "Shield your eyes now."

They didn't have to ask her twice. She hid her eyes against their shoulder pauldron, holding on tightly. There was a loud sound. More scraping metal. Then, the light of day again. She raised her head to see the completely busted wagon and many floating containers around them. Out of nowhere, Knight started moving fast enough to give Nicola motion sickness, darting around to bust open and check each of the remaining cars. After they were done, they spilled oil over everything and leapt to the sky.

Nicola's nails tried to dig into the metal of their armor desperately and she kicked at their waist, suddenly finding herself floating. "What are you doing?!"

"It burns nicely." They sheathed their sword and flicked their wrist. The remains of their crimes went up in flames. Even where they levitated, Nicola could feel the immediate heat.

"You could have said something! We're *flying*!"

"I didn't mean to startle you. I'd never drop you." They turned mid-air and walked away, stepping on nothingness. "We have to go now."

"Solid land, please!"

As soon as they landed and Knight put her down, she puked all she'd had for breakfast.

"I'm sorry," Knight said, just standing there awkwardly.

"I don't know what I was expecting."

Their path home was unconventional and confusing, as if Knight were trying to avoid being seen near the fire, which had already started to cause a general commotion. People in uniforms scrambled out of town and, fortunately, Nicola only saw them from a distance. Everything looked the same uptown, where the houses were two stories high and even a few flowers could be seen. When they walked into Adam's house, adorably tucked between two neighbors, everything was calm and still indoors as well. He was nowhere in sight, so she was free to zigzag to her bed and lie down. It helped soothe the dizziness somewhat.

"Are you okay?" Knight asked, looking down at her.

"It feels like you spun me around."

"I'm sorry. I've lost my grasp on what having a body means."

Nicola groaned and turned on her side, trying to find a comfortable position. "The things you did... No one should be able to do that much magic. It shouldn't be a thing."

"Magic is just a tool. Like that railroad, which facilitates what it shouldn't rather than what's needed."

"A gun is a tool as well, but its only purpose is harm."

"Sometimes harm is the way forward. I chose to become this precisely for the boundless magic." Knight knelt on the floor, leveling their line of sight. "Do you trust me less now?"

"I think existing for so long has fucked your head up. You're so, so rotten in the mind." She sighed. "No, actually... you must have been like that before dying to choose to be... whatever you are."

They put their head down and stayed silent long enough for Nicola to get a distinct pain in the chest. Maybe her words had been too sharp. "Nicola. I've always had a reason for everything I've done. Even while I was alive, people who knew me didn't get it and tried to talk me down. Sometimes I also think I'm losing it. Sometimes I do think I'm a wraith of a time past, lingering needlessly and pestering the living. But I set out to do one thing." They stood and crossed their arms. Somehow, they managed to look tense. "I was resolute to do it until my last living breath. There was a reason for that, so I will carry it through. Besides, when I look around, seeing living people suffer makes me think I was right back then."

Nicola blinked, trying to adjust her vision. Her mind had been busier with the story and her own thoughts while she listened, letting her eyes grow unfocused. "I think that's the most you've ever spoken."

"I'm sorry. You give me too many openings. I didn't think it through. Forgive me."

"No," she said, causing them to straighten their posture in obvious shock. "I like it. I like prodding at people. What's that you care so much about?"

"I feel that you don't give it the care you should. When I was alive, imperial occupation in our country was just developing. I only really felt it as a teenager. There's never been a day I haven't thought about it since then."

"You really are a vengeful spirit, huh." She smiled a little at the way they crooked their head. She made it out to be displeasure. "Oldie. I don't get it. Was Cruval all that different before the Lunarians?"

There was obvious hesitation. "I grew up in a rather isolated village. I don't know what it was like in other parts, but I can tell you there was no expropriation of our labor and resources for the benefit of another country."

"You really don't like talking about your time alive, do you? You always only graze the subject. Stop dancing around. I could care less about the Lunarians."

"I don't. And you *should* care."

"After what you put me through this morning, you owe me some. Indulge me," Nicola said, though she was fully aware that she'd asked to partake in the early morning excursion.

A ghostly sigh. "What will satisfy you?"

"Your name. Pretty please?" She joined her hands, looking up in a feigned plea.

"No."

"Why? It's just a name."

"A thing like me using that name would be a scorn on everyone who loved me while I was alive."

"That's dumb. You're still you, you know," she stated, but Knight just tilted their head again. "Alright. Your gender, then. I'm trying to picture alive-you some."

It took them a while again. "I was a woman."

Her chest tightened as she felt her cheeks warm up. "Oh. Oh, that really changes my perception of you."

"Does it?"

"Completely."

"Are you satisfied, then?"

"No, I want to talk about your self-loathing."

Knight was silent for a long time. Her voice was oddly stern when she spoke. "I'm possibly the deadliest thing you'll ever see. You should regard me with more caution, not try to psychoanalyze me."

"See, I pushed your buttons and you resorted to threats." Knight started stammering, but Nicola continued: "Anyway, you being such a deadly thing just makes me want to tear your bone structure apart even more."

Knight just stared at her for a while. Then, she slowly moved out of the room as silently as someone in a full suit of armor could.

After she'd recovered from the adrenaline high of their arson, Nicola sneaked out of the room. There was only the faint sound of a servant in the kitchen and she hadn't heard Adam come home at all. Thus, she went upstairs to his work room, her eyes immediately widening at the many wonders there kept — including the microscope. Everything was organized perfectly and there was little laying on the table. She'd have to rummage through the shelves, drawers and cabinets. Hopefully he'd still have that sample of the particles.

As she searched the room, the door opened, causing a light jolt of surprise to course through her. She turned to see Knight's tall figure looming in the doorway. "What are you doing?" Knight asked.

"I want to figure out what the substance that's making people sick is, but I have no clue where Adam keeps it," she said. Then, with a smile: "Missed me?"

Knight simply closed the door and crossed her arms again. Odd. "I wish you humans would be fully comfortable with magic. Then, I could heal everyone."

Nicola rolled her eyes, tiptoeing to examine the contents of a shelf. The effort made her tremble. "Can you heal anything?"

"No. Not anything. Vitality leeching can only heal what the human body would normally be able to heal on its own. It merely speeds the process, providing adequate nourishment."

"So that's why I have these scars," she mumbled, rubbing the one over her eyebrow. A stone had split her skin that one day. "Then you couldn't heal this illness anyway, because the lung tissue basically becomes one with the particles. The human body can't expel them."

"Illness is a terrible thing," Knight said solemnly after a while. At least she'd accepted it.

"Was that what you came up here for?"

Obvious hesitation. "I was thinking. If I allowed you to look at my corpse, would you stop asking about my human era?"

"Totally." It came out instantly. Then, she grinned. She planted her feet back on the ground and gave up on her search. "I thought you'd said the armor stays on."

"You're the only one around."

"Are you shy? Conscious of your dead body?"

"No. But the reason is not for you to know. Make it part of the agreement." Knight's arms slid down a little, like she was trying to cover herself, even though she was still fully armored. Maybe she *was* self-conscious.

"Whatever you like."

"You're not usually this compliant."

"I've only ever seen the full skeletons of animals. Hey..." Nicola said, joining her hands. "Take it all off, would you?"

She started by the helmet. Soon her empty eye sockets were staring back at Nicola. "Will you keep an eye on my rats?" she asked.

"I can try," Nicola answered and, as if that were enough, Knight started unbuckling and untying all the pieces of her armor. It came apart slowly, as if tearing out her very outer shell. Afterwards, all that remained was her skeleton and some rags draping from it; there was some cloth bundled between her hips. Rats clung to them and ran all over her, some resting in the bundle. "Hey... Take those off, too," Nicola mumbled, licking her lips.

Her long digits unwrapped the rags with care, putting the rats on the ground along with them; they immediately started exploring. Then, she crossed her fleshless arms over her ribs

and turned her skull away. Nicola took some steps ahead to run a finger along what looked like a desiccated nerve. "This is amazing," she said, her eyes widening again, "I can only imagine what your muscles looked like to be able to support all of it." She pulled one of Knight's arms to test the joints and she posed no resistance. "Obedient. If you still had flesh, would you have let me skin you like an animal to look at it?"

It took a moment. Knight's jaw didn't move. Nicola ran a finger along it. "There would be no reason not to."

"So tarnishing your name would be a scorn on your loved ones, but defiling your body wouldn't?" she teased, moving her fingers up to a fracture on her nasal structure. Knight stood very still, like a real dead person.

"You told me you'd stop."

"Just seeing how much you'd let me get away with." She rubbed her crooked bridge. "Ever get your nose broken?"

"Yes."

"And your cheekbone."

"Yes." After the reveal of Nicola's ill intentions, Knight seemed hesitant to even answer that.

She moved to the edge above one of her eye cavities. There was a noticeable crack. "This one would have been a killing blow."

"I was already dead. Unsteady icepick blow." When Nicola raised an eyebrow, she added: "We were figuring out a way to get my brain out."

"We? Oh, you're *so* easy. I hardly try." Nicola grinned, pressing her thumb through the cavity and into her skull. Nothing there. Knight went silent while her other hand traced her cheekbone again. "By your height, you must have been thin. So, considering your high cheekbones and long face, you had quite the sharp looks, yeah? And got into a lot of fights."

She turned her head away slightly, shying away from Nicola's hand. "I thought you wanted to know more about the general human physique."

"I do. But I also want to know more about you. See, you don't even deny my guesses."

"I don't understand what about me catches your interest," Knight said after a while, voice low. Nicola's thumb was still inside her skull.

She nearly laughed. "Are you serious? You yourself love talking about how undead you are. I've never seen a thing like you."

"You need to understand everything. But in my case, I don't think it's my condition you're interested in. It's..."

"You."

Knight crooked their neck. This time, Nicola could see the movement in her vertebrae. Intoxicating to look at. "Why?"

"Well, how could you choose this? How deranged were you? I need to know why you're undead, not how." Nicola forced Knight to look at her, pulling her head up by the cavities in her skull. Her jaw dropped a little. No tongue in there; Nicola knew it was, after all, one of the first things to rot away. She smiled. "Of course, I also do truly want to look at your bones."

"So if I tell you, your puzzle will be completed and you'll lose interest?"

"Yes." She made the skull bob up and down in agreement. That earned her a ghostly sigh.

"I saw Umbra. I looked past the veil. It all led me here." Her voice transmitted sheer exhaustion.

"What, you had a close encounter with some entity and changed the course of your whole life? Are you that easily influenced?" she asked mockingly.

"It made sense at the time. The ends justified the means, just like harm is sometimes the way forward."

"You let a fever dream consume you," Nicola said slowly, rephrasing it.

"I did have a high fever at the time it happened," Knight mumbled.

Nicola couldn't hold back. She actually laughed, wondering if Knight was even capable of listening to her own words. "See? Alright, lie down for me."

She obeyed, staying perfectly still on the floor. A good specimen. Nicola swiped some of Adam's materials so she'd be able to make her own notes. She started with a sketch of Knight's skull, including the desiccated skin and bone fractures. "You don't believe I made a rational decision," Knight said out of nowhere. The void of her eyes stared at Nicola in accusation.

A weird cold ran from her throat to her gut. She smiled again. "What, you actually wanna talk about it?"

She turned that void back to the ceiling. "No, you're right," she said. "But rationality and emotion must coexist anyway."

"Now I am not the one who wants to argue. But still, religious fanaticism explains your fate, so you did solve the puzzle for me." She touched her ribcage and bent down to get a closer look at her spine. Knight seemed to shudder somehow.

"Nicola..." she started only to be interrupted by the door swinging open.

Nicola looked up, mouth agape. Adam was standing in the doorway in a trench coat with an exasperated look on his face. He blinked. "Nicola, where did you procure a skeleton?"

"I'm sorry," Knight said impromptu.

His face eased. "Oh, it's just Living Armor. I... see," he paused. He frowned slightly and closed the door halfway. "Please just clean up afterwards. I keep this place tidy. Also,

don't just let those rats roam around. That's a sanitary issue." He turned away and closed the door. Despite the shadow it cast on his face, Nicola thought he'd looked quite displeased.

"I'm not a fanatic," Knight said as Nicola returned her attention to her.

"Okay." She shrugged.

"Don't let my rats escape." When Nicola touched her spine, it arched and she turned her face away.

"You shied away. You felt that?" She ran her finger through her hip, trying to confirm it. Knight squirmed again.

"Of course. I feel things."

"You shouldn't."

"There's many things you Red Lanterns can't explain," Knight said, choking out an odd sound when Nicola's fingertips tickled her hip. How could she choke without a throat? "Oh, now you're making it awkward."

"No!" Knight blurted out, raising her voice for the first time since they'd met. It was enough to shock Nicola. "It's nothing like that. I'm just not used to human touch. Not even while I was alive-"

"So you've always been socially inept?"

She turned her skull away again. "I was focused on other things."

"Getting punched in the nose and practicing the dark arts?"

"I was young and naive."

"You're opening up all of a sudden. See, I told you you were easy. That's so cute." She pulled her by the ribs, readjusting her torso. Knight let out a whimper. "Now stay very still while I sketch your vertebrae."

As it turned out, Nicola hadn't been keeping a close eye on the rats. One of them had escaped by squeezing through the underside of the door; they tore through the house in search of it as silently as possible, hoping Adam was busy enough not to realize it. Nicola thought that Knight must be disappointed in her, but she didn't say anything and it was impossible to read her unless she talked.

Though she had to go back to the Yellow Dog with Knight that night, she dined with Adam in a big room with a window leading to the backyard. She took his distraction with the newspaper as an opportunity to look at him. The chemical burn on his cheek, along with his careful organization, could only mean that he was really dedicated to his work. The coat he wore over his Red Lantern tunic looked exactly like one Nicola's father would wear — still, Adam's youth and looks made it look dapper somehow. She averted her eyes and stared at his empty backyard, darkened by dusk. Meanwhile, she ate absentmindedly.

"You're thinking," he pointed out, still looking at his newspaper. Once in a while, he'd eat a spoonful of food with a delicate hand.

"I'm always thinking."

"A common malady. What were you doing in my studio?" The question sounded like an accusation, though he just calmly sipped some water without looking her way.

"I wanted to find that sample you'd shown me."

"But you ended up looking at Living Armor's remains. How?"

"I asked them to."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that." She drank her tea, hiding behind the cup. It was much more pleasant than the conversation. Adam seemed harmless enough, though his lack of facial cues threw her off. Somehow, that didn't happen with Knight.

"You seem to get along quite well."

"Not particularly." She'd preferred to say that yes, they were the best of buddies. Totally. But there was something about his tone that made her hold back.

"I agree that it'd be an interesting case study. However, if the price is getting that intimate with an otherworldly creature, it might not be worth it," he said just as calmly, turning to the next page of the newspaper.

"I wouldn't say otherworldly. Magic is a material fact and so is Knight. It won't cease to exist because I turn my back to it," she said, immediately cringing at the reference she'd pulled.

"True. Let's just say I'm surprised that you asked a fabled war criminal to expose themselves to you and they obliged. Nothing more."

She tried not to frown.

That same night, Nicola and Knight found themselves back at the Yellow Dog. It was just as crammed and warm as the last time. They found Dan and his friends at the exact same spot, all with their filthy cups. Unlike last time, however, they didn't watch with a mocking smile as they approached. Instead, Dan had a hardened stare. "I would have said you were an imp if it weren't for the damage you caused them." He eyed Knight and tapped on the table, pensive. "How *did* you do it?"

"Magic."

There was discomfort all around the table. It reverberated through Dan as well, but he straightened himself out faster than the others. "It's better to have something like you on our side than not, I reckon."

"I can deal with any police retaliation easily," Knight said just as flatly as before.

"By deal with, I sure hope you don't mean mass killings. Though they are filthy parasites, we can't deal with the fallout."

"Of course not. They are Cruvalians just like you and me."

"Like you?" Dan chuckled. He was playing with a bottle cap. "That explains the Empire brand on your armor. You were one of those sellouts. For fuck's sake, how old *are* you?"

"Nevermind that. I need to know if you got anyone for me," Nicola interrupted, resting her chin on her hands.

"Yeah, I got someone for you."

They left after hearing Dan's instructions for both of them. The ones for Knight were far more convoluted, as if he was afraid someone might be listening — like someone could even properly listen in that hellhole. She walked home holding onto Knight's arm, a gesture that had become oddly comforting. As she herself had plainly put, Knight could *deal* with

anything. There'd be no angry mobs or tensions to worry about as long as Nicola clung to Knight; she was free to just think about being a Red Lantern.

"After this afternoon, maybe I should tell you..." Knight started, interrupting her tranquil thoughts. She actually stammered. "I can feel through my armor. So... You might not want to touch me like that."

"Are you embarrassed all of a sudden? Because I tickled your spine? Did you find that titillating?" Nicola grinned, only hugging her arm tighter. The metal dug into her torso.

"I am not embarrassed. That was just for your research purposes." She paused. "I just thought you might not want to cling to me like that if you knew."

"I'd cling to you even if you were made of fully sensitive flesh." Knight stayed silent, which only made Nicola smile more. "Anyway, why feel through your armor? That seems useless."

"I need to be able to feel through my armor so I'm aware of any damage to it."

"You said nothing could hurt you."

"No. I said very little could hurt me." She paused. "I am not embarrassed or titillated. You're only trying to humanize me."

"I wasn't even talking about that anymore. Well, suit yourself, I guess." Beside her, Knight grumbled faintly. "Hey. Is Dan right? Were you a sellout?"

There was a pause. "I had to help feed my family," Knight said in a low voice.

"So yes."

"Yes. I was a colonial soldier, what you'd call police now. It paid better than my previous job and was surprisingly less deadly."

"Wow, you don't have to justify yourself to me." Nicola laughed a little. "If it was less deadly, how come you died doing it?" Knight made a questioning sound. "Your armor. I assumed you died wearing it."

"The job didn't kill me. I killed myself."

"Oh." Her smile died and she held onto her tighter. "I'm sorry, then."

"For what?"

"That you killed yourself."

"I had to die to become undead."

"Oh, I forgot how fucked up you were. Nevermind, then." There was a long silence, but the phrase didn't leave Nicola's mind. Since Knight seemed more open right then, she couldn't help but pry further: "What about your family?"

"What?"

"The one you were feeding."

"Right. One less worker, but also one less mouth to feed. You'd be surprised how much an adult eats." Knight paused, turning her head away. "Even if no one understood it, I knew they'd be better off without me."

An odd cold went tingling up Nicola's limbs and through her body. Hugging Knight's arm didn't help in the slightest. "So your self-loathing isn't new."

"According to your beliefs, it was perfectly rational. A mathematical decision."

"Not you, though. You're an emotional little bitch. You have a weird bleeding heart."

Knight stopped and the cold settled inside Nicola. She froze, looking at the blank helmet and wondering if she'd gone too far. "It doesn't matter, because that wasn't the reason. My family didn't factor into my decision. I did it for-"

"Your purpose. Yeah, yeah, spare me."

"You don't believe me either."

"What?" Nicola looked up at her, once again finding nothing in her non-existent expression.

"It's alright. You were right." Once they got to Adam's front door, Knight stopped and turned to her. Carefully, she lifted the arm that Nicola wasn't holding and gently put her hand on her head. The gauntlet was somewhat heavy. She tilted her head and frost sparked up in the base of Nicola's spine. "I have opened up. I didn't want to admit it, but maybe I enjoy your interest. Though it's been long enough that none of it actually matters." Her voice was softer than usual and it made Nicola's imagination wander more than it should have.

"By that logic, nothing at all matters. And that might as well be, but I am not a history book or what have you. I want to-"

"I know." Still soft, but as low as usual. Not as deep. Without the ghostly depth shrouding it, Knight's voice actually sounded... sad. "You should sleep. It's past bedtime for the living."

A pause. The frost built in intensity and Nicola stilled under the weight of that hand. "Oh, whatever." She finally shrugged her off and stomped the dirt under her soles away on the slab before going inside.

At the time they walked into the kitchen the following morning, they hadn't talked again at all. Adam sat at the small table on his own, reading the paper. He gave Nicola a little smile as she approached and sat down across from him. Breakfast was already served and she knew Adam hadn't been the one to prepare it. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Knight stand against a wall and go as still as a statue.

A while later, Adam stood and grabbed his coat from a nearby chair, folding it over his arm. He threw the paper over the table. "Sorry to leave you so soon, but I have an appointment to attend to." He smiled again. When his cheek moved, his scar gained additional texture.

"That's okay. I have an appointment as well," she said.

"That's great to hear." It came out genuine. Thus he left, leaving them alone.

Out of idle curiosity, Nicola picked up the paper. "You know, I know you think you're an eyesore, but standing still like that only makes you creepy," she said, raising her voice as she unfolded the newspaper.

"I'm sorry," Knight mumbled before meekly walking up to her.

"He reads the Lunarian papers." She scanned the headlines. "What's the point? Thing's outdated by the time it gets here."

"Do you read Lunarian?"

"Yeah. My parents read these, too. They thought it made them so elegant. I'm sure you get what I mean." When she paused, Knight mm-ed. Suddenly, an idea struck her. "Do you speak traditional Cruvalian?"

"There's no one to speak it with."

"But do you?"

"My region's variant, yes."

Nicola let out a satisfied sigh. "I'm starting to get the appeal of you being so old," she said in a dreamy tone. Knight had bent down to look at the papers with her; upon hearing that, there was an odd sound of metal and they went as still as a rock again, neck craned. "There you go again, getting titillated." Nicola grinned, edging the newspaper before turning its page. "I just meant I'm revisiting my notion of the importance of history. Wondering what the country was like when you were alive is suddenly interesting." Although she was completely serious, she tried to contain a light smile.

After what felt like too long, Knight straightened her posture. "I'm glad. Truly."

Nicola stood and grabbed her bag. "Well. It's time for us to be out, then. Don't wanna leave them waiting."

"I'm sorry, Nicola." The void beyond Knight's helmet stared back at her. "You'll be on your own this time."

"Oh." Her smile dropped along with her energy. All her morning excitement, gone. As soon as she realized it, she swallowed her displeasure down and chastised herself internally. Why had she expected, or even wanted, Knight to go with her? "That's alright. By the way..." She paused on her way out, turning to smile at her. "You speak the creole quite well."

"Thank you." Nicola hardly heard it, as if Knight had only whispered.

Getting to the slums was easy enough, but finding the exact family she was looking for required some inquiries. Nicola ran up and downhill for what seemed like hours, her bag hanging from her shoulder. Cold sweat ran down her back whenever someone looked her in the eye. In those moments, she found herself wishing that Knight had come along. At last, someone recognized her by the tunic and beckoned her in. It was a woman taller than her, holding a child to her chest with a strong arm and waving Nicola in with the other. Though the usual marks of exhaustion were on her face, she smiled. They went inside.

"Doctor. Miss Red Lantern. Oh, what was your name?" She mm-ed something and put the child down so she could set tea cups on the table. At the same time, she pulled a chair up and tried to calm the cranky kid down.

"Nicola."

"Yes, Nicola. I was starting to think you wouldn't show up!" The woman chuckled and handed her the tea cup. Nicola idly accepted it.

"I'm not well acquainted with the town yet."

"It's great to have a new doctor in town. I know some people talk, but ignore them. Thanks for coming to see us."

"No need for that. Who am I to look at?"

"Me and my brother. Oh, but he has places to be. You'll want to look at him first." She pointed to a dark hallway.

"You're a miner?" Nicola raised her brow.

"Not anymore. I paid my debt."

A mental image of the lines of prisoners walking through the center of the town down to the quarries, led by police officers, sprung up on Nicola's mind. It was the kind of grim thing she'd often avert her eyes from. However, the woman still smiled. She yelled for her brother, who came out of the hallway completely dressed for a workday. He seemed significantly older than her.

"Am I cutting in on your work hours?"

"Not going to work today," he said, his voice as gruff as his badly shaved beard. He turned his head away to cough; once he faced her again, she noticed a slight discoloration on his lips. "Just say what you need, doc."

Even from across the room, his breathing was loud and obviously laborious. Still, Nicola asked him to sit upright and take his shirt off. Without much ceremony, she bent down and took her ear to his chest. She listened closely, asking him to breathe in through his mouth. There was distinct crackling, like the rubbing of dry hay. Despite how sharp it sounded, she still took a while to pick it up under all the wheezing. She listened from his back as well, not that she really had to.

"What does that tell you?" The man asked as he put his shirt back on. His face didn't transmit much patience.

Nicola sipped her tea. His symptoms all coalesced with Adam's notes of other afflicted people. "It just confirms what you already feel. You can hardly breathe, can you?"

"It is what it is," he said, sighing as he stood. He coughed some more. "The guys say Adam hasn't figured anything out yet."

That prickled her. "If Adam and I are right, the damage can't be reversed. All you can do is change lines of work so you don't get any worse."

He started laughing, but choked up on his coughing midway. "That easy. Thanks anyway, missy." As he headed for the door, he paused and said: "You're a young girl. You went to the Yellow Dog to see Armless Dan, yeah?"

"Yeah?"

"Adam is one thing. He has his surname to him and he keeps a distance. You shouldn't meddle with this stuff, though." He stopped to smile over his shoulder. "Unless the thing about Red Lanterns having a country wide net is true."

She chuckled bitterly and waved him away. He smiled wider before leaving. "I promise he means well," the woman said. She'd been watching all the while and the kid was sleeping on the couch; Nicola figured they'd been cranky due to waking up early.

"He seems depressed," she remarked.

"I guess. It's partly on me. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be able to raise my son. That's why he thinks he has to keep working." She crossed her arms and shrugged lightly. Nicola realized that her constant smile was weary. "Which is why I'm both glad and worried that he's going to that strike today." A jolt ran up her back. Nicola straightened out, her head shooting up. So that was where Knight would be. She hadn't realized it would be so early. "Are you okay?" When Nicola snapped out of her thoughts, the woman was looking at her.

"Of course. Let's get on with your examination."

While Nicola had her ear on the woman's chest, she heard her heart speed a little. "I sorta wish it was Adam doing this." When Nicola didn't say anything, she added: "Oh, that was a silly comment. You two must be together. He's just such a handsome young man."

She thought of Adam's ever neutral expression and his well combed hair. Something about it gave her the creepy-crawlies and she almost shuddered. "We're sect siblings. Nothing more than that. Now, I really need to listen to your lungs."

The evening came and it was only her and Adam in the dining room again. Nicola hadn't seen Knight since she'd left that morning and there was an evident armor-shaped gap in the room. It was impossible not to notice her absence. Still, she didn't mention it to Adam. "How did your appointment turn out?" he asked at some point, eating with all the poise in the world.

"A very advanced case of... We should call it something. Like, I don't know, Miner's Disease."

"Fitting."

"Very characteristic wheezing and crackling in his lungs. Couldn't go a sentence without coughing."

Adam paused. He cleaned his mouth graciously with a napkin. "Did you know he had it before going?"

"Yeah. I'm actually hunting them down." She realized it was a weird way of saying it.

"I should warn you that it's a waste of time, sister. There's nothing we can do for them. Your time is best spent hunting corpses than living specimens down, if you'll forgive my phrasing."

The food got tangled with the sudden knot in her throat. She coughed a little and let the heavy feeling settle down. "I suppose you're right." The words of the ill man came back to her: *that easy*.

By the time she'd washed up and gotten into bed, there was still no trace of Knight. Laying down in the dark without her shadow near the door made the room look far too big and empty; its dark corners grew into limitless void and Nicola's nape went cold when she turned her back to them. It took her longer than usual to fall into a restless sleep. So, when she walked out in the morning to find Knight standing in the hallway, she gritted her teeth. "How long have you been standing there for?!" she shouted, balling her fists up.

"Some hours. I don't understand," Knight said, uncrossing her arms, "Are you angry?"

"Of course! I was waiting for you! Why didn't you come inside?"

"You were already asleep. I didn't want to wake you," she said softly, even though Nicola was being loud.

"I'd have liked to be woken up! I was worried." The word came out of her mouth before she'd fully fleshed the phrase out in her mind. The shock of it was enough to blow her anger away and she just stood there, face suddenly cold.

"I'm sorry." Knight's voice was a deep velvet. Nicola's face wasn't cold anymore. "It's irrational for you to worry about me. It's unlike you."

"I've just grown used to having you stand by the door," she said, trying not to stammer. "You did save me once."

"Then you understand why I couldn't come straight home after yesterday. I couldn't risk leading anyone here." Knight bent down, her lack of eyes devouring Nicola's as she peered deep into them. "You trust me."

She tried not to take a step back. Somehow, it was like Knight was emanating heat, even if that was impossible. "At least let me know your plans beforehand. Don't just leave me all alone."

"I'm sorry, Nicola. Though the truth is you have no need for me anymore." She straightened herself out. "You know that."

"Now you're just being annoying."

"No. I'm trying to see the world by your logic. Of course *I* have no problems with sticking around. As I've told you before, I have infinite time."

Nicola rubbed her face and sighed. It wasn't Knight that was warm: it was her cheeks. Not being able to make out the tone in Knight's voice was driving her mad. "What do you want me to say? Do you want me to cave and admit to having emotions? Of course I do. Do you want me to say I want you near? That I care about you." Knight just stood perfectly still, looking at her sideways like a terribly suspicious crow. She listened to Nicola's rambling without saying a word. "Say... If you want me to do that, give me your name. Let me humanize you. It's what you're asking for."

Knight's stillness shrouded both of them as soon as the words got out of her mouth. They were encapsulated in a moment of perfect silence, as if time itself didn't move. A low hum came out of Knight's helmet, like the start of a syllable, only to be cut by a very human voice: "You two sure are talkative today," Adam said, not sparing them a glance. He carried a suitcase and read some papers as he made his way across the hallway. His remark made Nicola wake up and grant him passage, her ears burning. Knight still hadn't moved an inch.

When Adam got to the front door, he turned to them and raised his face to Nicola: "You'll find it in the upper right corner of the right cabinet, by the way. Have a good day." Just like that, he smiled and went outside.

As soon as the heat in her face had died down a bit, Nicola looked up to Knight only to find that nothing had changed. She sighed and fiddled with her hair for a bit, brow furrowed, before deciding to just move on. As she had breakfast, Knight followed her into the kitchen and slowly sat across from her. It made her pause. Knight seldom sat out of their own volition — or did anything but stand. She even rested her elbows on the table and put her head down, mimicking human exhaustion.

"It's Oleander," she said.

"Your...?"

"My name. Don't say it in front of anyone else."

For a moment, Nicola felt like mocking her concern, but shut her mouth and rethought it. "Why were you so afraid of saying it?"

"Because I'm not who I was then." When she saw Nicola's parted lips, she added: "The people who knew me as Oleander wouldn't have wanted this. It feels disrespectful of me. You could say undeath is a taint in the world."

"It's merely a fact of our reality."

"Everything causes reactions. This is one that causes *visceral* reactions." She paused and looked away. "I had people who once loved me."

"Aren't they all dead?" The air between them could have crackled after Nicola said it. She quickly amended it: "You still own your likeness."

"It's all so distant," she mumbled after a while, head still down.

Nicola thought on it while Knight — Oleander — visibly sulked. "So what changed? Why tell me now?"

Oleander took her own hand to her helmet as if covering her mouth. The oddness of the gesture put a dreamlike filter on the whole situation. "I wanted you to be able to refer to me in a more intimate way."

She choked and tried to recompose herself as quickly as possible, hoping Oleander wouldn't notice. "The things I said before..."

Her pause made Oleander speak again, hand still on the front of her helmet. "Were you just prodding at me?"

"No." Nicola exhaled.

"You're good at prodding. Either that or my resolve has never been stable." Oleander turned her head away, completely facing another direction. Not having a neck allowed her to do so. "I'm still lonely and feebly human."

"I thought the feeble part of human nature was just your thing." Nicola smiled.

"Emotions." Oleander chuckled. "It's more complex than that."

"How so?"

"In all honesty, I've placed myself in a box separate from humans over the years." She put her head down again. "You were right. I put human qualities on a pedestal, but I don't give myself room for them."

Because of Oleander's brief pause, Nicola felt she had to mock her to nudge her forward: "Because of your purpose?"

"Yes. Feelings like loneliness would defeat my reason to be."

"What changed? You've realized you can be human and execute tasks at the same time or something?" She made sure to sound snarky enough that even someone as dense as Oleander would pick up on it.

"No. This feels more like a moment of weakness due to finding a human that doesn't care that I'm dead."

"So you know that you're still a person." Nicola ate her bread calmly as she watched Oleander fumble for words.

"Despite what it may seem like, I have many moments of doubt."

"What do you think it seems like?" She chuckled. "I think you're adorably awkward. I'm sure you're an overthinker."

"Nicola..." Somehow, it sounded like she'd run out of breath. "Were you being honest? That you care about me."

"Right. You told me your name to hear me say it," Nicola said, pausing to clean her hands. Oleander stayed quiet and very still. "I care about you."

"Thank you." It was low and melancholic. That dreamlike feeling came back.

"Don't thank me. Freak." She savored her tea for a moment. Whoever it was that fed her, they brewed good tea. Her body was warm. "Will you stay in today?"

Oleander turned her face back to her and just stared for a while. "Perhaps just a little longer," she said softly.

The vial was where Adam had promised it'd be. It had a decent amount of a powdered crystalline substance. Nicola gloved up and took to his workstation, where she'd already prepared many other vials with assorted substances. Oleander stuck to her like a shadow. As she mixed a fraction of the vial's contents with water, she thought up a way to destabilize the skeleton woman. "Oleander," she called softly, enjoying each syllable. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her posture stiffen — if that was even possible. "You were supposed to be helping with the strike right about now, weren't you?"

"Yes," she said with a heavy tone.

"Yet you stayed," Nicola smiled, dripping some water carefully into the tube, "Because I asked you to. You're a hypocrite."

"You asked me to."

"So you do enjoy my prodding more than you admit, even at the cost of your *duty*." Oleander started blabbering an answer, but Nicola interrupted her. "What you want is to feel needed," she said as she shook the glass vial slowly, trying to mix its contents. Nothing seemed to change.

"As I said, your presence merely caused a moment of weakness. You're right. I shouldn't have stayed."

"Oh, but it fits. You always say you *want* to be as powerful as you are. You *want* us humans to ask for your help. You gave up your morals because you thought your family needed you. You gave up your life because you thought the world needed you." Silence. It didn't wipe Nicola's smile off. "You have a savior complex."

"Though it pains me to admit, that might have been true when I was young. Your age," Oleander said after a while. She touched her back to the wall and crossed her arms. Did she

seek human comfort? Nicola couldn't help but wonder. "I'm too weathered to entertain delusions."

She moved on to the next trial, noting that the substance wasn't soluble in water. "I thought I'd lose interest once I'd figured you out, but now I want to hear it all. The small and irrelevant details. Your choice to stay with me this morning told me too much."

"I've already told you that you don't need subterfuges," Oleander said, her voice low and somewhat raspy. She was either embarrassed or annoyed. "I'd thought it was an honest request."

"Did you want it to be?"

More silence, though shorter. "Yes. But you're prodding again."

"It was honest. It can be honest and informative at the same time." Her brain divided its attention between her experiment, the conversation and wondering where she could find a propane torch. "I like talking to you. And it makes me wonder what it would be like talking to alive you. The faces you'd make."

"I wasn't very social."

"You were too busy, huh. You must have never dated."

"I..."

"Thought so. What about the person who helped you remove your organs? I know you had help." She thought of the scene. Her own guts felt like a hot mixture and she smiled. Nicola had moved on to mixing the samples with available earth metals such as calcium.

"I fail to see how that connects with dating."

"What's more intimate than putting your hands inside a person's flesh and pulling their vital organs out? Everything that constitutes a person, out on display. It must have been someone you trusted deeply. Someone close enough not to care about dipping their hands inside you."

"It's nothing like that. It was a gruesome ordeal. He should have never had to do that."

"I would have given up a limb to be able to do it. It's one thing to carve into the lungs of a dead person. It would be another to cut you up and see your every reaction as I tease your exposed nerves. You would have been the perfect experiment." She let the words ooze out as she mixed the earth metals with each of the powder's samples and water. Most of them became a nicely absorbent slurry. When the silence droned on, she realized the weight of her words. The heat climbed up to her throat, making the next words hard: "Go to your strike, Oleander."

Oleander uncrossed her arms and took a step away from the wall. When Nicola had thought she'd be safe, she spoke up in her ghostly voice: "You're wrong. Innards are not all that constitute a person."

"A mage's obsession with the soul," Nicola mumbled, glancing at her with a smile. Oleander merely nodded. "Being hands deep in someone's guts is the closest two people can be."

"Not really. Not even literally, by your rational logic." She turned away and held onto her own arm. "You gave me a taste of proximity for the first time in a long time. I'll take my leave."

So she did, just as Nicola had wished. However, her words lingered in the air. Ripples of her voice remained in Nicola's mind. Her voice. It varied too much in depth. How had it been in life? At times, it sounded like a forced attempt at a husky tone. But she knew it wasn't forced. So her imagination wandered, fed by Oleander's words and her own; that image of someone else hands deep in Oleander returned and Nicola's own bowels went hot. That eagerness was something she could understand, unlike the burning sensation in her eyes when she pictured that *someone else*.

By the end of the day, Nicola hadn't really gotten anywhere. She'd written down many notes and discarded tons of possibilities through trial and error, sure, but there were only ever errors. Adam came back in his business-like attire in time for a Lunarian style afternoon tea. He hung his coat on the chair beside him and sat down, pouring some for both of them. "Did you find what you were looking for?" he asked with the usual smile.

"Yes." Nicola ate some cake. The readily available food gave her the weirdest sense of nostalgia. "Don't know what it is yet. Pretty sure it's an earth metal. I made some notes, so you might want to review them later. I'd have checked how it reacted with fire, but couldn't find a torch."

"Wonderful. I might do that myself." He joined his hands. "Nicola, I was wondering how your Lunarian is these days."

His smile made her hesitate. "Good," she said at last, opting for the truth.

"Great. Might I take you to a dinner party with the provincial administration?"

"You walking your thin line?"

"Indeed." He chuckled. "As long as you follow my lead, it should be a hit."

She looked him over. Adam was oddly mild. That was the best word she could find. Mild like the calm surface of a lake. Perhaps deceptively mild. "Alright."

"We just need to get you some appropriate clothes. I'll get a tailor to take your measurements."

She sighed. "If you invited me, I assume you have good reason."

"Always. Leave it to me."

She did.

She'd been reading one of Adam's books in bed as the oil burned away when she heard the front door and the clanking of metal. Her heart unwillingly fluttered and she half closed

the book, expectant. A string of thought tried to surface and ask her why, but she quickly suppressed it. Oleander walked into the small room and shut the door; then, she just stood there.

"Well, hello," Nicola said with a nonchalant smile.

"Nicola." The usual ghostly quality of her voice was more noticeable than ever, coming at Nicola as if it surrounded her. She shuddered under Oleander's empty stare. "I was thinking of you in my absence."

"Out of all the things someone like you could think of," she said, rueing the quiver in her own voice.

"I know you thrive on subtext. Manipulating me to see what my reactions tell you. I don't mind," she continued, stepping closer. She ended up beside the bed where Nicola lay, looking down on her. "But it means I'm left out of the conversation, because I don't understand." She paused. As Nicola just looked up at her with her mouth agape, she slowly knelt beside her. Their line of sight aligned and Nicola's spine irradiated a chill. "Do you accept direct conversation?"

"Yes," Nicola started, blushing when she stammered, "That'd be the most productive."

"I must admit I've forgotten how to talk. Nicola..." Another pause and a ragged breath. A breath? Was Oleander nervous enough to fall back on mimicking *breathing*? "You've been saying you wanted to put your hands inside me."

Her imagination made her blush intensify. "Don't say it like that, but yes."

"You also said that that's the closest two people can be and that you care about me. Would I be wrong to assume that that means you want to be closer to me?"

When Nicola looked into the void of her helmet, she somehow found anxiety. Maybe it was her tone. Maybe it was the way she was kneeling beside the bed, like a dog waiting on its master. Still, something about it made a knot ascend to her throat. When Nicola opened her

mouth, she'd been about to lie and say it was mere scientific curiosity, but the scene made her hesitate. She realized what it was: pity. "No. But I do have to speak in subtext. Otherwise, you run away."

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to admit I need company." She held onto her own arm and looked away.

Nicola closed the book, not bothering to mark the page. She reached out towards her helmet and held it, her hand over where her cheek would be. Oleander's shoulders straightened up. "So you're consciously opening up to me?"

"Yes."

"I don't think you've forgotten how to talk. I think you never knew it to begin with." She held her chin up, gripping the back of her helmet to force eye contact.

"What?"

"Am I wrong?" Her fingers found the metal's edge and held onto it tightly. Something like a low whimper came out from within it. "And don't blame it on your obsession. You had a life before that."

Oleander seemed petrified. "My words never seemed necessary," she said after a while.

"I want your words." Fueled by the odd heat inside her, she rubbed her thumb against the metal surface in a caress. "Glad we talked." She took her hand back and relaxed in bed again. Lights were crackling inside her head, sending off waves of pleasure.

"Thank you..." She paused once more as if regaining her breath. "Thank you."

"Don't act like it's such a big deal."

"But it is. I've never slowed down like this. Not even while alive. I'm somehow afraid it might be fatal."

"Emotions may be a waste of time, but they won't kill you. Besides, you're undead." Nicola yawned in an exaggerated manner and picked the book back up. "Now let me get back to reading."

Oleander just stayed right there as she read, silent. Seeing her out of the corner of her eye was unavoidable and, as much as she tried to read, Nicola ended up relenting after some more pages. "Lunarian literature is boring. Hey... Tell me something in traditional Cruvalian."

She seemed to perk up. "What do you want to hear?"

"I don't know. Make it something traditional as well. Something you heard a lot."

The words started as a low hum, coming out in soft spoken vibrations. There seemed to be rhymes in them, though Nicola couldn't identify them. Despite there being syllables she knew and small words she recognized, comprehension was limited. When Oleander was done, she said "That sounded very musical."

"It was a coastal folk song."

"Oh? What's it about?" She held back a small smile and laid on her side to properly stare at Oleander, who still hadn't moved an inch.

"A cautionary tale about sea sickness." When Nicola raised her brow, she continued: "Fever dreams, delirium, being drawn to the depths and drowning."

"And that was something you heard a lot?"

"Every sailor knew it by heart. I learned it from my father." She paused and Nicola could see her lower her head ever so slightly. "I think people still sing it out east."

"You got along well with your father?" The slight shift in her posture and tone had made Nicola think of the question.

"Not in the way a child and their parent should get along. I was the oldest."

"You were the extra parent."

"Yes." Her voice was low.

"I'm an only child," Nicola said, shrugging. "I wouldn't know."

"Your life is distant from mine in all the ways possible," she replied, even quieter, "Not only time."

"Is that why you look down on me? Because you've lived through so much?" Nicola gave her a snarky smile.

"I don't look down on you," Oleander said, obvious surprise in her voice. She raised her hands and meekly touched Nicola's; as she did, she bowed down, almost touching her head to the bed. "I don't. What makes you think that?"

The cold metal of her gauntlets. Nicola turned her hand up and actually held onto them. "You act like you're always right. Nothing's ever up for debate."

"I'm sorry. That's a problem within myself. It has nothing to do with you. I'm rigid because I have to be."

"You're scared of being wrong because if you're wrong you should just drop dead. Right?" She held onto her gauntlet tighter, pressing her thumb down on it. The satisfaction of hearing puzzle pieces click flooded her.

"Yes. However, there are things that I don't debate on because I know you're wrong through experience... Sorry." She actually touched her helmet to the mattress, as if hiding her non-existent eyes from Nicola. There was a sigh. "You're too smart for me. I can hardly keep up with you in conversation, even though I have many years of advantage over you. If you'd met me in life, you would never have looked my way."

Nicola had to laugh. The sight of that towering knight-like figure bending over for her was too much, especially after watching the way she could slice metal as if it were nothing. "You're so pathetic. I mean this with no judgment or attribution of quality: you're pathetic and by no means boring. That's all I need."

"Alright," she mumbled, head still down. She didn't dare move her hand from Nicola's grasp.

"So you'll guard me while I sleep again?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Stay right where you are."

"There won't be any danger." Oleander lifted her head a little, wary.

Nicola put her other hand on top of her helmet. "You're being pathetic again. Just do as I say."

"Why pathetic?"

"It's not about the danger. I just feel better having you here. There's no rational reason for it." She smiled and reached for the lamp on the nightstand, putting it out. The sudden darkness rendered her unable to see Oleander, not that she had to — there was no expression to interpret.

"Oh," Oleander mumbled.

"You're pathetic because you can't tell when you're wanted."

After that, Oleander didn't move anymore.

The first thing she registered after waking up was a faint movement beside her. Oleander had just lifted her head off the mattress to stare at her. "You really stayed put," Nicola said, smiling.

"You asked me to." She sounded confused.

"Don't you get bored?"

"Time flows differently when you're immortal." She crossed her arms over the bed. "But it did give me room to think."

"Tell me about your convoluted thoughts," she said, pausing to yawn midway.

"You said I can't tell when I'm wanted. Does that mean you want me?"

Even though it was her own, the phrasing made Nicola blush. She acted cool. "Yeah."

"What does that mean?"

"Have you ever wanted to rip someone open to see what makes them tick then sew them back up and kiss their skin for good measure?" She sat up and just stared at Oleander's blank metal face. It made her chuckle. "Of course you haven't. You'd never assume anyone could return your feelings, so you'd never entertain the notion in the first place."

Still no response. Nicola stretched her arms out as she waited. "You can't do any of that to me. I have no skin," Oleander said at last, still on the same spot.

Nicola rolled her eyes and bent down. She gripped either side of Oleander's helmet and pulled her up. After some forced eye contact, she leaned and planted a kiss on the cold metal, just about where her cheek should be. She pulled back. No reaction. "That's half the experiment. I act upon you and you react. Then I get information." She watched intently, hoping for any sign that Oleander was thinking about something. Anything, really.

"Is it just an experiment?" Her voice was low and soft.

"What?"

She shook her head. Slowly, she stood and turned away. Before she could leave, Nicola called out: "Wait. It's not. Ripping someone open is very intimate. I feel a different kind of urgency when I look at you."

Oleander froze, exposed in the middle of the room. "Urgency?"

"Like when I want someone to tear all my clothes off." That urgency presented itself right then, setting fire to her insides. She focused all of it in her eyes, pinning them to Oleander.

"You..." she stammered and stopped. After covering the spot in her helmet where her mouth should be and standing around uselessly for some longer, she said: "You can't be serious."

"Why not? Don't be pathetic."

"Even if you see me as a person, I'm still... disgusting."

"You're doing it." Nicola stood and crossed her arms, feeling her heartbeat over her chest.

"I mean it. You can't..."

"I didn't choose to get interested in you. There's no logical reason behind attraction."

Oleander craned her neck so much that there was the sound of metal. The silence dragged on, making Nicola's heart pound harder against her ribs. "I have places to get to. I'm sorry," the knight said, turning for the door again. Nicola just watched, allowing her to leave. There was no use in holding her against her will. Still, the thud of the door shutting was a bucket of cold water being dumped on her head. She couldn't help but smile a little, aware that it was more than likely that no one had ever talked to Oleander like that before.

As it'd been that past week, she was left to her own devices for the rest of the day. She used the spare time to narrow down the nature of the crystalline material with diligent note taking, only really pausing when a tailor turned up to measure her just like Adam had promised. Standing immobile in the living room as he wrapped the measuring tape around her left her mouth dry. It didn't take long for her to realize that she was getting cold feet. It was too akin to being dragged around by her parents, constantly under scrutiny. But she was not really a daughter anymore.

Once again, she was in bed by the time Oleander came back. She immediately dropped to her knees beside the bed, assuming that pleading stance. "Oh, you're back to guard me," Nicola mumbled.

"You said I make you feel safe."

"Even though I scared you this morning?" Nicola smiled.

She turned her head away. "You just caught me off guard."

"Yeah? Oleander," she called and waited for her to meet her eyes. "You don't need to say anything. Just get on the bed."

"What for?" She sounded wary.

"So you can hug me." Nicola stretched her arms out, beckoning her in.

"It won't be comfortable for you."

"It was comfortable when I slept on your lap. I'm sure it's even better with a bed. Unless you don't want to, of course."

Only when Oleander hesitated did she seem as weary and weighted down as she should be, her age considered. She slowly got onto the bed, laying on her side carefully. Nicola turned her back to her and had to nudge her until she wrapped her arms around her. Though all the edges in the metal prodded at her skin, there was a familiar rush inside her and she smiled. "How can you like this?" Oleander whispered, very still.

"It feels affectionate. You don't like it?" She was pretty sure Oleander liked her, but then again, there was no way to tell. Besides, she wasn't very talkative. Her heart picked up the pace.

"I don't have the right to like this. I'm a corpse. I'm centuries older than you. I-"

"There is no such thing as a right to do this. Just answer the question."

One of her gauntlets tugged at Nicola's shirt. "I shouldn't."

"I'm the only one here." She held her gauntlet and splayed it over where her own heart should be. It was beating much faster than usual. "Do you feel that?"

"Yes." Oleander's voice was so soft. "I can always hear your heart from across the room."

She giggled. There was no reason to. It hadn't been funny, but the novelty of the situation was making her giddy. Being hot and vulnerable always amplified everything.

"That's useful."

"It is. It lets me know you're safe."

"So you like me?"

For some reason, Oleander breathed in. "If you're not simply messing with me for a reaction, I'm afraid of what this means. The human mind is prone to mishaps and the fact I saved you from death may have skewed your view of me." She let it all out in one go. Meanwhile, she hugged Nicola as if she was made out of glass, one arm almost hovering over her.

"Say whatever you like, but don't cast a shadow on my mind. Don't imply I can't make my own decisions." She kept her voice stern. "I like watching you. Your mannerisms. The way you talk. Take it at face value."

"But you said... you wanted me to take off your clothes." Oleander sounded short of breath. "How can you be... *attracted* to me?"

"Oh, you're flustered. Titillated, even." Nicola grinned and moved her hips to get closer to her, tightening their embrace.

"*Stop*. Talk to me." For once, Oleander didn't speak to her in a velvet tone.

She sighed. "I've always been one to get attracted to people because of their personalities at first. Besides... You're a woman. You were also a soldier. That just gets my imagination going." She ranted a little and, when she paused, all that came out of Oleander

was a weird sound. "Your facial structure as well. So angular. Sharp. The broken bones. You must have looked..."

"I don't look like anything anymore. I'm not human."

"I guess I scared you off. Just tell me, then..." She grabbed one of her hands again and took the cold metal of her armor to her lips. Just another soft kiss. She lingered there for a moment. "Does that make you feel anything? You have to tell me, because I can't see your expression."

"If I had a body, I'd be feeling all kinds of weird inside. But you're just messing with my soul. If I were a worse mage, it'd make me light a flame." Her voice was low again, like she was actually scared to say it out loud.

"That's so romantic."

"I don't know. I never expected to have difficult conversations after dying. Please..." Finally, she hugged Nicola properly, pulling her against her armor. Hard. She huffed in frustration. Not really, of course. "Goodnight, Nicola."

Nicola thought of asking her what she'd meant by 'Please', but ultimately decided that she'd managed to get much more than expected out of her already. "I've always liked you touching me. Goodnight."

Before she could complain about the light, the lamp went out on its own.

When Adam got home the next day, he handed Nicola a carefully wrapped package with a smile. It was like everything about him was careful: his ironed-out shirt, his ribbon tie neatly tied up into a bow, the ever so tiny smile and the way his fingers didn't touch hers when he gave her the package. She tore it open to find a crimson red dress and a blouse.

"I didn't know how you felt about exposed skin, so I asked for a blouse and stockings as well," he pointed out.

"You could have just asked."

"This was more practical." He slid out of his trenchcoat and folded it over his arm.

"Will that be the first time Living Armor sees you in different clothes?"

Her brain grinded to a halt. She raised her eyes to his, but only found his ever neutral expression. As her mind overheated, her cheeks had to take on the heat. "What?"

"Just fishing," he said. As he talked to her, he casually took off his tie and undid his cuffs.

"For what?"

"Information." When she furrowed her brow, his smile grew. "Relax. I won't meddle in your affairs. All I ask of you is that you aren't seen with them. The city's been in an uproar and I'm aware that it's their fault. Your image is inevitably tied to mine."

Her throat tightened up. It would be a futile effort to try to convince him that his reading was wrong. He already knew it wasn't. "Of course. My priority is always with the Red Lanterns."

"I know. You went through this as well." He tapped his rib. "Still, we all have games to play sometimes."

Sharp eyes, sharp smile. His words steadied her heart though. She narrowed her eyes at him. "What about you?"

"I don't know, what about me?"

She held onto the clothes tightly. "How good are you in bed?" The question came out loud and clear.

His expression didn't change. She'd at least been expecting him to widen his eyes. "I'd say at least decent."

"I've been plagued by perverted thoughts. It's like I can't go ten minutes without shifting focus." She sighed, frowning.

"Can't exactly ask Living Armor." His voice was soft. Contrary to what she'd been thinking, he didn't have a mocking tone or any form of reprehension in his expression. Actually, it'd be better if he did: she'd know what he was thinking. She just shook her head. "I'm assuming you were asking me, then. I wouldn't mind. I also need to unwind sometimes."

She pressed her lips shut and ran the tip of her tongue over them, suddenly unsure. Still, her body remained hot. "Good."

"For now, you should get ready for the party. I'll be doing the same." He turned and threw the trenchcoat he was carrying over his shoulder with a sigh. Right then, there was the faintest trace of tiredness in him. After taking a step, he looked back at her and added: "By the way, Nicola, I'm great at following orders."

Even in that situation, his smile wasn't any different. It gave her the chills in a way she couldn't discern: either due to his inscrutability or to that idea he'd tossed up, the idea that she could do as she pleased with him on a whim. Both, probably.

Nicola ended up wearing the blouse under the dress. She and Adam were together, wearing matching red tones in a dining hall full of people. Healthy looking people, as she couldn't help but notice; most of them pale. Many conversations fluttered about in the air, all in Lunarian. The language was rough and distant, perhaps simply because it had been so long

since Nicola had last had to listen to it. Someone had placed a wine glass in her hand — someone who was no doubt Cruvalian —, so she drank sparingly. That also tasted like a distant memory. Her other arm belonged to Adam at that moment: their arms were linked as he guided her through the groups of people. Even though her image belonged there perfectly, she felt jarringly misplaced, like a crooked hinge.

"If it isn't Mr. Summit," a grave voice said, interrupting their trek. Nicola looked up to find a huge man with an equally huge smile, though a little covered by his mustache. A woman dangled from his arm just like Nicola did from Adam's, she realized.

Adam nodded politely at them and shook both their hands, offering the woman shallow compliments on her attire and everything. Nicola mimicked him without effort. Mere muscle memory.

"Finally married, I see?" the man asked, smiling down at her. She tried not to contort her lips.

"Not at all. This is my associate, Nicola Silkweaver." His choice of words struck her ears as careful, just like everything about him. Measured. *I'm great at following orders*. That must have been measured as well. She downed some more wine. Red Lanterns weren't *associates*. It was deeper than that, but she approved of the choice.

"Silkweaver! How daft of me. I had no idea there was a Silkweaver in town. We have much to talk about, miss." Somehow, his smile had turned hungry.

"Oh, you'll have to excuse me, sir." She cringed at her own accent. It sounded heavier than it had years ago. "I'm not here on family business. It's exclusively a Red Lantern journey."

"Why, Mr. Summit, isn't it a perfectly good time for you to marry?" the wife intervened in a sweet voice, "It can't get better than a smart Silkweaver."

"It would be negligent of me to ever marry. My first priority will always be medicine. If I married, I wouldn't make for a good husband or father," Adam said calmly. Though the woman's meddling and implications had made Nicola's already tipsy blood boil, he had measured his answer again. *Medicine*. That had been a lie. He'd normally have said *science*. He was only saying what they wanted to hear, she realized.

"A wise decision for a wise man."

It was all so perfectly cordial and she hated every second of it. She tuned the rest of the conversation out and, by the time she clocked back in, a dozen other people had joined them, creating a circle of conversation. There was so much silver in their clothes and necks that it stung her eyes. Two words made her body perk back up in attention.

"If this Living Armor situation doesn't clear up soon, I'm going to face massive loss," a man said, prompting immediate response from another nearby Lunarian aristocrat:

"If I were you, I wouldn't worry about that. I have it as personal knowledge that it will be dealt with in a few days." He smiled with perfect confidence as he said it.

Nicola looked at Adam out of the corner of her eye, but there was no change in his expression. Well, that was to be expected. That was not the case for her, though. Her heart picked up the pace and she couldn't help but think that Oleander would have been able to hear it. The alcohol made her prone to blushing and she shelved both the thought and the warning for another time so she wouldn't undo herself right there. The conversation had moved on while she realigned her mind.

"Do you think we should actually worry about that disease? Or does it just affect miners? I've heard rumors."

"My wife has a terrible cough..."

People started murmuring towards her and Adam. Once again, she just looked at him discreetly. "At this point, we can't discard anything. We need to establish which substance is

the cause to do so. It might be something more present in their workspace, but also present in household appliances. There's no cure. That's why we're focusing our efforts on it." Adam said it all with his usual faint smile. Nicola only wondered how he could lie with a straight face. Both she and Adam knew that no one was powdering and snorting a specific earth metal at home. Her next sip of wine tasted bitter.

She leaned on him for support as he unlocked the front door. The streets were dark except for the lamps and no one was around. "Why did you lie?" she asked at last. Switching back to her native language was better than taking her shoes off.

"About what?" He held the door open and she walked in, one hand on the wall.

"The disease."

"Ah. If I'd told them that the likelihood of any of them suffering from it is null, sister, they'd have told me to cast it aside." He sighed. Though he'd drunk as well, he looked perfectly composed, if not a little tired. "That's the thin line I walk."

"I see." She swallowed hard and looked him down. He was in the process of relaxing his attire again, undoing his tie and cuffs. After the conversation from earlier, there was something oddly sensual about it. She paused. Oleander was probably home already. She'd listen to her heart, breathing and voice. The idea made her knees weak. She realized Adam was waiting for her to say something. "That man who said that the Living Armor situation will be dealt with soon. Is there any validity to his claim?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't know. He *is* the provincial administrator, though."

The ease with which he said it made her legs go weaker. "I see. Well..." She took a deep breath. "I'll be going to my room, then."

"Goodnight, Nicola," he said with a knowing smile. Just like that, he turned around and crossed into the hallway.

She took her shoes off and walked into the room cautiously only to be taken aback by faint purple lights floating about. Her eyes wandered to Oleander, who sat on her bed unmoving, hands on her lap. "You're home," Oleander said, putting her head down. "I was worried."

Nicola shut the door and averted her eyes, using taking her stockings off as a pretext. "Oh. Adam took me to a dinner party. I suppose I should have told you."

"No. You don't owe me that." She raised her head and craned it, possibly looking directly towards her.

The implication made her heart throb and she knew that meant Oleander also knew. Her breathing faltered. She sauntered towards her, stopping right in front of her, as close as could be. Oleander looked up at her wordlessly as she raised herself to sit on her lap, knees going past her hips. She deposited all her weight upon her, laying her chest against her armor. It was too hard to resemble human flesh in any way, but it made her insides flare up anyway. Oleander stayed still, their line of sight connecting. "I don't. But I want us to have that bond."

"Nicola..."

"I need you to either outright reject me or tell me how you feel." Her hands slowly made her way up to her helmet, caressing the metal and feeling all its sulks and dents. She held her head straight towards hers, forcing eye contact. The idea of Oleander looking into her eyes made her catch on fire.

"I feel... weak." She leaned into Nicola's hand; her voice was rough.

"You're not rejecting me." Her eyes widened.

"I should."

"Yeah, whatever. Because you can't fulfill your purpose and have feelings at the same time," she said, rolling her eyes. "You think humanity is ineptitude. Be weak for a minute of your long lifespan, then."

"I don't..." Oleander started talking only to be interrupted by a firm kiss on the front of her helmet. Though she had no mouth from which to speak, it shut her up. The cold and straight surface made Nicola feel like she was kissing a wall. A cold gust of shame hit her, but didn't manage to smother the flames. Oleander's hand on her lower back only fanned then; at least there was a way to measure her reaction.

A sudden spark of greater consciousness made Nicola pull back. "We have to talk," she said.

"I'm listening." Her hand remained on her waist.

"The province administrator was there tonight. He was confident that the 'Living Armor situation' would be resolved soon." She held onto her head tight, as if Oleander's attention could slip.

"I'd like to see them try." The sentence was remarkably cocky, but there was no trace of arrogance in her voice.

"He said he knew it for sure. I'm serious. I thought I should warn you." She caressed her with her thumbs as if rubbing her cheeks.

"They may have something planned, but it's useless. I'm certain they don't have what it takes to undo me."

"You don't know."

"I know what I am and I know all the rules of my existence. I created myself." She sounded much more confident and sober when the matter wasn't feelings.

Nicola scoffed. "What are the rules of your existence?"

"Telling you would be another moment of weakness."

She huffed. "Sure. They might hurt the strikers instead, then."

"I can hold something as small as this strike forever. There's nothing they can do but cave." Her voice was deep and much more gravely than the times Nicola pressed her.

"If you're so sure."

"This is the one thing I'm not inept at, remember?" For once, there was humor in her tone.

"You made a joke. Are you trying to make me feel better?"

"Forgive me. I shouldn't just assume that you were worried." Her tone shifted.

Nicola pressed a short kiss to the top of her helmet. "Pathetic. I just didn't think you could joke."

"I never could."

The wistfulness in her voice made Nicola want to tear her open and get inside her head once again. "So you return my feelings?" she asked as softly as possible.

"I'm scared," Oleander whispered back, raising one hand to hold hers against her face, "that you're just messing with me."

"Pathetic once again. I'm not."

"You're the first person to ever show an interest in me. Even if I don't understand, I can't help but... feel."

"Oh, I doubt that. With your endearing personality, muscles and possibly sharp looks in life, someone must have had a crush on you at least once. You were just too dumb to notice."

"Endearing," she repeated and mm-ed. "You're not endearing. You're striking." Before Nicola could mock her sudden openness, she added: "You should sleep. I will deal with everything."

"Are you embarrassed?" Instead of answering, Oleander lifted her effortlessly and laid her down, placing her head on the pillow with care. Then, she sat beside her and looked down upon her. "I need to take this dress off. And you could finally tell me more about your life." Still, the way she'd lifted Nicola had made her guts float like fluttering butterflies inside her.

"You've hardly told me about yours," Oleander countered.

"Is there more to know? I'm the renegade would-be heir to the whole national textile industry who was never 'right in the head'. I'm sure you've already worked that out." Nicola smiled and offered her a light shrug. The blouse was starting to feel tight around her neck.

"I wager that that is the way your parents view it. You tugged at my thoughts and didn't give me any of your own."

"There are a myriad of things more fascinating than money in the natural world."

"So there are." Oleander sounded somewhat less tense. It eased Nicola as well. "I'll let you change into your nightgown."

She'd have said that she was allowed to stare, but that would undoubtedly have sent Oleander spinning again. As she changed, Oleander stood a few steps away with her back turned to her. Though she knew Oleander wouldn't look, part of her still tingled in excitement over the idea. "You could come with me tomorrow," Oleander started, "To the strike. Like when we sabotaged the train, just so you know there's nothing to worry about."

When Nicola was done, she walked over to her and hugged her from the back, holding her tight. The thin fabric of her nightgown made it feel like the metal was right against her skin. "I'd bet that'd be the best place to go to find people affected by the illness," she mumbled.

"Will you come, then?" Oleander was as rigid as stone under her arms.

Nicola thought of Adam's request and a sour taste dripped into her mouth. Still, she nodded. "I'll go." She pressed herself harder against her back. "Can you feel this?"

"Yes," Oleander said, short of breath. Absurd. She raised her hands to touch Nicola's arms. "I don't know how to act."

"Turn around."

Slowly, she turned around in their embrace. The proximity made it hard to look at where her eyes should be; Nicola's neck ached. She grabbed Oleander's gauntlets and touched

them to her thighs, sliding them under her nightgown. The texture was rough, but the thrill was undeniable. Her heart sped up.

Oleander just allowed herself to be manipulated like a mannequin. "You smell like alcohol," she whispered.

"Yeah. Can you really feel my skin?" Everything was cold except for the trajectory of Oleander's hands. They rested on her hips right then, heavy.

"Yes." She choked on the word. "I don't see what's in this for you."

"Knowing you feel it excites me enough. Imagining how flustered you must be. You are, aren't you?" Nicola grinned and tiptoed, widening her eyes at her.

Immediately, Oleander recoiled a little. "You have no idea. You speak lightly."

"Tell me everything, then." She trembled from the effort of reaching Oleander's face and trying to peer into the deep dark beyond her helmet's visor.

"What do you want to know?" She sounded meek and utterly defeated. Nicola revelled in it, sparks of joy lighting up behind her eyes.

She brought Oleander's hands further up, leading her slowly to her waist. The movement lifted her nightgown and she knew her cheeks were flushed. "The person that helped you remove your organs. Who was he?"

"He came with the Lunarian military. He was my mentor in magic. I was always withdrawn, but I think he knew how *pathetic* I was. We got along." Her hands turned to stone over Nicola's waist, unwilling to continue.

"Of all people, you were buddy-buddy with a Lunarian officer?" She smirked.

"You have to remember that I was one of them. I was a traitor. The people I grew up with thought I was stuck up to say the least." Oleander bent down, taking a close look at her. Her voice deepened. "Do you get it?"

The sudden tone shift shook her a little. She blinked. "Yeah. And knowing you were the silent type, they didn't have the opportunity to change their minds."

"That didn't matter." When Nicola raised her brow, she added: "My image never mattered."

"The savior complex again. Stop hiding behind it." Nicola forced her hands to continue upwards. She didn't resist much. It was slow and painstaking, the gloved undersides of her fingers tracing Nicola's ribs. "You're lonely. I bet you'd be crying right now if you could," she whispered.

"You make me feel like I'm in my early twenties again." Somehow, her hands were trembling. Nicola felt the slight fluttering against her skin.

"Alive and feeling so much you might puke?"

"Yes." The word was small and spoken in pure embarrassment.

"I love having that effect."

Her hands staggered. They were touching the sides of her breasts so softly that Oleander herself might not have been aware. "Do you cause that often?" she whispered.

"You have been my favorite." She smiled and led those hands firmly to her breasts, touching her palms to her nipples. "You can relax. Feel them up."

It took Oleander some time to obey, cupping them and carefully sinking her fingertips into the tender tissue. Heavy breathing came from under the helmet. "You're... soft," she said, choking on the words.

Nicola chuckled. Heat was coming to life inside her and she felt lightheaded in the best way. "I love when you revert back to breathing. You have the easiest tells for a faceless person."

"It's ridiculous. I'd never done it before meeting you." She bent even further down to bang her forehead on Nicola's. It hurt somewhat and made her chuckle again. "You make me nervous."

"I know. Hey..." She gave the metal face a quick little kiss. "Take me to bed. I sleep better when you're around."

It was true. She ended up placing a pillow over Oleander's shoulder and sleeping lodged under her arm, against her chest. There was no bodily heat or anything remotely human, but an odd sense of satisfaction lulled her to sleep.

Seeing that Adam was still asleep by the time the two walked out the house soothed Nicola. Regardless of the fact that she was still going behind his back, her conscience remained clear. The sky was mostly gray and the only evidence of the sun was a tiny ray of light on the eastern horizon. They hardly saw a soul until they got downtown; even there, it seemed like they were among the first outside. In fact, the first person Nicola made eye contact with was a police officer. Immediately, his face scrunched up and her own body recoiled within itself. She feared he might try to stop them somehow, but he didn't make an attempt. So she turned her eyes back to the path ahead and kept walking.

She stuck to Oleander like a shadow as she shepherded groups of strikers to the surroundings of the quarry. Though the people followed her, their faces showed unease and they kept their distance. Heading down to the quarry felt much like sliding down unstable terrain; the irrational side of Nicola's mind wondered if she could even walk back up, as steep as the path was. Throughout the morning, their group thickened and set up camp. Above them, circling that hellhole, the dull tone of military police coats dotted the skyline. The barrels of dozens of guns stared down at them, unwavering.

Nicola walked to the front of the mass, where Oleander stood tall with her sword drawn. She stood in her shadow and, even there, taking refuge behind the heavy armor, the cold clump that had formed inside her didn't dissolve. "You do realize they have guns," she whispered.

"Rifled muskets," Oleander said. It sounded like purring — appreciation of some kind. "Guns, the universalization of damage for those that can't learn magic."

"That's not the point. They're pointing guns at us." She made sure to make her tone heavier.

"To keep appearances. There's nothing they can do. I wouldn't ever bring you under fire."

She swallowed that clump. Oleander's *you* had sounded far more meaningful than usual; added weight had been placed on it. Nicola eyed the sword, so worn that the metal didn't glisten under the sun anymore. She didn't understand how magic and a sword could hold their own against bullets, but she figured it must be true. So she wandered away from Oleander, leaving her there. When she looked back over her shoulder, Oleander looked like nothing but a misplaced statue.

There was general chatter and coughing amongst the crowd. No one stood too close to the knight. An older woman offered her some fresh tea, which she accepted gleefully. "You're a doctor, right? Like Adam. Are you here in case things go wrong?" She smiled, the wrinkles on her face accompanying the movement. "Living Armor is keeping things in check."

Adam's name popped out to her. It could only be due to his influence that the people of Fairview recognized her as *doctor* and not *witch*. She'd told him she wouldn't be seen with Oleander. After shoving the thought to the back of her mind, she took a sip of tea and looked around. "People look wary of them." In fact, they looked terrified when their eyes met Oleander.

"Well... I don't think he's making things any better." The woman shrugged as she fed the small fire she'd been using to brew the tea. "As soon as he's gone, we're going to get double the comeback."

Nicola eyed Oleander, who still stood alone. She hadn't moved an inch. "I don't think they plan on going away anytime soon."

The woman shuddered. "The town feels haunted now." Despite the grim look on her face, she kept distributing tea to her comrades.

Realizing she had no words of comfort to offer, Nicola downed the rest of her tea and returned the cup to the woman before walking away. She spent the next couple hours listening to the breathing of willing subjects and advising them on how to alleviate the symptoms, to the point she couldn't tell the crackling in the lungs apart from the ambient sound anymore. From a distance, she saw Armless Dan talking to a few other people. He'd been busy the whole morning. Still, she walked over to him, penetrating his inner circle. "Nicola," he nodded in acknowledgement after finishing his current talking point. He also had a tea cup.

"Dan. You want me to listen to your lungs too?"

"No, Red Lantern girl, I already know my fate." He smiled, but it soon wore off. "Do you mind chatting for a bit?"

"Sure." They stepped away from the group.

"Your Living Armor. I'm starting to think we bit off more than we can chew with them," he said in a low voice, his head tilted towards her.

She turned her eyes up, meeting one of the many guns above them. "I wonder."

"I didn't think they were *the* Living Armor. This level of magic is obviously gonna attract too much negative attention from the Lunarians." He pointed at the officers that circled them. "You see that? They haven't attempted to scatter us since the first time the thing shut them down. But there's many other things they could be doing."

"Knight insists that everything is fine," Nicola said, ignoring the burning spot in her stomach. Dan's eyes were boring into her.

"That's just the problem. Right now, they should be invading our homes and arresting our relatives. They should be gunning us down when we go back home in the dark. But they're not doing *any* of it. They're just standing up there." He took a step ahead, bending

down a little to look even deeper into her eyes. "This can only mean two things. Either the administration is too scared of that thing..."

"Or they already have a solution at hand," Nicola completed. The spark in Dan's eyes told her he'd already thought of it. Funny. She'd needed someone to rub it on her face.

"Exactly. I haven't been able to talk to Adam. I know he's buddy-buddy with the administration." He paused to put the tea cup down so he could grab Nicola by the shoulder. His tone became even more serious. "So I need you to talk to him. Press him as much as you can. Would you do that?"

"I will," she said, offering him a feeble smile. The weight of his hand was oppressive.

"Good." He let her go and took a step back, letting out the tiniest sigh. "Is it true that there's no cure for the cough? I've heard a rumor."

Her heart sank and she tried to mentally drown out the faint sounds of coughing around them. "It's true. You should know what's happening to you. The damage that's done is done." She averted her eyes. "The lung fibers envelop the substance, ingraining it. Perhaps with more advanced surgery we'd be able to excise it, but as it stands-"

He waved it off. "I don't need to hear the nitty-gritty. If you say that's how it is, that's how it is."

"If I were dying, I'd want all the bloody details." She cocked her head.

It earned her a smile. "Gotta pick the battles that can be fought. Can't avoid death, but sure can resist the imps. So talk to him, yeah?" He got back to his tea.

After promising she would and bidding him goodbye, Nicola found herself wandering back to where Oleander stood guard. Even though hours had passed, she was still in the same position. Nicola stood behind her and carefully touched her forehead to her metal back. Being in her shadow was comforting. Oddly enough, the armor hummed as if acknowledging her. "I think you should really reconsider all of this," she whispered.

"Why?" Oleander asked. Nicola told her of Dan's suspicions, making sure to link them back to what she'd heard at the party. Slight movement let her know Oleander was shaking her head. "There's nothing to worry about, Nicola. You don't understand the scope of this because you know nothing of magic, but I promise you that I have answers to whatever problem they can pose to me."

"I don't like this. I don't like not knowing." Despite knowing there were tons of people around, she enveloped the armor with her arms and squeezed. The day had hardly started and she was already tired enough to lean on Oleander.

More movement. Oleander seemed to stagger upon being hugged. There was more humming from the armor and Nicola realized what it reminded her of: a cat purring. "I know it's hard for you to trust blindly and I apologize. Do know that I truly appreciate it."

Her voice stirred some dormant heat inside Nicola and she tightened her hold on her. Her chest burned. "The way you put sentences together," she started, lowering her voice even more, "so respectful. So apologetic. It's pathetic. Endearing. It makes me want to embarrass you until you can't think of any words."

Suddenly, Oleander's posture straightened out even more. Nicola raised her face to see that she was gripping the sword far too hard. "Stop... Don't throw me off..." She let out something that sounded like a whimper. "Not right now."

"Oh? Later, then." She smiled.

By the time they got home, it was dark. Oleander had picked Nicola up and sped the whole way, so much so that she couldn't make sense of the way they'd taken. Still, she'd gotten them home. A whole day of standing around under the sun and allowing people to inquire about health issues had turned her body wobbly and exhausted. On her way to the

kitchen, she was surprised to peek into the dining room and find Adam eating on his own. He turned his eyes up to her and took a napkin to his mouth. "Care to join me?" he asked softly.

"Sure." Nicola walked in and sat down across from him. The scent of food made her whole body relax.

They ate in silence for a while until he spoke up. "Were you really at the strike today?"

She eyed him warily. His expression was as neutral as ever, though the easy smile wasn't there. "Yeah. Most of the people there were afflicted to some degree. I thought I'd be useful."

He sighed. For once, he sounded tired. Then, he set his plate aside, joined his hands and focused on her. "I've told you before. It's a waste of time to look at them."

"That's not true. When a person's health is degrading, they worry. There are tricks to help one breathe better and ease their mind. It would be a waste to let them go in pain."

"What I mean is that looking at them as they are tells us nothing we don't already know. We need to progress." He stood and picked up his coat from a nearby chair. All the while, his eyes remained sharp on her. "You might think it's noble of you to spare time for them, but you're putting off actually understanding what affects them in favor of emotion." Her eyes widened and they just stared at each other for a moment. Finally, he sighed again and smiled faintly. "You have the potential to make a good Red Lantern, sister. Don't waste it."

She tightened her lips and tried not to glare at him until he turned away. Still, some shame burnt under the anger and her eyes stung. Walking into the bedroom later to find Oleander wiped that conversation off her mind. She walked past the purple lights that floated in the air again, careful not to touch them. "What are these?"

"Fairy lights," Oleander said, standing in front of the bed. "Do they bother you?"

"I guess it'd be silly to make a fuss about tiny lights when I'm dating a whole ass magical being." She smiled, stopping far enough away from her to look at her without making her neck hurt.

Oleander froze, looking more unnatural than ever. "Dating?"

"Don't you want to?" If only she could get a tell from Oleander's face.

"Why would *you* want to? I can't even touch you the soft way you touch me. I don't get it."

She laughed. "I like you. Isn't that enough?" She stepped ahead to take her hands to her chest, looking up at her. "You're just scared."

"There's little that scares me. I've been avoiding engaging with people on an individual level. I don't want to outlive everyone all the time." Tentatively, Oleander raised her gauntlet to hold one of her hands.

Warmth crawled up her arm. "Woah, It's not like I asked you to marry me. How precocious. Don't think so far ahead." She tiptoed to grin at her in a taunt. "Maybe you'll even get to experience a normal human heartbreak when we go our separate ways."

"I'm sorry. You're right." She carefully bent down to touch her helmet to Nicola's forehead. "It's all so new."

"That's almost unbelievable. How old were you when you died?" Her arms went up to envelop Oleander's neck.

"Around twenty-six, I think."

"And you went that long without really talking to anyone?"

"Many things were expected of me. Talking wasn't one of them."

Nicola chuckled and suddenly leapt, trying to climb Oleander and hoping she would understand that she was supposed to catch and hold her. She did. Nicola smiled. "I was thinking. Child labor should be abolished."

"Laws don't mean anything if a family can't feed themselves." She held Nicola tight against her chest. Whenever she talked about that, her voice turned rough. "Though that's far from your reality."

"So were people right? That you're an angry spirit?"

"Everyone should be angry." She turned and bent down to carefully place Nicola on the bed. "Come on. It's time for you to be in bed now." Her tone was velvety and much lower. Caring.

Nicola stretched her arms out to get ahold of her and pull her down. "With you."

She obliged and soon they were on their sides, facing each other. Nicola tried to hold her smile back as she lifted her hands to Oleander's helmet. She took it off slowly, making Oleander put her shoulders up as if trying to hide herself. Her hollow eyes stared back at Nicola, impossibly wide. When Nicola cupped her cheekbone, they seemed to widen even more. "There we go," she whispered, caressing the bone.

"The rats will get out," Oleander mumbled, stumbling on the words.

"That's alright. Let them out."

They lay in silence for a while, just staring at each other. Nicola's body relaxed under the gauntlet on her waist. There, looking at her bones and desiccated ligaments, she couldn't help but remember the whole process of her death. "Oleander?" she whispered, pressing into her cheekbone.

"Yes?"

"Did it hurt when you died?"

"Yes," she said, somber.

"What was it like?"

"It was a type of pain I shouldn't warn a mortal about." Her voice was soft and she inched a little closer to Nicola.

"Isn't it better to be prepared?" She smiled.

"No. It wouldn't be good to live in fear of the inevitable."

She couldn't argue with that. "What about now? If you can feel things, do you feel pain?"

"I choose to. It's easier to ascertain damage that way."

"So you felt pain when your organs were ripped out and rats ate your flesh?" She furrowed her brow and pulled her face closer, grabbing her by the jaw.

"Yes."

"But you could have chosen not to?"

"Yes." Her voice lowered.

"Oh, you're fucked up. Why are you like this? I thought you only sacrificed when you saw a net positive, but is it that you actually *want* to suffer?" She touched their foreheads again, staring as deep as possible into the nothingness.

That still and quiet, Oleander could really pass off as a fully dead person. When she finally answered, it came out with caution. "I believe I was much more erratic in my early days."

"I see..." She kissed her on her crooked nose. "I bet your family really did love you. You were just too worried about being useful to let them. I wish you did."

"I know." The unusual crack in her voice made Nicola hug her tight, holding their bodies together — as much as she could.

She woke to her pillow being moved and Oleander's hands firmly repositioning her so she could get up. Despite feeling sluggish, Nicola grabbed her gauntlet and pulled her closer. The huge knight staggered and gave in. "Stay," Nicola whispered, "You make me sleep better."

"I'm sorry. It's time for me to go now." She touched her free hand to Nicola's, gently making her lighten her grasp on her. "You make me feel better too."

Nicola let her go, her hand dropping back to bed. "Do you usually feel bad?" she mumbled.

Then, there was the familiar weight of Oleander's metal hand on her hair. She tried to look at her, but it was too dark. "Sleep," Oleander said in her deep voice.

When she woke for the second time, she swore she could feel Oleander's lingering touch on her head, but the room was empty. She took her hand to that spot and messed up her hair, a little more awake. A trip to the kitchen revealed Adam sitting at the small breakfast table as usual. Even then, she was surprised to find that he was as composed as ever. "Good morning, sister," he said, the regular smile.

"Hey." She sat with him and blinked, trying to shoo the discomfort away.

"I cross-referenced your notes with the reactions of other earth metal samples I had," he said, pausing to take a sip of coffee. "It's definitely silica."

She tried not to grimace as she prepared her sandwich. She should have caught that herself. "Something that common," she mumbled.

"There's one other thing to do. We'll be getting some fresh lungs today, so we're able to actually spend some time doing more precise cuts. What do you say?" His smile was wider.

She tried to find the usual excitement. The spark was there, but it was overrun by a cold wind. She thought of all the people she'd met who had similar lungs. "Sure." She smiled anyway.

Being by Adam's side the whole day was unsettling. She thought of it enough to conclude that it was because she couldn't exactly figure out what the words he'd said the day

before meant. She wondered if there was a second layer to them. Still, carving into dead flesh was more than enough to take her mind off everything else.

They attempted to excise the embedded silica with caution, analyzing the structures left behind. "I wish I could see a functioning lung," Nicola mused, "This doesn't tell me much."

"We've done some experiments on animals," Adam said as he took his gloves off to write on his notebook. Nicola kept slicing away as he told her about alveoli and the full process of breathing.

"So that's how it ends up there."

"That's why there's nothing we can do. Even if we could cut them open and do exactly what you're doing there, the lungs would lose too much function," he said flatly.

"The only thing that would help would be a whole new lung." She sighed and paused for a moment, putting her head down. It all seemed so pointless. The moist sound of flesh was starting to irk her.

"Now that's something I'd enjoy being alive to see," he remarked, his smile growing. "But I won't be. Do you agree with me now?" She just nodded. "We should move on to other projects," he said, putting the cap on his pen.

Even as she agreed with him, there was a sour taste on her tongue.

She was reading in bed again when Oleander walked into the room. When Nicola looked at her, she froze, standing awkwardly. Her arms were slightly arched, tense; it looked like she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't. The subtle display of fear made Nicola grin in delight and call her name in a teasing manner, highlighting each syllable.

Oleander bent down a little and her head shot straight in her direction, her neck probably crooked. "Yes?" she asked hesitantly.

"You just looked like you wanted to say something," Nicola shrugged.

"I did," she admitted, her arms dropping as she relaxed. "I thought the stars looked quite visible today. I wanted to invite you to stargaze, but then I thought that might be beyond you."

"That's so romantically cliché." She put the book aside and tried to hold back a chuckle. "Do I scare you?"

Oleander turned her head away completely. "I'm scared of your reactions."

"You're scared of rejection."

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice lower.

"I love it. It's like I'm your first love. Well, I suppose I *am*." She stretched her arms out. "Take me outside."

Oleander's head whipped back towards her and she hesitated for a while before approaching. Then, she bent down and gently picked her up. She held her close and just stood there for a moment, as if savoring it. "You are. You'll also be the last," Oleander whispered, bringing Nicola up to touch her helmet to her forehead.

She couldn't help but cringe and roll her eyes. "Stop being so dramatic. You're immortal."

"I am. I don't bounce back the way humans do. I haven't changed in many years."

"That's just a you thing, so work on it." Oleander carried her to the door and it opened by itself. "Creepy." Oleander mm-ed and just proceeded out of the house through the backdoor. Once outside, Nicola tried to ignore the cold breeze and looked up. Many white dots made patterns on the dark sky. "Yeah, that's definitely the clearest the sky gets here."

After finding a decent spot amidst the grass and bushes, Oleander laid her down. The gentle way she always handled her was comforting. When she laid down beside her, Nicola raised her arm to cozy up against her chest. The metal was as unforgiving as ever, but she pretended that wasn't the case. It seemed to take a while for Oleander to gather courage, but

once she did, she started talking in her low velvet tone and didn't stop. She went on a tangent about constellations and how to locate oneself. Even though Nicola was familiar with some of the information, she allowed her to talk. It felt right. It was somewhat cold out, which meant Oleander's armor was even colder, but Nicola focused on that silly inner warmth.

"That's the Crooked Man. It won't be visible anymore in a couple months," Oleander was saying.

"Why do you know so much about this?" Nicola piped up at last, snuggling up to her some more.

"I was first and foremost a sailor. The military thing just happened." She produced a ghostly sigh and carefully bent her arm to caress Nicola's hair. "I don't know why, but I can't forget any of it. The constellations, I mean. It's always there."

The wistfulness in her voice alarmed Nicola. "You don't have a withering brain."

"When I was alive, I never knew memories were related to the brain. You're smart." Her hand kept caressing Nicola, making her feel fuzzy inside.

"Different priorities. And times." She pulled Oleander's other hand to her chest. "Did you like the sea?"

"It was cruel." She paused. "Sometimes I remember our long trips and I think that time spent at sea goes by much like time in undeath."

"Slow?"

"Like you're in a dream. When you know you're dreaming, but can't wake up." Her hand stopped, relaxing among Nicola's hair. "It's been a long time since I've dreamed."

"It's overrated."

"Do you dream?"

"Yeah." The silence made her go on. "I dream a lot about... home. The Silkweaver estate. All I remember from those dreams is the awful looks on my parents' faces, though." It

was fun to laugh at Oleander when she was vulnerable, but not so fun to be in that position herself. "I also dream about my Red Lantern initiation. It's always the same nightmare. They're not tattooing me at the end, but holding me down and branding me. I wake up when the iron touches my skin."

"That's how it used to be done. I remember." Oleander's hand brought Nicola closer to her, tightening the embrace as if shielding her from the world. "Did hearing about it leave a strong impression on you?"

"It frustrates me. I like to think it didn't. It's silly to be scared of something that won't ever happen."

"I'm scared of lots of things. Most of them can't happen. You're too strict on yourself and your emotions."

"If I were, I wouldn't be dating you."

More quiet and then, oddly enough, purring from the armor. "True."

"I like it when you purr. I mean, it's weird, but endearing." As soon as Nicola said it, the armor started purring again. "Are you embarrassed?"

"Perhaps."

Having to let Oleander go in the morning was, once again, tough. In its own way, sleeping beside her was novel and she wished it'd last longer. Nicola held onto Oleander's hand as best as she could, pulling her down. While she knew Oleander was much stronger than her, she also knew that she was too gentle to pull back. "Ollie..." she whispered, the new nickname successfully making her pause. "Where will you go? After you're done here?"

"We can talk about this tonight, after I get back." Like she'd done the day before, she pried Nicola's hands away from hers.

"I want to be with you a while longer," she muttered, curling up in bed. The world was still a little hazy and the pillow felt all-encompassing.

"I'd love all the time in the world with you."

She only half-heard the words, but they made her sleep easier.

Breakfast with Adam was numb. Unlike the first couple days, she regarded him with caution, in that quiet way she'd sit with her parents. Nonchalant, he read the Lunarian newspaper with a smile. He didn't put it down when he spoke up: "By the way, Nicola, I'll have some guests arriving today, but I won't be home until much later. Will you be busy?"

"No. I can play host."

"Thank you." He sighed in obvious relief. "Sorry for springing this up on you."

"It's fine."

Even if she'd agreed without hesitation, she stewed in annoyance at Adam the whole day. She tried to immerse herself in some reading, but couldn't. Instead, she found herself in standby, constantly focusing on her ears to pick up any noise outside; when she did, she'd

walk up to the window and inevitably be disappointed. She spent the better part of her day in that relentless cycle, wasting her energy on simply waiting. Her brain felt flat.

She only perked up upon hearing knocks on the door in the late afternoon. She opened it with a forced wide smile that nearly dropped when she encountered a group of people clad in Empire colors, some with guns — rifled muskets, as Oleander had called them — strapped to their backs. The relief turned to sharp awareness and her eyes met the leader of the group: a tall, white skinned woman whose dark eyes bore into her skull.

"Good afternoon. Ms. Silkweaver, I presume? Mr. Summit told us you'd be here as well." She spoke in a very clear, fluid Lunarian. Then, she raised her hand. Her thin black glove made her long fingers seem like claws, as sharp as her smile. "I am Eleanor Duskhand. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Nicola's blood turned cold inside her as she shook the stranger's hand. The act itself became foreign upon learning she was a member of the Lunarian Royal family. "Likewise. Please, step inside. Adam shouldn't be long now."

Duskhand walked in gracefully, the silver stars that dangled over her green cloak jiggling. Her companions followed suit. Nicola's arm felt oddly stone-like as she closed the door. At least she found some respite on the fact that they'd probably be gone by the time Oleander got home. Probably. She led them to the living room and showed everyone comfortable seats; then, she asked the servants to prepare some afternoon tea.

When she came back, Duskhand was sitting alone on the couch and her armed guards were standing by the wall, guns in hands. The view brought a knot to Nicola's throat. Eleanor smiled at her sweetly and patted the space beside her. "Don't be so shy, now. I noticed how jittery you went when you heard my name. I'm not the Crown Princess, you know. I'm just a scholar. No need to get stiff."

Nicola eyed the big star-shaped clasp on her cloak and sat with her after some more hesitation. "Umbral Star scholar?"

"Indeed. We both know the relationship between our... *institutions* is complicated at best. Mr. Summit is, however, very level headed."

"I hope you'll find that we're all very level headed," Nicola said with a faint smile. Despite the pressure of Eleanor's hawk eyes, knowing the reason for the visit made her relax a little.

As the evening progressed, they ate cake and drank coffee together. Nicola allowed Eleanor to lead the way in conversation, which meant they ended up discussing magic and the Academy more than she'd like to. So, she was relieved when she heard Adam get home and walk up the hallway; when he got to the entrance to the living room, he stopped and looked in. He sighed. His usual smile was nowhere to be found. Just that was enough to wipe Nicola's off.

"I'd hoped you'd be done with this by now," Adam said, loosening his tie, "I'll be in my study."

"You got it," Duskhand said, smiling at him.

"Excuse me? Isn't she your guest?" Nicola piped up.

"I'm afraid she's yours," he said plainly. He was gone before Nicola could answer.

That sharp awareness came back. Something was wrong, terribly so. She tried to stand up to follow him, but her knees buckled under an invisible force and she was forced back to the couch. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that the guns were now pointed straight at her. Her mouth went dry.

"How rude." Eleanor paused to take a sip of her coffee, her hand still raised towards Nicola. "I reckon you still have to entertain me for a while longer."

Nicola's eyes widened at her and she pressed her lips shut. She couldn't find anything to say that wouldn't sound silly.

"Isn't it ironic for a Red Lantern to be in love with a lich? Depraved even. Now, really, don't look at me like that." Eleanor did seem a little distraught as she took a forkful of cake to her mouth. "All you have to do is sit there and look pretty."

So she sat. Though it was a much smaller chunk of time than the wait from before, it made her infinitely wearier. She could hear her own heartbeat as she bent over herself on the couch, the guns still aimed at her head and Eleanor's watchful eyes over her. The sound of her blood rushing through her was deafening as she tried to listen to her own thoughts: rational thoughts, the kind that required immense effort. She told herself that Oleander wouldn't come in. She'd know something was wrong. If her hearing was really that good, then she'd hear the sheer amount of people inside the house and wouldn't come in. She wasn't stupid. Yeah. Still, the logic behind it wasn't enough to make her body calm down.

All that rush came to a grinding halt when she heard the front door again. Then, the creaking of metal. Nicola stilled completely, listening closely to each step taken by Oleander. They were measured. Slow. But they were coming towards the living room anyway. Nicola's stomach churned and burned as if she'd swallowed needles. When her tall armored figure appeared on the doorstep, sword drawn, she couldn't help but start crying. She tilted her head. "For your well-being, Duskhand, this better not be what I think it is," she said, her voice much rougher and deeper than it ever was when directed at Nicola.

Eleanor snickered, her clawy hand covering her mouth. "Why? What are you going to do? Slice her head like you've done to other hostages?" In the brief pause, Nicola's breathing paused as well and her lungs felt like solid ice. She couldn't help but eye the dull-looking sword. "Or are you going to let me spray her insides out on the floor instead? All you have to do is move an inch."

"Nicola," Oleander called, her voice softening. "It's going to be alright."

"Is it true? You killed them?" She tried not to sob, but it came out anyway. She felt herself tremble and hated it.

"I had to. It was for-"

"Your purpose. Is it not anymore?!" she yelled, still curved over herself, arms pressing against her stomach. Her tears tasted salty. "So *don't* fuck up."

"Hey. Focus," Eleanor said, snapping her fingers to call attention back to herself. She had a slight frown. "I mean it. I have tons of creative ways to kill her before you even move. You know I can. So." Her gloved hand disappeared inside her cloak for a bit and fished out a big gem with a rough cut. "What will it be, Living Armor?" She smirked.

Oleander sheathed her sword, making Nicola's stomach drop. "Alright. You can have my soul."

"What?! No!" Nicola interjected. Though she yelled, it seemed like no one listened to her.

Eleanor chuckled the gem across the room. It made a perfect linear trajectory to Oleander, who caught it just fine. "This will be a hard fit," she remarked.

"Oleander! You're a hypocrite!" Nicola pleaded.

"Oh, is that your name? I'll make sure no one remembers it. You'll be lucky to be shoved into a common ditch," Eleanor said gleefully, sipping some coffee.

"It seems we're both hypocrites, then," Oleander replied, turning her head to Nicola, gem still in hand. Despite the argumentative nature of her words, her tone was mellow.

"You can't just ravage the world in the name of a 'purpose' and then push it aside for a crush! Are you really so shallow?" The effort Nicola put into it scratched her throat and made the tears come down harder.

"Come on, I'm not here for melodrama," Eleanor interrupted, holding her cup like a proper royal.

"You'll get what you want, Duskhand. More than you'll know what to do with. Just let me say goodbye properly," Oleander said, obviously irritated. It was the first time Nicola saw someone manage to annoy her. Once Eleanor shrugged, the knight sighed and put her head down. "It's true. I shouldn't differentiate you from other humans, but I can't help it. It seems I'm a person after all."

"And you have your beliefs. Don't throw it all away."

"I do. I still believe it all. I just don't have to be the one to follow through with it. As you said, human hands are very capable. I've been..." Oleander paused. "Tired. It's okay. I've overstayed my welcome in this world."

"Bullshit! You never even lived your life to its fullest." Nicola lunged forward, but the invisible force returned to hold her in place.

"That was my mistake. There's no use in regretting it now." She raised the gem and turned it, pensive. "You gave me some life in my final days. I hope it's not too early to say this. Forgive me if so... I love you."

"I love you too! I *do*! I know I taunt you too much, and I made it seem like I don't really care, but I do! So stay. Please." She was out of breath and her airways burned.

"I'm sorry." She ran her gauntlet over the gem and stood silent for a while. Then, the armor went completely limp and fell to the floor with a thud, an useless pile of metal. The impact made the helmet slide off, revealing the battered skull, as emotionless as ever.

Nicola's whole body tingled and went numb. All she could do was watch with her mouth ajar, tears flowing freely, as Eleanor stood and sauntered to the fallen knight. She bent down and pried the gauntlets away from the gem, picking it up. She opened up a delighted

smile and just reveled in it for a moment before pursing her lips. "Oh, that stupid lich put the useless part of their soul in here as well. I just want the flame. The rest is trash."

"Give it to me." Nicola said, her mouth moving on its own before Eleanor could do anything else. Her tears had dried up and her eyes burnt.

"You want it?" Eleanor taunted, walking back to her. "You don't even know what it would do."

"Give it to me. It's not trash." She raised her voice and found herself finally able to stand up, clenching her fists.

"You Red Lanterns are all the same. Always barking about rationality, yet feebly emotional. Alright." Eleanor slid her fingers across the gem and took them to Nicola's forehead. Her fingertips were hot. "Enjoy it."

Her vision went burning white.

She woke to a pounding headache and the cold wooden floor against her cheek. Someone was touching her shoulder softly. Her body ached as she uncurled herself to find Adam kneeling beside her. "How are you doing?"

It took a while for her to process it, staring at him blankly. Then, she spoke up, the words grinding on her sore throat: "You sold me out."

"No. I sold Living Armor out. I'm sure you'll come to understand at some point." He took his hand away and looked down on her. His smile was still gone, his expression somber.

She wanted to scream that that was exactly the problem, but she knew he wouldn't care. It was pointless. A waste of breath. So instead, she focused on calling him out on his lie. "Fuck you. You gambled with my life."

"Duskhand had no intention of hurting you. Neither did Living Armor. I saw how you two acted around each other." He took a deep breath. "I knew you'd be fine."

"Fuck you, Adam." She sharpened her look to pierce him with her eyes. The tears were coming on again.

"I don't expect you to understand right now. You must be in shock." He talked as plainly as ever.

"I'm pretty sure I already understand. Just... Leave me alone." Her voice dropped. He obliged, standing up with the usual poise and walking away silently.

On his way out, he stepped over the fallen clump of armor that once housed Oleander. So lifeless. As the tears finally flowed down, Nicola crawled to it and pulled it apart to find her skeleton. A fuzzy snout greeted her, making her eyes light up some. The rats. She'd completely forgotten about them. She spent some time unbuckling the armor parts and rescuing the rats, relieved to find that they were all okay. They crawled up her arms, blissfully unaware that their previous caretaker was gone.

Epilogue

Nicola had cleaned up the skeleton and mounted it in Adam's spare bedroom. The armor was gathering dust in a bag under the bed. She spent a while just existing in that room, eyes puffy and body numb. What motivated her to get up the most was taking care of the rats. She liked the chocolate point the most. Fortunately, it was quite affectionate and enjoyed being held. She had half a heart to name it, but didn't. Oleander had never named them, after all.

A good chunk of her time was spent sleeping. Dreaming, to be exact. Her dreams were getting impossibly vivid. Just like Oleander had said, they were like being trapped in a never ending sea journey — or, in Nicola's case, a train ride. The first one she recalled having had started with a look in the mirror; however, the one looking back at her wasn't her. Or maybe it was. It felt like it was, despite having a different appearance. The image that stared back at her was of a muscular tall woman with a crooked nose; her skin was slightly lighter than Nicola's and her hair, much darker and longer.

As she looked in the mirror, she pulled her eyelid down. Her eyes had started looking glossy and white-ish, she noticed. Her tongue was swollen. She was disturbed to realize that her body felt heavy and stiff; her heart didn't pound in her chest. *I wish I could have gone to see them before I started rotting.* The thought came from nowhere. It was hers, but it wasn't. Sadness dripped through her body and made her expression weary. As fast as she could, she shoved it away. *I'm not alive anymore. It'd be more efficient to let it go.*

After waking up from that initial dream, she immediately realized that the memory belonged to Oleander. Even then, it had felt oddly familiar, like she'd already lived through it herself. She fell into an unhealthy cycle of sleeping as much as she could, which inevitably led to more dreamlike memories.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" a slightly older man asked her in another dream. Beside him, there were a bathtub and a table with many shiny tools displayed over it.

"Yes," she answered plainly in Oleander's voice.

He sighed and turned to the tools as she disrobed and settled down in the bathtub. When he turned to her with the scalpel, she gripped the bathtub's edges, cold overcoming her exposed body. "Do you think you can turn your pain receptors off?" he asked softly. His droopy eyes were overcome with concern, but she didn't notice — or, at least, the part of her that was Oleander had never noticed.

"Yes," she repeated, but never even attempted to.

The scalpel dug into her skin, breaking it with ease. Sharp pain exploded through the surface of her corpse. *Just a cut.* Even if she thought that to herself, her grip on the bathtub was almost enough to break it and her eyes widened as much as they could. When he flayed her, tearing her open, Nicola's conscience was suddenly shoved away, like hands were pushing her out of the room. Later, she woke up to frustration. Of course Oleander wouldn't want her to know what disembowelment felt like.

She was sitting numbly at the breakfast table with Adam. He'd been pestering her about getting out of bed and eating. She'd gone that morning, mostly to shut him up. It was better to pretend she wasn't at his house and mercy. Under his watch, she ate slowly, almost forgetting to do it. She was startled to hear him speak. "I know you're grieving," he said.

"Do you, now?" she mumbled.

He ignored that. "However, it'd be good for the process if you got out of bed more often. Perhaps bathed and did things you like," he spoke softly. "I can't help but think having that skeleton in your room isn't good for you."

For the first time in a while, her insides flared up and she glared at him. "Stop pretending to care. This is all on you."

"I never had ill intentions towards you. If you think about it rationally, Living Armor was a risk, aside from being undead."

"You can't use reason to justify everything." She banged on the table and there was sudden silence. The pause allowed her anger to subside a little and embarrass her for the gesture. Still, it felt justified.

Adam looked stunned. When he recovered, he sighed and replied: "You can take your time getting through this. You're one of us."

She didn't hide her scowl.

"You owe me money." She'd opened the door to Adam's study and announced it as soon as his eyes met hers.

"Do I?" he said, taking his reading glasses off.

"Consider it compensation." She was idling by the door, unwilling to step inside. "I want money for a train ticket. I want a bigger bag and I want you to pull your strings and house me somewhere. Anywhere. A cottage in the middle of nowhere." Because he just stared at her for a moment, still holding his glasses with his brow furrowed, she added: "You fucked me up."

He put his head down. "Alright. May this be a token of my consideration for you. I suppose a change of scenery would clear your mind."

She only thought that her mind didn't need any clearing.

