

Calm shores

In opposition to the name, the air inside Grotto Inn was warm and welcoming. It smelled like fresh food and beer. The waitress, an odd woman clad in black from head to toe, danced between tables in a moth-like manner whenever anyone called. And, when Jules did, she would never seem quite so happy. They'd been staying at the inn for a couple of nights; at the end of each one, that same waitress would have to ask them to stop and haul themselves back to bed. Wouldn't happen again, though. This time, Jules would win some coin without grabbing that much attention.

The night passed by quickly when they were on a constant rollercoaster, placing bets on mountains of chips and relying on drinks to keep going. They still had to win enough to pay for the drinks, of course. At some point, someone started shouting and wiggling their index finger in Jules' face. Despite being too buzzed to focus, Jules found the words "You're just a dirty cheater" obviously disparaging. They defended their honor until they noticed the looming figure of the waitress. She waited by their side, her only eye stabbing them.

"You make me repeat myself, Jules," she said, hardly moving. Her accent wasn't quite the same as everyone else's. In fact, her whole figure was out of place. "You either simmer down and stop drinking, go to sleep or get thrown out."

"Is this the way to treat a paying customer?" Jules splayed their hand on their chest, slurring their words quite a bit.

"You're hardly paying," the waitress said, unwavering, "And we don't really need the business of a rascal."

The word made heat surge in Jules' chest. They reached towards their wine glass, holding it as delicately as possible. Then, they raised it and toasted to her face; satisfied, they took a long sip. She didn't seem impressed. "Don't make me touch you," she said. Jules

laughed. "Oh, I'm so scared," they mocked. She blinked. "You're not supposed to be," she said.

Someone kicked them in the shin from across the table. "Don't bully Circe," a man said. A few others contributed with scattered 'yeahs'. To Jules' surprise, the bartender looked up from his post. "Who's bullying Circe?" he asked, frowning. Though Jules shrank in their seat, they were immediately pointed out. The bartender sighed. "Listen to her," he said simply, like a babysitter would.

"You're done drinking," the woman called Circe said, reaching for their drink. They immediately reached out, trying to get to it before her. There was no thought process behind it, really. She was faster. However, as soon as their fingers brushed her glove, she swung her arm and slapped their hand away. "I said I didn't want to touch you," she said, snarling. Her lips were curled. As she got their glasses and bottles off the table and hurried off, they sat there, stunned. Had that expression been disgust? Their hand, the one that had been swatted, seemed to tingle. It was a little sobering.

Before Jules could reap the benefits of sobering up, though, someone gripped them by the arm. They looked up to see the bartender's displeased face. "Not cool, man," he said, dragging Jules off the chair, "It's time for you to go to sleep. One more and you're out of here." Analyzing the reproachful look on his and everyone else's faces made Jules eyes widen. Did they think...? In any case, they allowed themselves to be shoved away and scooted off to bed.

The next morning, their head was much clearer; the only clues of their drunken state were the off taste in their mouth and the faint headache. Jules splashed water on their face and stuck their head out the window, the chill breeze getting under their open shirt and making them shiver. The sun was already low in the sky; nearly noon.

After buttoning the shirt up in a haste, they flew down the stairs and crossed the exposed hallway — the walls were really just some planks plied together — towards the common area, the one he'd been kicked out of the night before. As expected, there were no other patrons there. Just Circe, sitting in the corner and reading quietly. She sipped her coffee, nonchalant.

A flash from the last time they'd seen each other sprang into their mind. They winced and approached with slower steps, shaking their hands as if that would help. "Hey. Are you still serving breakfast?" they asked, swaying a bit. She finally looked up; her hair was pulled back, exposing the eyepatch. "Yeah."

Jules kept shaking their hand, uncertain. After drawing in a long breath, they added: "Look, I didn't mean to... *touch* you. Last night. That was weird."

Circe looked back up from her book. She had a frown. "I know," she said, emphasizing each syllable as if they were stupid. She was marking her page with her thumb.

"Then why...?" they started, trailing off.

She sighed and closed the book, unceremoniously folding the corner of the page she was on. "As I said, you're a rascal. I spend my nights looking after drunken men and I know all you Lunarian types. All you do is drink and push your luck," she said, turning to them and crossing her legs.

They smirked. It was involuntary. "So you kicked me out the room 'cause I'm a Lunarian?" they asked, pulling a chair from a nearby table and sitting down as well.

"No," she said, not smiling back. "I keep my eye on you because you're a libertine." Again, when she said 'libertine', she stressed each syllable. "Being a Lunarian was just one of the factors that turned you into one," she concluded, finally hinting at sarcasm.

"Oh, are you a prude?" they smiled wider, resting their cheek on their arms, which were cradled over the back of the chair. "So bitter. That accent of yours... it's not coming back to

me. Which little invaded nation are you from to hold such a grudge?" That was a bit of a low poke.

Her eye narrowed at them. Perhaps the poke had also been deep. "When are you going away?" she asked, tilting her head. Her voice was ever so calm, perfectly tailored for customer service; however, her smile seemed poisonous.

"Ouch. Not right now. I want some eggs and toast, please," Jules said, tapping their feet merrily. Circe tapped on the wall. Someone poked their head out of the kitchen; she just signaled and they went back inside. "You take everything very seriously, eh?" Jules said, smoothing their voice.

She rested her back against the wall and just watched them for a while. Then, she laughed. Just a little. No happiness, just pure bile. "It's like going off a checklist. You walk like Umbral Star waste. You talk like one. Even breathe like one. Take up space like one," she said. She widened her eye, expectant.

"There's no way you guessed that off the way I walk. Come on," Jules scoffed.

"But of course. Having a huge stick up your ass warps your walking," she said, shrugging.

"Ah, that's true," they said, shrugging, "We grads do give off a stuck up air."

"See, you even had to go and say you're a graduate. I didn't ask," Circe said. More knocks on the wall. She got up and returned with a plate; when she dropped it in front of them, they thought it'd crack from the carelessness. It didn't, though one of the egg yolks did burst.

"It has to count for something, even if it's just bragging rights," Jules said, trying to keep the conversation going.

Circe crossed her arms. "Yeah, because it didn't do anything otherwise, hm? You're kind of a failure, winding up here in the Alcove," she said.

Jules watched her over the rim of their cup, trying to pin her angry expression down. It didn't seem all that rigid. "You're not from here. You stick out like a sore thumb. That must mean you're a failure too," they smiled.

She bit down on her lip before she spoke. "Don't refer to me unless you need something. You know what I think of you," she said, going back to her chair. She picked up the book, but her eye seemed lost. There was no way she was really reading.

Though there was little reason to remain in a roadside inn, Jules had to make enough coin to pay their tab. Every night was the potential last night there; it all depended on luck. Luck and maybe a little bit of finessing. The past few nights, the patrons had been mostly the same, but there were some new faces that night — faces they hadn't yet preyed upon.

It was easy to lure drunkenly giddy newcomers into a game of poker. Jules let the first round unfold as normal, laughing easily and relaxing on their chair. Drinking helped. A hot body and a fast mind made for easy decisions. As the next round started, they flagged Circe down for another drink. She obliged, but her watchful eye seemed to stab them in a warning as she did.

There was no easier way to influence the outcomes of a poker game than to mess with other people's cards — especially the dealer's. As Jules pretended to rearrange his with a pensive face, their subtle thumb movements actually rearranged the dealer's hand. Telekinesis was but a neat party trick. They took another swig. Sure, they still didn't know what the cards were — but throwing other people off their game was surely beneficial.

Jules felt the pinprick of a stare on their nape. When they looked in its direction, they met Circe's wide eye over all the patrons' heads. Still watchful. Had she seen it? There was no way she'd notice. Even if she did, she wouldn't do anything about it. They kept on their game, falling into a pattern of watching for others' distraction and swapping cards. Easy.

"Those cards just moved," one of the newcomers said. It was a burly man, easily twice a Jules. He was frowning at the pile. "You should lay off the beer," someone else said, laughing. The man just looked around, looking at each of their faces. "No, it's not the first time it happens. It's a filthy mage."

Accusations started flying off the handle. Jules shrank and kept drinking, trying to seem nonchalant. Some people still insisted that was ridiculous, but the conspirationists grew in number. The original man at last looked right at Jules. "You! You have a Lunarian accent!" he said.

"Well, yeah. That happens when you live in a certain country," Jules said, sporting a nervous smile. They drank some more.

"Come on. Everyone knows the Lunar Bay produces magic scum by the bulk. You're shifting the cards," he insisted, banging on the table.

Jules shrugged. Cold sweat ran down their back. "Oh yeah? You wanna see a magic trick?" they said, smirking. The man nodded. Jules cleared their throat and, in a slow and calculated movement, raised their closed fist. Then, they flipped him off.

Before Jules could react, the man had one foot up on the table and a hand on their neck; shouts reached their ears along with the sound of a bottle shattering. Hot white dots overtook their vision, making everything indistinct. Their insides stirred. Something dislodged them, going deeper with each passing millisecond. Then, it stopped. Jules was paralysed on the ground, able to see only the people closest to them. Held by an invisible force, his assailant was steps away from him, still trying to get closer. His hands were tainted red.

"Enough!" in Circe's grave voice. Jules crooked their neck to look at her. She had her hand raised, so tense it looked like a claw; her face was scrunched up from the effort. Still, she was able to hold the telekinesis until the bartender took control of the situation. Jules

wanted to keep watching, but the corners of their vision darkened; they were out of breath and couldn't keep up with their brain's demand. Just staying awake was so exhausting.

Black ink doodles over wooden walls overtook their vision as they came to. The burning scent of alcohol called their attention. They looked down to see Circe pouring a bunch of it over tweezers. "What are you doing?" Jules forced the words out. Something deep within them throbbed.

"Playing operation," Circe said. "There are shards in you. Hold still." Jules looked down. She must have ripped their shirt to expose the wound. It looked like a living thing, breathing on its own; a red mouth. That was not the case. Jules knew it was their own breathing, but still.

"Damn, can you at least change your gloves first?!" they asked, squirming away to delay the inevitable.

She blinked. "Why would I do that? Hold still. You're going to take this quietly," she said in a serious tone. It didn't sound like a question. She had a firm grasp on their hip as the cold tweezers touched his flesh. Pain flared up like she was stabbing them again.

"*Stop*," Jules moaned out, writhing under her touch. She took her hands away from them for a moment. "I told you not to move," she repeated.

"How qualified are you to be doing this?" they asked, turning their eyes to the ceiling. Doodles all the way up there.

"I knew you were gonna get shanked at some point," her voice was lower as she poked them with the tweezers, "So I should have been more vigilant."

"Is this a recurring thing?" Jules couldn't help but shout a little.

"No. Just when it comes to your type," she said.

"Whatever *that* means," they said, rolling their eyes.

Their back arched as the tweezers dug in. Circe chastised them again. After the cycle had repeated a few times, she showed them a rag littered with bloodstained glass. "Look what you get for being an ass," she said, "You get shanked."

"Yeah, I'm lucky you were there," Jules smirked, throwing their head back on the pillow. It was like they'd just run a whole marathon. "Who would have known you were a mage, eh?"

She placed a cloth over the wound. "I think you can take some more bleeding. And no. I'm not much of a mage," she said as red spots appeared on the rag. Her face was pale.

"Where are we?" they asked, forcing their neck to examine their surroundings. The walls were covered in black ink paintings and the few shelves were stacked with books and canvases. Beside the bed, there was a window leading to the darkness outside. It was a starry night.

"My room," she said simply. She was still sitting beside them on the mattress, but her eye was lost somewhere on the opposing wall. She seemed to be perfectly still.

"You helped me," Jules said. "Even though you think I'm trash." The blood that coursed through their body felt thin and no breath was enough; they could hardly hold their eyes open and being in bed had never been so comforting. But they couldn't sleep. Not until they'd poked at her.

"Letting you bleed out on the floor wouldn't be good for business," she said. "Plus, it's hardwood. It'd stain."

Jules reached a tentative hand out to touch hers. Her glove was wet — probably from his own blood — and her hand shuddered. "But it was y-" they started; before they could finish talking, though, her hand turned to grab them by the wrist.

"I'll snap your wrist," she whispered, her face suddenly closer. Her only pupil seemed so big, staring deep into theirs. "So help me, any force in and out of this world. I *will* break you. No touching."

Their body instinctively recoiled as much as possible in the mattress, sinking. The cold blood around the wound sent frost all over. They tried to free their hand, but her grip was steady. She was probably being truthful — she could break their wrist. Though her expression was chill-inducing, the urgency behind it didn't seem that threatening. It came off like fear.

"Okay, okay. Stop," Jules said, blinking hard, "I *just* got shanked. Give me a break."

She let him go and got up. "Tread lightly," she said as she pulled a drawer open. With her back turned to them, she took the dirty gloves off and put another pair on. She turned her eye to them. "Now go to sleep. I'll watch over you."

Jules looked down at the rag. "I'm bleeding quite a bit," he said.

She halted. They thought they'd seen her rock back and forth a little. "Do you know any black magic?" she asked, lowering her voice.

Jules scoffed. "Yeah, I'd rather not kill a baby animal for my own stupidity, thanks."

Her brow went up as her eye widened; her lips parted a little. She looked around until she settled on something. "How about this? Could it stop your bleeding?" she asked, lifting a potted plant. It was a big, beautiful thing, its leaves sprawling out of the pot with a verdant glow. It had been sitting next to her vanity.

"I guess it could tide me over," they said, grimacing a little as they tried to turn on their side.

Circe walked over and held the pot beside them. A lone lilac flower bloomed in the middle. "Go on before you stain my sheets," she said with a feigned frown. Well, at least Jules thought it was feigned.

He reached out to the plant. A living thing; it felt a little odd for a plant. It was just enough. As they converted its vital force the leaves crumbled, turning brown and crackling. When it was done, there was not much left of it. Jules dared touch their wounds. Coagulated. Just enough. When they looked up to Circe, her brow was low and her eyelid was droopier than before. "Was that really okay?" he asked.

Her face turned rigid again. "It was just a plant," she said, putting the pot aside. "Are you bleeding still?"

"I think it'll hold up," Jules said, pulling the blanket up and rubbing their face on her pillow. Not too soft, but still okay. "Thank you, Circe."

"Go to sleep." She blew the nightstand's candle out.

As Circe threw the window open and sunlight streamed in, Jules woke up to discover their whole body was sore. They mumbled a complaint, but Circe didn't pay them any mind. She shoved a plate of eggs and toast into their hands. It seemed like her day had already started. She was fully dressed, even wearing gloves already.

"Aw, you remembered my usual order!" Jules said, smiling as they accepted the meal. Nothing like the scent of warm toast.

"You're basic," she said plainly. She lifted the wilted potted plant out the window and turned it upside down. Then, she started uprooting it and dumping the dirt.

"Why do you always wear gloves? You're gonna have to swap them again," Jules asked, munching on the toast.

"Mind your business," she said, banging the pot against the outside of the wall to make sure she'd gotten all of it. She put it back down and, as expected, swapped gloves. As Jules dipped his toast in the egg yolk with pure glee, she took out a cigarette and lit it. Then she took to the window, pointing her gaze to the lake.

"You're smoking tobacco?" they asked. She just nodded. "You do seem the type."

That made her furrow her brow. "Don't get too familiar," she said, "I already told you not to refer to me."

"Well, you're sending mixed signals. You're helping me and stuff."

"That's just basic human decency. But you're a Lunarian, so you wouldn't know that," she said, pausing to blow some smoke out the window.

"Is that so?" they asked, trying not to smile too much, "To me it just seems like you're nice."

She paused. Still looking out the window, she took a long drag out of the cigarette; then, she walked closer to him and bent in his direction just to blow the smoke in his face. "Lay off me," she said, "I'm going back to work."

They coughed, watching as she walked away. "Tryhard," they said. She surely listened, but didn't give any indications of it. He went back to eating. The taste of the smoke lingered, though.

She left them to rot the whole day, only showing up to give them food. Being in a stranger's room was intimidating; though it was a tiny space, it felt huge. It didn't help that he was bound to one particular spot, his abdomen contracting and shooting up pain whenever he moved. So, Jules ended up sleeping through most of the day, lulled by the pleasant breeze that came in through the window. Circe returned when it was already dark out; she lit all the candles in the room and handed him a bowl of stew wordlessly.

"Is it really okay if I stay here?" they asked, indulging, "How much is this gonna add up to in my tab?"

"You're injured. Your input is useless," she said plainly, sitting down in front of the wooden vanity. Its mirror was slightly stained. Turned to it, she untied her eyepatch and put it aside along with her gloves. Then, she used a hair clip to keep her bangs out of the way, exposing the empty cavity where her other eye used to be. Jules watched her reflection as she splashed water on her face and washed the cavity out. Her eye caught theirs in the mirror and he went cold.

"This is my private space," she said. "I shouldn't need to cover up. So." She turned to them, frowning. "What are you looking at?" Her voice turned rougher.

They swallowed down hard and tried not to stammer. "That's not it. Sorry. I was just... a little curious. Bedrooms *are* sacred," they said, nodding.

"Curious?" she asked, blinking.

"Yeah. The eyepatch. So mysterious," they said, smirking.

She touched her scarred lower lid. There was a phantom of a smile on her lips, but it only lasted a second. "You wonder about other people's unseemly injuries?"

"It's not unseemly. You look pretty cool," he said, pausing to eat some more. "I always wonder. *You* sure leave room to wonder."

She merely shrugged before getting up and arranging some blankets and a pillow on the floor. She started blowing some of the candles out.

"Is that really okay? Letting me have your bed?" Jules asked.

"Someone has to watch over you. It's fine," she said, heading to the window for another smoke. As she lit the cigarette on a candle, the light shone on the bare skin of her hand.

Jules had the privilege of watching Circe in the privacy of her room, bare hands and injury exposed. She really was sending mixed signals, wasn't she? Maybe it was time to lay off her. They let her smoke in peace, eating quietly. It was more comfortable than they'd expected. After she was done with the cigarette, she seemed much more relaxed; her shoulders had dropped a little. She kicked her shoes off and got under her blankets.

"Are you really fine with sleeping on the floor?" Jules asked.

"I'm used to it," she mumbled, stifling a yawn. "Put that candle out before you sleep."

"Good night." It took Jules a while to say it. They put the flame out with a flick of their fingers.

Aside from feeding him, Circe disappeared again the next day. They tossed and turned in bed, unable to remain still despite the soreness. The hours crawled by in Jules' understimulated mind. They forced themselves to sit up; their side burned. Upon further

inspection, the skin around the wound and the flesh under it were all tender. Still, there was no way they could stay in bed. It should be fine as long as they didn't do anything too sudden.

He exited the bedroom, almost surprised to find that the world still existed outside of it — and, furthermore, that the inn had rooms and corridors he should never see as a guest. It was slightly dark, but Jules managed to find their way to the kitchen following that breakfast smell. They poked their head inside and only saw a tall, mean-looking man standing in the small space. He turned to Jules, rubbing his hands on his dirty apron; then, he raised his brow.

"Hey," Jules said, making sure to smile, "Do you know where Circe is?"

The man exhaled visibly. "It's a slow day, so she must be fishing."

"Well, alright," they said, brow furrowed, "Thanks."

With support from the wall, Jules went back down the hallway. There were a few steps down and a slight inclination, so the trip ended up being more strenuous than he'd pictured. He had one hand against the wall and one holding onto his gut; it was so tender that it was like something was loose in there. At last, they reached a door. Opening it revealed a cloudy sky over the vast expanse of the lake; a short path led straight to a pier. Sure enough, a black dot with blond-ish hair sat on the edge of it.

Jules survived the trip over the dirt path, but nausea hit them as soon as they stepped on the planks. The pier was more decrepit than the inn — which wasn't an easy feat, since parts of it hardly had a ceiling. A few steps in, though, Circe turned her head so fast they thought she'd get whiplash. Her eye went wide.

"What are you doing, you dumb fuck?! You should be in bed!" she shouted from the edge.

Sure, she was screaming at him, but the water beyond her was calm, the breeze was light and the temperature was just right. Not all bad.

"I was bored. You left me all alone," Jules pouted, still forcing their body to reach her, "Do you know how much being locked up in a room sucks?"

Her face scrunched up and she turned back to the lake. Beside her, there was a lantern. One of her hands held a fishing pole, but she didn't seem too worried about it.

"You'll rip yourself open. Just... sit. Stop walking," she said in a lower tone.

Having gotten close enough, they realized her shoes and socks were also on the planks. She had her long skirt pulled up and her bare legs under the water. As Jules' eyes took the scene in, she looked up at him and frowned. Her mouth curled up. "Don't come any closer," she said, looking like a cat about to hiss.

Jules halted. "Can I stay?"

She pointed to the other end of the edge she sat on. "Yes, but sit away from me. Just... stop moving. You're fucked up."

Obedient, Jules tried to sit; however, as they folded at the knees and tried to go down, they realized that the movement involved more of their abdomen than they should be using. The wound started burning up and they let out a yelp. Suddenly, it was like a huge hand was holding them steady; they looked around to see Circe with her hand outstretched and a concentrated face. Slowly, the invisible force put him down on the pier safely.

"Thanks. That's very handy," they said, smiling at her. She let out a heavy breath, slumping forward a little. "You're not very used to it, are you?" they asked, looking at her shaky arm.

"You sure are persistent," she said, rolling her eyes. She gave the fishing rod a light pull, but the line showed no resistance.

"Why don't you indulge me just a little? I'll be gone soon," they said, smiling at her. There was something so endearing about seeing her sway her feet under the water. He

decided to do the same, folding his pants up and imitating her. He bit on his lip as his body got used to the cold. "I just think you're interesting," they added.

She sighed. "You think I'm interesting because I don't fit your conception of a random waitress. Once I answer your intrusive questions, I won't be interesting anymore," she said, "That's self-serving."

"Mm, no. I think you'll still be interesting. People aren't puzzles, you know," Jules said, slowly dropping back and laying their body down. The diffused sun rays felt nice on their face.

"A waste of my time," she mumbled. He saw her try the line again out of the corner of his eye. No luck.

"See, then you drop such cryptic lines. If you really care so little, you shouldn't care if I stop thinking you're interesting. Either way, you'll lose nothing. Indulge me," they insisted.

She looked back at them, frowning. Her only eye was trained on him like an arrow. "You really aren't gonna leave me alone until I do, are you? Annoying fucker."

Jules gave her a radiant smile. It was more of a smirk, actually. "I won't," they said.

"Put your Umbral years to use and light my cig," she said, holding it out in their direction. He ignited a flame close to his fingertip and she held the cigarette over it until its end was glowing. She took a long drag out of it. "Kill your boredom," she exhaled.

Jules' heart jumped a little. Was he really getting what he wanted? Upon looking at Circe's relaxed figure, their cheeks turned hot. "Why are you fishing?" they asked, an easy smile plastered on their face. The water felt nice on their feet. Letting loose like that made them feel like they were floating.

"Few guests today," she said, "Catching dinner for me and the guys. Hopefully."

"And me?" he asked, his face lighting up. His excitement threw her off, but she nodded. "Why do you wear an eyepatch?"

"You saw it," she said, frowning.

"Well, yeah. But *why*?" they insisted, "Do you really think it's unseemly?"

She winced, her body going back a little. One of her wet legs came up to rest on the pier. For a split second, they could see her inner thigh. They averted their eyes. "You don't think it is?" she asked, training her eye on him. Jules shook their head. She sighed. "It grosses people out."

"You wear it for other people, then?"

"I'm used to it now. And the sun is rough on it anyway," she said. For a moment, she just looked off towards the skyline. Then, like she'd snapped awake, her head turned to Jules and she narrowed her eye at them. "Why do I have to answer such intimate questions?"

"Ah, I thought that's what we were doing," Jules said, chuckling. "Well, to make it even, you can bug me too."

"What makes you think I care?" she said, frowning.

"You seemed pretty interested the other day, guessing about me and all," Jules shrugged, "I'll answer if you ask, you know."

Suddenly, she jumped up, her cigarette hanging between her lips as she pulled the fishing rod with both hands. She alternated between reeling the line in and giving the rod strong pulls. At last, she got her fish, unhooking it and throwing it in the container with the few others. She knew what she was doing. Why was it... a little hot? It was the confidence in it; the sure footwork. Jules averted his eyes as she cast the line and sat down again. Their face was warm.

"Why are you here, if you're an oh-so-amazing graduate?" she asked. The sudden return of her voice made them fumble with their own thoughts.

"Just trying to get as far from the Lunar Bay as I can," they said. She looked at them inquisitively and they swallowed down hard. "I was drafted."

"Oh, you're a defector," she said, her face lightening. "Why?" Was the game about fitting as many 'why's as possible into a question?

"Well, isn't it obvious? I didn't learn magic to kill people for the empire," they said, "Easy decision."

She smiled at him. It was the least sarcastic smile she'd given him so far. It made their face warmer. "Yeah, you learned it to gamble, eh?" she chuckled.

They smiled too. "Why did you? Learn magic, that is."

"I only know a bit of telekinesis," she said, looking away from him.

"But there's a why. It was a conscious decision at some point."

"Obviously," she shrugged, exhaling some smoke. There was slight annoyance on her face.

"You don't like being touched, right?" they asked, paying close attention to her. Her shoulders tensed up and her grip on her cigarette threatened to crush it. "That's alright. You don't need to look like that. You just had to say so. That time I touched you, I just... didn't know. Sorry."

Circe stared down at him for a while, her lips tightly shut. Then, she averted her gaze to the sky and took a drag of her cigarette. As she blew the smoke out, she turned her attention back to Jules. Her eyelid was droopier than usual again; everything about her face was melancholic. "I don't. I'm saying it," she said, her voice devoid of the usual edge.

"Okay," Jules said, turning on their side to get a better view of her, even if it hurt. "Is that why you learned telekinesis?"

She turned her face, hiding behind her bangs. "Yes," she mumbled.

"But you're not very used to it. How did you learn?" they asked, still watching her. She was all tense.

"Books. By myself."

"Ah, that's why. I could help you if you wanted me to," Jules said. They made a conscious effort to make their smile as easygoing as possible. Maybe she'd see there was no cause for concern.

"I know just enough," she said.

"Okay. Tell me if you change your mind," they said. "I owe you anyway."

For a while, they just watched the surroundings, taking in the still water and Circe's patient form. Though they were supposed to be much farther along in their trip, they felt perfectly content to be there. They knew Circe didn't want to be bothered to that level, but still... "Hey, Circe," they called.

"Yeah?" she said, beating the ashes out into the water.

"Thank you for helping me. I mean it."

"We've been over this," she said, frowning and avoiding his eyes.

"No, I'm serious. You said it's just basic human decency. Still, most people wouldn't care for me," they said, "Cause you were right. I'm a good for nothing. A libertine. A little rascal. All that."

Her face crumpled up as she listened to him. She parted her lips and started speaking, but stammered and paused. Then, she took a huge drag out of her cigarette, like her life depended on it. "That means you deserved to bleed out?" she asked, her lips curling in a way that made her canines apparent.

"No, I don't think so. But someone else might not have valued my life over their hardwood floor," Jules said, smiling. "Even though you call me names and all sorts of nasty things, you've been nothing short of kind to me. To me, it's actions that count."

Her eye was wide. He could hear her rapid breathing; she quieted it down with the cigarette. "You have a severe inferiority complex," she said, but her voice wavered.

"Nah. I see you as a good person. Why does that bother you?" they asked, but she didn't respond. Too busy smoking and looking at the setting sun. Her face was tinted red and orange; the colorful light accentuated the humidity of her eye. "Is it because you need the thorny act to keep people at bay? So they don't touch you?" they asked, keeping their voice as soft as possible.

Circe took in ragged breaths. She tried to keep smoking to avoid answering, but her hand was shaky. Then, she looked the other way. "Why are you being a prick?" she asked, her voice quivering. It was nearly a whisper.

Hearing her tone, Jules knew that she was almost crying. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-" they started, but she looked back at them. No tears rolling — everything was still contained on her lower lid. She was holding on. Her lips were trembling.

"Is this what you wanted? If you're so good at figuring people out, why don't you keep it to yourself?" she shouted, bracing herself still, "Do you have to go and jam your hands into my guts?!"

Jules sat up, holding onto his own guts and wincing. Everything burnt and it wasn't just because of their injury. "I was insensitive. I'm sorry. Circe," he called, trying to get her to keep looking at him. "I really am sorry. I was getting somewhere, but I didn't have to be an ass about it. I guess it did come across as provocative."

"What the fuck were you getting at?" she asked, speaking in a half whisper. A tear rolled down and she immediately wiped it with her glove.

"You're so kind, but seem so lonely. You should allow yourself to find friends who respect your needs and will keep their physical distance," they said.

She outright laughed. "People don't do that, Jules. You're delusional. If most people would let you bleed out, why would they respect me?" She said, rubbing her wet cheek. Her smile was bitter. Distorted. "Listen to yourself."

Her crooked expression tugged at his heartstrings. The muscle squeezed and Jules winced. "I said *most* people," they pointed out, "I'm sure there are still plenty who'd accept boundaries. I'd... I'd like to talk to you more. I won't touch you. Or get too close."

She started putting her things away, still chuckling to herself. Between each chuckle, there was a choked sob. "That's what they say. But they never keep their word," she said, drying her legs and sliding her socks on. "I don't know what it is."

Jules shrank. They'd really poked at her sore spot. There was nothing left to say. "Can I help you carry all that?" they asked instead.

She scoffed, putting her cigarette out. "You can hardly carry yourself." She paused and took a moment to breathe; averting her eye to the sky, she looked at the remnants of sunlight without blinking until it dried. Then, she rubbed her face thoroughly. "Alright. I'll carry all this inside and then I'll come back for you. You're in no state to be walking around."

Somehow, she managed to lug all her equipment back inside. Circe returned with a small blanket and wrapped it around Jules, careful not to touch them despite her gloves. "Nice," they said, smiling faintly, "Double layer of safety." She gave them a puzzled look, but remained silent. They managed to reach her bedroom again. The sounds of banter and pans clanging above were much softer that day.

"I'll come get you when it's our dinner time," she said. Usual Circe didn't look happy, but the Circe before them looked simply downtrodden.

"Thanks, Circe. For helping me anyway," they smiled. She just sighed and turned her back on him, shutting the door.

Jules was itching to see more of her room — being locked in there was chipping away at their patience. There had to be something in those stacked canvases. The empty pot and the plant that had once been in it had to mean something. Everything was so shoved into those nooks and crannies that it just had to be all she owned — all of Circe's belongings, all of

them in that tiny space. Had to be. So yes, Jules' hands were nearly twitching as they lay in bed, eager to unveil more of her. But then they'd be *most people*, chipping away at a layer of her she hadn't agreed on shedding. So they stayed in bed.

It was already much darker when she returned, just saying "Fish time" before getting them out of bed. They made their way up the steps that led to the common area slowly but surely. Only a couple guests remained, sitting close to a window and talking amongst themselves. The scent of fried fish made Jules melt. Circe led him to a seat at one of the bigger tables; out of the men sitting with him, he only recognized the bartender.

"Cici, you really caught one for him? Guy ain't worth the blood he bleeds," the man laughed. When Circe merely shrugged, he furrowed his brow. The concern on his face was obvious. Jules felt a twinge of guilt.

They remained wrapped in the blanket until the cook dropped a plate in front of them. Golden goodness, hot and steamy. They were quick to free their arms and dig in. Though they didn't know the names of most of the people eating with them, there was a home-y feeling to it all; it tasted familiar and nostalgic somehow.

He raised his head, looking around the table for Circe, but found her sitting at the bar instead, eating on her own. Another tug at his heartstrings. They got the bartender's attention. He'd called her 'Cici', after all. "Hey. I don't think Circe's okay," they said.

He sighed, shaking his head slightly. "Yeah. It comes and goes. Leave her be," he said.

"So sitting with her wouldn't be a good idea?" Jules asked.

"She's sitting on her own for a reason," he said, pausing to lick his fingers. "Besides, you're a Lunarian. You sitting with her would only make her more uncomfortable."

"What's that got to do with anything?" they pressed, frowning. Sure, a lot of people were uncomfortable with the Bay, but not to that level.

After glancing over at Circe for a moment, the bartender lowered his voice. "She's come a long way, you know. When she first got here, she'd hide in the kitchen whenever we had Lunarian guests. She sniffs y'all out like a dog," he said, shrugging, "Who knows."

"Oh," Jules mumbled. Suddenly, the fish wasn't so appetizing anymore; their stomach churned. It was all starting to get too specific — if his imagination was right, it made sense for Circe to lash out at them. They had been unnecessarily cruel. They ate quietly.

Along the next day, they let Circe be, ignoring the temptation to bug her for attention. Gloom filled the room whenever she came in. However, they still needed her. There was no avoiding it. "Hey, Circe... I kinda need a bath," they raised their voice. She paused; she'd been washing her own face.

"I bet you do," she said, sounding more like the usual Circe, "Those cuts must look nasty right now."

"Yeah, bottles just aren't the cleanest, huh," he smiled.

"You look like you have a tendency to get shanked," she said, staring them down. Somehow, it was nice to see her face without the eyepatch.

Something stirred inside Jules. She was addressing them! They smiled. "Nah, that was the first time."

"Not the last, I wager," she got up, swiftly putting on a clean eyepatch, "I'll draw you a bath."

"You're a goddess."

She frowned, her lips curling enough to show her canines again. "You're a fucking weirdo," she said.

A while later, Circe came back to help them make the trip to the washroom; she used the blanket method again. When they stopped at the door, she turned to them with a blank expression. "Will you need help with that?" she asked.

Probably. "No. I can manage," Jules said, stepping away from her and getting support from the wall, "There'd be too much skin involved and stuff."

Her lips parted for a moment. "I'll stay here," she said, "So I'll listen if you fall. Don't. It would be pathetic." Though her words and tone were sharp, her face was at ease.

As Jules had expected, they did have a rough time on their own. Writhing out of their clothes made them feel like their skin was tearing apart. Lowering themselves on the bathtub solidified that notion; there was no way the wound wasn't splitting. No way. Dumping alcohol on fresh cuts hurt less than that. Still, they didn't make a sound. They didn't make a sound when they were alone. No one whose attention to yearn.

When it came time to dry off, they slipped. They threw themselves to the wall, searching for support desperately; the sudden movement made them arch their back, the pain taking over. Before they could cry out, they bit their lip. That was better than alerting Circe. Because of her nature, she'd surely storm in, even if that meant she'd see something she absolutely didn't want to.

"Jules?" she called from the corridor, "You good?"

"Great," they said, catching their breath.

They tried to get dressed, but after all that, just bending a little was enough to make their eyes water. Defeated, they hid their body as best as possible under the towel and banged their head on the door.

"Circe," they dragged her name out, "I can't get dressed." There was silence for a bit. "I could... sleep rolled up in a blanket, maybe?"

"Or you could wear something easier to slip into," she said, "Like one of my dresses."

Jules winced. "You deeply wound me." He said, laughing the idea off.

"Guys wear dresses," she said. He could almost hear her frustration.

"I'm not a guy. And if I wear a dress, I'll inevitably be read as a woman. Sorry," they said, sighing.

Awkward silence settled in until Circe sighed as well. "Fine. Be naked. What do I care," she said. "Just... stay bundled up until you can get dressed."

"Of course."

Back in the bedroom, Circe was smoking by the open window again. Jules was comfy in bed, bundled up in the blanket. They held it tight, knowing slipping up meant flashing Circe. "You know what else I need?" they asked.

"No."

"A drink," Jules declared, melting a bit inside.

"Yeah, I don't think you do," she said, "You're injured. I already said your input doesn't matter."

Jules wilted, sighing. His body desperately needed some kind of substance coursing through his veins. "Then... can I have one of your smokes?" he asked, smiling again.

She eyed him for a moment. Then, like a reluctant mother, she put her hand in her pocket and produced a cigarette. They accepted it and lit it through magic, thanking her. They just indulged in it together for a while. "You don't drink, do you?" they asked, breaking the peace.

"Not a drop."

"But you smoke."

"It's different. Smoking doesn't mess with my consciousness," she said. "What reason is there to drink?"

"Well, sometimes I'd rather not be fully conscious," Jules answered. It had been a long time since he'd last smoked; the smoke burned his throat a bit.

"Because there is no weight to your actions."

"Is there weight to yours?" Jules asked, smiling and furrowing their brow.

Circe turned her face to them, staring for far too long. Jules started sweating a little. Had they said something wrong? At last, she tilted her head, her eye turning down a little. "Your hair is slightly longer than I thought it was," she said. He'd let it loose to wash it.

Her focused gaze burned a hole in him. He inhaled some smoke and coughed. "Yeah, it needs a cut," he said, trying not to smile too much.

"Looks okay," she said simply, turning her eye back to the sky.

Jules tried to catch their breath. As a breathing exercise, they took a long, measured drag out of their cigarette. It was somewhat calming. "Thank you. Yours looks... pretty good."

She touched it mindlessly. Admittedly, it was a mess, cut much shorter at some points than others. "It looks like shit," she said, "I can't cut it myself."

"If you'd be comfortable, I could put on some gloves and cut it for you," Jules said.

"You... You're stubborn," she said, her voice faltering. She blew some smoke out slowly, looking directly at him. Her eye was wide and so was her pupil; her lips were parted. She swallowed hard. After looking at Jules for a good while, her face hardened again.

"Alright. Tomorrow, after you manage to get dressed."

"Yay!" Jules threw their arms up, quickly holding onto the blanket when it started sliding down their chest. "Are we smoke buddies now?"

"No. I already told you to lay off me," she said, "You're so desperate for attention."

"So what? Isn't it nice to have someone interested in you?" they asked. It was hard to tell under the candlelight, but they thought she'd blushed.

"Not when I can't reciprocate."

"Do you *want* to?"

Again, she stared at him in silence. Her brow lowered. She put her cigarette out. "There's nothing so interesting about me, Jules. Go to sleep," she said, closing the window and turning away, "Tomorrow you'll be feeling even better."

After resting, Jules managed to get dressed. It came time for the promised haircut. Circe let them borrow one of her pairs of gloves. It fit pretty well. "Button your sleeves over them if you can," she said, watching as Jules tried to hide any trace of skin. She sat in front of the vanity and took her eyepatch off. The sight had become familiar.

Jules stood behind her with the scissors, pausing to watch her face in the mirror. Her eye was so, so wide. "How do you want it?"

"Just make it less shit, please."

"I thought it was a statement. Like, 'look at me, I'm so tough'," he said, handling her messy hair with care.

Their eyes met in the mirror. She glared at him. "Don't mock me, Jules."

"I'm not mocking," they said, their knees going a little weak, "I thought you were tough. And cool." Before she could chastise them again, they started cutting it. There was a lot of volume that died out at her chin's level; they tried to make it more equal.

She smiled faintly. "I told you I wouldn't seem so interesting once you knew more."

"But I still think you're tough and cool," they said. "And interesting."

"You're quite interesting yourself," she said, this time with a proper smile.

"I... didn't think I'd hear you say that," they said, lips quivering a little. "Do you want to keep the front longer?"

"Yeah," she mumbled, closing her eye. "You're contradictory. Benny was right. You're not worth the blood you bleed. You don't even have a spot to drop dead. You've gone a couple days without drinking and you're already complaining. You're a cheat."

Though Jules kept the smile up, each phrase was like another stabbing. Still, they cut her hair with a firm hand.

"But out of someone like that, I'd expect the worst. Like the guy who shanked you," she paused, sighing. "You're weird, though. You were fine with it. An Umbral degenerate who's

not keen on using black magic for their own comfort, or retiring with benefits after going to war. That's rare." She let out a wry laugh.

Jules let her rant sink in. "Hey, Circe. I know that's normal and all, but... I feel like you have a particular disgust for the Academy," he said softly.

Silence took over. Her hair fell to the ground, forming clumps of dirty blond strands. She took in a ragged breath. "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"Can I..."

"I've been there, you know. Everyone is self-serving at best. That's all I'm saying," she said.

"Alright," they said, clacking the scissors in the air, "What do you think?"

She opened her eye, meeting the mirror. Her face lit up with a genuine smile; it sent a shock down Jules' spine, chilling his insides. Somehow, that smile was softer than any other she'd displayed those past few days. For once, she didn't have her lips tightly shut and a furrowed brow.

"It's been a while since I looked anywhere close to prim," she said, her voice quivering a bit. She rubbed her eye with caution.

"It's okay to rely on people to do little things for you," Jules said, "But you look good with any haircut, so..."

"You need to stop saying such things to me, Jules," she said, standing up and straightening her clothes out. More hair fell to the ground.

"Does it make you uncomfortable?" they asked, holding onto the scissors with an iron grip.

"I don't know what to do with it," she said. Her shoulders went up.

"We could... be friends. Just for a little while."

She tilted her head. "Someone like me is best left alone."

They couldn't see her face. "Someone like you? I thought we'd already established I'm far worse," they said, trying to give an encouraging smile.

"It doesn't matter. What's the point in being friends with someone you can't touch? So inconvenient," she mumbled, starting to sweep the hair off the floor.

"I'd be fine with that. There's lots I want to bug you about still," they said.

She grew rigid. "I said no, Jules," she said, turning her face to him. She had a frown. "Respect me."

"Okay," they said, dropping the scissors and the gloves on the vanity and going back to bed. There, they hid safely from her sight.

They did respect her wishes. Talking to her had been like headbutting a wall so far. So Jules let her be, his drive to gather needed money rekindled. If he felt good enough to sit up, he felt good enough to sit at a table and bet. At night, they struggled up the steps to the common area, leaving the comfort of Circe's room. Their guts stirred and burned; nausea welled up, but they pushed on until finding themselves in the midst of the other guests.

Somehow, the gleeful banter felt nothing but unpleasant that night. They held onto their tender abdomen, surfing the crowd for a game to join. It felt odd to be back to such familiarity after that intermission. When Circe appeared to place a cup in front of another guest, her gaze pierced Jules. Jules smiled and signaled for her. "Hey, sweetheart," he said, slathering honey on it. It was easy to throw such words around between strangers, after all. Her face scrunched up and she froze. "Some wine and bread, yeah?"

For a moment, she didn't budge. Her lips curled and she balled her fists up before just nodding and walking away. Jules felt a sting to their lower stomach. Shouldn't have done that. When she returned, she whispered: "Have sepsis and go into shock." She uncorked the bottle with unnecessary violence and poured him a glass.

Jules was more cautious about their cheating this time, letting the others grow as confident as possible. Whenever he caught Circe's eye, she looked at him with her lips parted and brow raised. She seemed pale. With each drink he ordered, her disapproval became more evident; still, she served him. At the end of the night came time to return to her room. She followed not much after, tearing the eyepatch off in an obvious display of anger.

"Are you trying to be fucked up again?" she said, containing her voice so as not to shout.

"Not really, no," Jules said, sitting on her bed. It felt odd to do so.

"You're reverting to the exact behavior that led to it in the first place," she said. Though they could see how tense she was, she moved little; she kept her fists balled up beside her body, occupying little space.

"You don't need to worry about me, Circe." Jules smiled.

"I'm the one who has to pick glass off you!" she said, stomping her foot a bit.

"This is the only way I can pay my tab and move on." They shrugged lightly.

"You're in no condition to travel. What are you thinking?" she asked, properly shouting.

"I've inconvenienced you for long enough," Jules said softly.

Her shoulders dropped along with her jaw. She just stared at them for a while. Jules saw her eye glisten and tears form on her lower lid. She turned her face away. Jules' chest was suddenly warm.

"You know, you're still sending me mixed signals. If you want my company, you should say so. But when you say things like you did this morning and ask me to respect you, of course I will," they said, looking away too. His body was hot and heavy from the alcohol and thoughts came and went too quickly. "What did you expect?"

She didn't answer. She just stood there, face hidden from their sight. They sighed.

"You're so lonely it hurts to look at. If you want something from me, you need to tell me now. Because I *will* leave you on your own like you asked, you know," they said.

Her hands trembled. He heard her snuffle. For a while, it seemed like she wouldn't answer at all. Then, she turned to face him, lips curled and eyebrows slanted upwards. Her face was all scrunched up. Tears streamed through the side that still had an eye.

"You were right," she said, sobbing, "I wanna live, Jules." She paused, looking up to the ceiling as the tears rolled down. She blinked a little, as if trying to contain them. "I can't and I don't know how to. Then you come and get under my skin." She said it like an accusation. Her voice was high-pitched.

Jules started lifting their arms as if to offer a hug, but then caught himself. Instead, he slid to the other side of the bed and gestured for her to sit down on the wide open space.

"Come here. I won't go near you," he said.

She sat and he handed her a pillow. She hugged it without needing further instruction, her fingers digging into it as she kept it against her chest. The fabric soaked up her tears. As she cried, she folded over herself, sobbing. The sound was piercing; the pain crawled down Jules' neck and through his spine.

"Someone had to get under your skin," they said, keeping their voice low. "It's not good to keep these things bottled up."

"But there's nothing I can do with them," she said, her hands going up to hide her face. Her fingernails dug on her skin and it looked like she'd tear it off. Still, Jules couldn't grab her arms and pull them away.

"You can be honest with yourself. There are people around you who care about you," Jules said, touching their back to the wall. "Like Benny and the others. They'd be your friends." They had called her 'Cici', after all. His stomach squeezed up.

"It's exactly because they're nice to me that I should keep them away," she said, still hiding her face. Her breathing was fast and choppy; Jules wanted to place their hand on her back and tell her to take it slow. "Someone like me..."

"You keep repeating that, but I have no idea what it means," they interrupted, watching her closely, "I only see a meek girl who hates herself."

She sniffled. For a moment, it sounded like she was choking. Then, she raised her face to Jules. It was all puffy and red. "If I give people too much trust, they always get too comfortable."

"They touch you?" they asked. Jules didn't use a serious tone often. Circe nodded. "Let's do it like this," he said, "I won't touch you. I'll be the one being mindful for once. I see how you're always holding back and squeezing away from people. I'll be the one holding back. *You* will let loose. And we'll try things you haven't been able to do."

Her teeth dug on her lower lip. Ever so slightly, she rocked back and forth. Then, she sighed. "I guess you're weird in the good sense," she mumbled. When she focused on Jules, her pupil was dilated. "So you'll... stay a bit longer?"

"Yeah. You asked the right person, you know. I'm as fun as it gets," he smiled.

"If your concept of fun is deranged, I'm sure," she said, scoffing and laughing a little.

"You just agreed to let loose," he said, smiling wider. "Will you let your guard down for me? Just a tiny bit."

"I don't get why you're so interested."

"Well, you did help me," Jules said, shrugging. They had to look away to hide the blush on their cheeks. It was the way she'd look down on them; the way she spoke, dragging out every 's'; her mannerisms. There was a trained certainty to her footwork and the way she'd dance around people in a crowded room. But admitting any of that would make it sound like he had hidden intentions.

"Hey," she pulled them back to reality. When they turned their face, they met her extended hand holding a cigarette. They took it with caution. "Smoke buddies," she said simply, smiling. Her nose was even redder than the rest of her face.

"Nice." He lit both of their cigarettes and they smoked in peace. The relaxing chill that coursed through his veins couldn't be just from the tobacco.

As Circe got ready to sleep, Jules turned away to give her privacy. "So, tomorrow... Where do you wanna start?" She mm'ed and then there was only the sound of ruffling fabric as she changed into her pajamas.

"I have no idea," she said at last. It sounded like she'd cry again.

"Is there nothing you'd like to do?"

Jules turned back to her. Her arms were dropped by the sides of her body and her head was tilted. "I'd... like to sunbathe. Then I'd go for a swim," she said. Her shoulders squared up. "I don't go because it means exposing too much skin. If anyone were to show up, I'd be... like that." She turned her face to him and smiled faintly. "But if you come with, I won't be alone."

Her feeble smile warmed Jules' heart. "Sure. I could go for a swim. I'll race and humiliate you," they said.

She giggled and the warmth turned melting hot. "You won't. All you know is cheating."

"Wait and see," they shrugged. She laid down on the floor again and the sight weighed Jules down. "Hey. What did you mean when you said you're used to sleeping on the ground?"

She froze up for a moment. "Guess it's related," she mumbled.

"Let loose."

She sighed. "I spent a bunch of my teen years locked away in a room," she said nonchalantly. "No bed. That's why."

"Locked away like... an indoors-y person? Figuratively?" Jules asked, even if the way she'd phrased it had instantly irradiated cold up their body.

"No," she said, pausing to laugh a bit, "Literally locked away. It's just a thing. A thing that happened. It's a drag to talk about, you understand."

She sounded deceptively alright. Jules took a deep breath, trying to ignore the mental image. "I understand," he said, though he really didn't. "This is your room, though. I'm better now. I can take the floor."

"This is nothing, Jules. Injured people get no input, I already told you."

After thinking for a while, Jules dragged themselves and their blanket to the floor, keeping their distance from Circe. She rolled around to furrow her brow at them. "Then we're both sleeping on the ground," he said.

Circe rolled her eye. "For fuck's sake. You're so stupid. That's an empty ass gesture," she said, groaning, "Now both of us are bedless."

"Exactly." Jules smiled.

She still frowned at them. "You're hopeless."

Throughout the morning, it felt like there was a bug clawing at Jules' guts. Pure tingly anxiety washed over him as he waited for the afternoon. When it came, they went back to the pier together. Again, the breeze was nice and the water, perfectly still. However, Circe just stood there, fidgeting. "You still wanna do this?" he asked.

She took a deep breath. "This is stupid," she mumbled, untying the eyepatch. Then came the gloves; she pulled them off and her fingers slid out. Jules wasn't used to seeing them. She kicked her shoes off and, visibly holding her breath, shimmied out of her skirt. Her stockings dug into her thighs; Jules looked away as she slid them off. They needed to find a way to stop... perceiving her. Their face was warm as they took their own pants off.

Soon they were both just in their shirts and underwear, staring at each other. Jules tried to keep their expression neutral, but held their hands in front of themselves awkwardly. Circe was rocking from side to side again. "Warming up to it?" she asked, smiling faintly.

"Yep. You?"

"Yeah." She looked around again and grunted. Her hands flew down and she gripped the hem of her shirt. "Fuck it," she said, throwing her arms up; the shirt went flying to the wooden boards below. The movement was so sudden that Jules hardly had the time to avert their eyes before being flashed by her boobs. The way she'd torn the shirt off had made them bounce a little.

They turned their head and caught their breath, too conscious of the fact that looking at her meant seeing nearly all of her. He was pretty sure she trusted him not to think of her that way. A splash reached his ears along with drops of water on his legs. Then, laughter filled with pure glee. "Yeah, there's nothing weird about this. We used to do it like this as kids anyway," she said.

Jules risked a look at her. She was keeping herself afloat and smiling at them. They held their tongue so as not to remind her that they were not kids. They levitated themselves down to sit at the edge of the pier. Still with an easy smile, she swam up to find support on the opposite edge, crossing her arms over the wood plank. "You know, it's not fair that I'm the only one with my tits out."

"I think you and I have different feelings about having our tits out," Jules pointed out, smiling back.

"Oh, sorry," she said, actually blushing a little. Was it the second time she blushed? "If it helps any, to me you're not a guy or a girl. Just a rascal."

"Actually, that's good. Let's go with that," Jules said, their arms still crossed.

She closed her eye and sighed, resting her head on her arms. Seeing her floating so peacefully made them relax a bit too. "I was wondering. Is Jules short for something? Like Julian."

"Nah. Just Jules."

"You do look like a Jules," she agreed.

"What's that even mean?" they asked, to which she just shrugged. "You're wondering about me, huh." It'd given him a slight buzz.

She blushed again. Two in one day? "Don't make this a thing," she said, frowning.

"Why not? I'm glad," Jules said. Her face softened. After bracing themselves some more, they took their own shirt off and managed to slide into the water without demanding too much from their body. The noise alerted Circe and she opened her eye wide, swimming away.

"Relax. I said I'd be the one on guard," they said, letting their body float. The pressure of the water was relieving on their sore muscles.

"I can't help myself," she said, deciding to float as well. "Guess you're too fucked up to actually race me. That means I win by default."

As she gave him a smug look, he splashed some water her way, hitting her face full force with some aid from telekinesis. "I can humiliate you through other means," he said. Her face dropped and she blinked. A frown came on as soon as she recovered; his sudden attack had kindled something. She let out some form of insult and splashed them back. They were able to tell she was putting some telekinesis into it as well just by the effort on her face. So, they stopped the attack midway through the same means; the water dropped back to the lake. "Try harder, please," they laughed, going back to floating happily.

"You're a cheat!" she shouted, hurling yet more water at Jules. Just to appease her, they allowed themselves to get splashed.

"Well, you used magic too," he shrugged.

After a considerable while splashing about, the two found support in the pier again. Circe's face was pale and her breathing, rapid; similarly, Jules' side ached. Even the muscles between his ribs were sore. He just watched her for a moment. Though she was obviously tired, she smiled. "Hey, Circe. Can I ask you something?"

Her smile turned hesitant. "Yeah?"

"You said you've been to Umbral Star, but I figure you weren't a student. So..." they paused. "What's that about?"

She shifted, resting her head on her arms. "That's also a drag to talk about," she mumbled.

"A drag for you? Or..." he paused, gesturing vaguely at himself.

Circe averted her eye. She sighed. "It's useless to talk about things that can't be changed. It just bothers people," she said.

"I'm legitimately curious. I'm directly asking you," they said, softening their voice. They let their head drop as well. "It won't bother me."

She lifted herself to the pier, turning to sit on the edge. Jules couldn't help but think her arms must be strong. Water droplets ran down her body, reflecting the sunlight. They decided to focus on her face; wet streaks of hair clung to her forehead and cheeks. "I was part of some research on..." she paused and swallowed hard. "Curses."

"All you know is telekinesis, though," they pointed out. "So you mean you were a subject? Part of a control group?"

She looked down at them, her eye widening. Her lips were pressed shut as she took their whole face in. "You're more observant than I thought. Sucks."

"What? It takes a lot of observing to be a good cheater," Jules said. He scoffed and took a hand to his chest.

"Yet you still mess up," she said, smiling.

"Anyways. At first I thought... Siren. But no tattoos on you. Curious. It's her method," they said, gesturing vaguely at her. With more effort and magic, they lifted themselves and sat on the pier as well.

Her face scrunched up. "Yeah, Siren."

Jules had to laugh at her expression. "Oh yeah, she's such a stuck up. I'd say bootlicker too, but it seems everyone's defecting these days."

"Circe?" The rise of a sudden voice behind them made Jules lift an arm to cover their chest, almost jumping in their skin. He recognized it as the cook's voice. "Are you guys out for a swim?" he asked, shouting the question from the inn's backdoor. The note of surprise in his tone was hard to miss.

Circe turned to grab the first piece of clothing she found; she held it over her chest, smiling awkwardly. "Yeah...?" She blushed again. A third time?

"Good. I was just... making us some snacks. So when you're done..." his voice died out.

"Thanks, Vince," she said. The smile turned genuine. Jules heard the door shut again and let their held breath go. Circe turned that smile to Jules and his heart squeezed up.

"You're getting cookies. Lucky you."

"Am I? I'm included?" they blinked.

She shrugged. "Eh, let's find out."

After drying off and getting dressed, they went up the steps to find the inn's staff eating their snacks in the common room. This time, Circe sat along with everyone, though she did pick a lonely corner. As soon as Jules sat down, Vince wordlessly put a plate of cookies in front of him. "Does this go on my tab?" Jules asked before daring to touch anything.

Vince just stared for a moment. "My treat," he said simply, walking away.

"Eyepatchless Cici," Benny said, smiling at her as he stole one of her cookies, "That's new."

She touched the skin around her empty eye socket, averting her gaze. Her smile dropped. "Yeah, the skin's a little tender."

"You'll get a sunburn," Jules said.

Circe grumbled and got back to eating, only speaking when provoked by Benny. There was a cheery undertone to her snark. It made Jules have to hold back a smile. All of it was just too much: the banter, the hot food, the smell of homemade desserts... The sense of home just solidified the fact that Jules was intruding on their space. Knowing he'd been willingly included made his eyes sting somehow.

As they basked in that feeling, someone touched their shoulder. They looked back to see Vince again. He just gestured for Jules to follow him; as they got up, Circe eyed them inquisitively. "Dishwashing duty?" she asked, smirking. Vince nodded. He led Jules to the kitchen and closed the door cautiously as soon as he walked in. Much like Circe, there was a precision to his every step. He stood taller than them, his stern expression inducing a chill in Jules' guts. "Jules, right?" he asked. At least his tone was neutral.

"Yeah."

"I was chatting with the other guys just now," he said, leaning on a counter and crossing his arms. "You're racking up quite the debt." Jules' awkward smile froze in their face. Vince scratched his hair absentmindedly. "But I've... we've never seen Circe warm up to anyone." He turned his back on Jules and started wiping the counter down, even though Jules had been sure it was perfectly clean. "I never thought I'd see her playing."

"I got that impression," Jules said, keeping their voice down.

Vince sighed. "We decided that you can stay as long as Circe's happy. That's what I mean."

Their mouth went agape. His brain halted. When it got back into gear, he asked: "Does Circe mean that much to you?"

He staggered. "Yeah." After a pause, he looked off to the side. "You can wash some dishes if you want. She might grow suspicious otherwise."

"Sure." As they pulled their sleeves back, though, they furrowed their brow. "Why can't she know?"

Vince scratched his head again. "She's skittish."

Yeah. Jules got to washing.

As had become custom, they gathered by the window to smoke before sleep. Circe handed a single cigarette for him to light. "I'm running low on smokes," she said, "We'll have to share." Though her expression was nonchalant, her cheeks were red yet again. Or was it a sunburn? Still, he lit it, took the first drag and extended it out to her. Her gloved finger brushed against his hand as she took it and he shivered. Couldn't help it. When her lips touched the same spot his had, the shiver came back. He felt like a teenager.

"Jules," she called, serious. She didn't look at them. "I had fun today."

"Me too. You're such a sore loser. Love to see it," he said, smiling. They cautiously passed the cigarette around as they talked.

"I mean it."

That was the softest look he'd ever seen on her face. As his chest warmed up and squeezed his heart, he bent over the window frame, trying to keep his composure. "I know," he said. After basking in the silence for a while, they raised their voice: "What's with the drawings on the walls?"

She raised her shoulder. "I can't stand bare walls."

Jules watched her out of the corner of their eye. "You ever get claustrophobic?" they asked.

Her face dropped. "A little." Smoke drifted away from her mouth as she tried to keep her cool. She was so obvious that it made Jules smile. "You pay too much attention to me," she said, her tone going lower.

"Do you want me to stop?"

Immediately, her body went stiff. She paused, the cigarette still in her hand. "No," she said, biting her lip. "I want you to keep going. But I know I shouldn't." Her idle hand gripped the window frame.

"Again, you should let loose. You can keep me at an arm's distance, but don't push me away if you want me around," they said, extending their hand towards her to ask for the cigarette. She acquiesced.

"You're very full of yourself." She smiled at them.

"You like it though. A little bit, yeah?" they asked, grinning.

"Shut up."

Knowing Jules had the time to just watch Circe for as long as they wanted soothed them. Thus, they slowly got comfortable with the new routine; the bed remained unoccupied and the staff took him under their wing, letting him eat with them during every meal. The moments he had alone with Circe were all spent nudging her.

They sat together on her bed during an afternoon, backs turned to the open window. The breeze ruffled her hair, hiding her slight smile at times.

"Circe," they called, cheeks turning warm when she focused on them. "Can I see your artwork?"

Her smile turned nervous. She fidgeted with her hands. "There's not much to it."

"That's fine," they shrugged.

After a while of rubbing her own thumb, she got up and ran her fingers across the contents of her shelves. She grabbed a thick notebook and gave it to Jules without making eye contact. With her hands joined before her, she sat, focusing her gaze on her lap. Receiving no further instruction, they opened the notebook to find still nature sketches. They were all things he'd find if he looked around, certainly.

"I know. I'm not very imaginative," she mumbled. She started playing with her bangs, obfuscating his view of her face. "Can I drag you down?" The question came out hesitant.

"Whenever."

She chuckled. "Even when I was locked up, I wasn't very imaginative. Never had it in me," she said. She let out a sigh. "That's not art. It's just idle and... mechanical."

"Isn't that fine?" Jules asked, still looking through the notebook. "Sometimes things just have to serve a purpose. You don't need aim or whatever. That kind of talk annoys me." Without meaning to, he spilled a drop of acid on the last sentence.

Circe turned her face to them, eye wide. She rested her head on her hand. "Oh? Is there something capable of annoying you?" she asked, smiling.

"Lots of things."

She reached out for the notebook and put it aside. Then, she just stared at Jules for a while. The smile was still there and the heat from his cheeks started to course down. "Hey, Jules?"

"Yeah?" they swallowed hard.

"Can I... touch your hand?" she asked, lifting her gloved hand meekly.

"Yes," they said, biting their tongue once they realized they'd answered too fast.

"Lift your hand," she said. They obeyed. "Now don't move. Please." Taking deep breaths, she took her hand to his. Even through the glove, it felt warm — but not as warm as

his body was. Then, she slid her fingers between his, entwining them; their hands were joined. Instantly, Jules' insides turned liquid. She closed her eye and just breathed for a second. Her breathing was steady, unlike his.

"Sorry," she said after a while, separating their hands. Her warmth dissipated too fast.

"Don't apologize," they said, looking away to hide their blushed cheeks. "You can do that whenever you like."

Somehow, it was tough to start a conversation after that.

After one particular shift of Circe's, they headed to her bedroom. As she washed her face, Jules paid attention to the sounds that came from the common room. Loud music passed through the wooden walls. "That musician guy is still at it, eh?" he asked.

"You get used to it," she said simply.

An idea reached their head and butterflies swam in his guts as he suggested: "Or we make a thing out of this. Wanna dance?"

She turned to them with her brow slightly furrowed. "You know about the touching."

"No touching. Just dancing at the same time," they said, smiling wide.

"That's really ridiculous," she scoffed, getting off her chair and crossing her arms.

"I thought you trusted me to show you fun things," Jules pleaded, joining their hands. "Indulge me."

Her arms dropped along with her gaze. "The last time I danced, I was probably five."

"All the more reason to do it."

Because she didn't seem convinced, Jules started tapping their feet to the rhythm, raising their eyebrows at her. She rolled her eye and sighed. "Fine, whatever," she said. Despite her aggressive tone, she blushed yet again. Unable to look them in the eye, she started swaying her arms and hips. Her face turned redder.

"Come on, feet too. You got this," they said, going along with it. As Jules let loose, she grew more confident in her own steps, though she still didn't look at him. "You know, it's nice to see you do something you're not confident at."

She staggered. "You think I look silly."

"No, I love it," he said, smiling. "It's just... No matter what you do, you always look certain. Even just walking, you're so... elegant." He averted his eyes as well.

"You say a lot of nonsense," she said, stammering.

After taking a deep breath, Jules extended his hand, palm up. "It's not nonsense," they said softly so their voice wouldn't quiver, "Want to take my hand?"

She paused, looking at his outstretched hand and biting her lip. "We might touch."

"I'll be careful," Jules said. As she took a step forward and rested her hand on his, his chest went hot. He kept some distance between them and got back to dancing. With her cheeks still tinted red, she followed. Jules nodded to the right. "Twirl?" he asked. They twirled, their arms going over their heads. Circe giggled and her fingers gripped him tighter. How soft her hands must be without those gloves — whenever such a thought hit him, he felt that sting of guilt.

Their dance was slow and measured. Soon their other hands were joined as well. At some point, Circe's nervous smile dropped, making Jules' nape go cold. "Do you really think I look elegant? And confident?" she asked, her voice as cautious as their steps.

Relief washed over him. "Yeah. You move like water. You have this..." they paused to swallow hard. "This air about you."

They twirled again. Not being able to see her face for that short time frame made his throat tighten up. "It's bizarre to me that someone like you thinks that," she said. When they faced each other again, her eye was wide and her face was on fire.

"Someone like me?" Jules knew their faces must look similar.

"Larger than life."

"Is that good?" they asked, their chest turning hot and cold.

"Makes me jealous," she mumbled. "You're fun to watch."

"We can have fun together," they said, lowering their voice as well. Her lips were trembling ever so slightly as she smiled. Though Jules' side was starting to burn, they didn't say anything; they kept dancing until she felt like stopping.

When the ruckus in the common room finally died out at night, Jules and the staff would join two tables as far as possible from the patrons and sit down to eat. Another musician happened to decide to entertain the crowd that night; Jules lifted an eyebrow to Circe and she blushed a little. It made him smile. After dinner, he got off his chair and headed to the bit of open space he could find. Then, they called for her with a motion of their fingers. She approached meekly, leaving the others to chat on their own.

Jules reached out to her. "Grace me with another dance, sweetheart?" they asked, being sure to make their tone sarcastic.

She giggled and looked around. "Is it really fine?"

"Yeah. We're out of their way." He bowed. "Shall we?"

Circe joined their hands, bowing back. Her gloved fingers slid through his skin softly. "Sure, creature."

As punishment, Jules made her twirl at an obnoxious speed. She yelped, but flashed them a smile. The butterflies swam out of his stomach and lodged themselves in his throat. Just watching her was enough to induce such effects. Moving to the same song was almost like being able to hug her, as if they were in sync. Her occasional laughter made them smile and send her spinning.

During one of those spins, Jules caught a flash of skin close to her wrist; a hand was coming up to grab the arm she had above her head. Before they could open their mouth to say something, whoever it was grabbed onto her. The man had also started saying something. It sounded like he was going to ask her to dance as well. However, he couldn't finish his sentence. As fast as he'd touched Circe's skin, he let her go, his fingers tearing at his own face as he stared at the ground and stammered.

Circe's eye widened and her smile dropped. The color fled from her face and she herself fled, letting Jules go and turning tail to her room before they could tell her to wait. She'd barely run out of the room when the man threw himself to the ground, covering his ears.

Heavy steps made Jules lift their face to Benny, who seemed to have caught the commotion. He flashed them a quizzical look. "What's up with him? I thought he was gonna have a problem with Cici, but then..."

"Yeah, I don't know. He just freaked out," Jules said. Their throat tightened up immediately after telling the lie. They did have an idea of what it might have been. Their gut sank.

Benny got down to the guy's shoulder level, calling out to him. When the guy finally spoke, it was something along the lines of "I'm nothing." The unusual sight attracted more patrons. They squeezed up around them and smothered Jules. He squeezed past everyone and ran for the hallway, hoping to catch Circe in her room.

Though their punctured muscles ached, they didn't slow down. Upon reaching her door, they turned the handle for naught. She'd locked it. They knocked on the door, but she didn't answer. Jules let his hands drop to his sides and took in a few deep breaths. "Circe. It's okay. You can open it," he said, "You're cursed, aren't you?" It hadn't been much of a revelation.

It took a while for her to answer. "Yeah."

"I know not to touch you. Come on," he begged, touching his forehead to the door.

Light footsteps from the other side made cold relief irradiate from their spine. They exhaled slowly. She only opened the door enough to reveal her one eye, guarding her body. "Now you know why someone like me..." she interrupted herself, sighing and looking down. "I shouldn't have let loose."

"It's not your fault some guy tried to grab you."

"He wanted to ask me for a dance," she said. Her shoulders were squared up again. "If I weren't dancing..."

"So you can't enjoy yourself because someone might cut in on your personal space? That's ridiculous." His blood boiled and he was sure his face was turning a little red.

"It's my responsibility to be mindful of myself. I've ruined enough people," she insisted, still unable to face them.

"Circe... Let me in. Let's talk in private, alright?" they asked, lowering their voice.

She rocked from side to side until lifting her eye to their face. Her pupil seemed so tiny. Was she scared? She sure looked like it. It only made Jules' blood hotter. Finally, she pulled back, opening the door. After Jules walked in, she shut and locked it again.

"You shouldn't stop living because other people have no respect," they said, standing with arms crossed.

"There's a guy losing his mind up there because of me," she said, "And you're defending me."

Jules covered their face for a moment. They took in a deep breath. Inhale, exhale. Slowly. "Honestly, Circe, I can't bring myself to give a shit about that guy." She started saying something, but stammered; her eye was wide. "If he wanted to take you out to dance, he could have asked," he said. Then, he cast his gaze aside. "That was my dance," he mumbled.

"Are you really more worried about that?!" she nearly shouted, balling her fists up. She was all stiff again.

"Yeah. I'm not worried about someone who thinks they're entitled to a woman's time and body," they said, waving the concern away. Then, they focused their eyes on her. "I'm more worried about you."

"I hurt people!" She threw her arms up. Still, she was blushing and her eye glistened.

"Maybe I'm not that good a person," Jules said, shrugging.

She hid her face and took a step back. "I'd gone so long without fucking up," she said. Her voice was quivering. "Then you come along with your silver tongue. I should never have let loose."

Her words drove a wedge between his ribs. He took a deep breath, trying to keep himself together. Though his face was hot, the rest of him was cold. "I just wanted you to have fun."

"Maybe I don't deserve to."

Jules' hands itched, yearning to grip her by the shoulders and pull her into a hug. They'd press her head against their chest and keep her quiet. But they stayed still. "We're going at this the wrong way. You don't have to be cursed your whole life."

"I've tried."

"Look at me," he asked, keeping his voice soft. She lowered her hand, focusing her puffy eye on him. "If Siren couldn't figure it out, there's no way I can. Do you know who the original caster is?"

She shook her head vehemently, holding her skirt with a firm grip. "It's useless. I'm not going there."

"After trying Siren and the Umbral Star, it's your only shot."

"That's why I'd made my peace with it," she said. "I can't allow myself to want anything more."

"You obviously didn't make your peace with it," they said, keeping their arms crossed tightly to refrain from coming closer to her. "You told me you want to live." She didn't answer. A choking sound came out of her throat. "Circe. I'm used to curses. I think..."

"I said no!" she shouted, tugging at her skirt so hard he thought she'd rip it. "No good could come from it!"

Jules lifted his hands, trying to keep a relaxed posture. "Alright. It's okay," he said, lowering his tone, "I won't push you." He repeated it until she let her skirt go, taking in deep breaths. Then, he walked to the bed and took the top sheet. "Blanket method?" they offered, lifting it.

"You... want to hug me?" she asked, her face scrunching up.

"You look like you need it."

"You just saw what might happen to you."

"It's safe through fabric, isn't it?" they asked, jiggling the sheet and lifting their brow. Suddenly, she let out a sob. Tears trickled down her face in quick succession. "Sorry. We don't have to."

"I want it," she said, her words coming out muffled. "But then I'd be a liar."

Jules walked towards her and wrapped her body in the sheet unceremoniously. "Whatever," he said, "I've lied a lot. At least when it's just us two, keep indulging." They held her by the shoulders, the burnt wick of their anger turning to sadness as he watched her swollen face.

"Why are you so invested in me?" she asked, sniffing.

Jules averted their gaze. "I like you. I think you're nice. That's all," he said. Then, he cautiously took her wrapped body in for a hug, avoiding her exposed face.

She was as soft as they'd thought she was. Her warmth was shared with him and it made him relax against her. It wasn't the same warmth as his anger's; no, her body was soothing against him. It took a while, but her arms wrapped around his waist too, pulling him closer. He could feel her heartbeat. She was sobbing quietly against their shoulder, her tears dampening his shirt. "You feel so good," she whispered. All it did was make him hotter.

"You're very huggable," they whispered back. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? I was... worried."

"You're a mage. At first I was afraid you'd want to poke at me too," she said, "Then that you'd pull away or... something."

"I wouldn't. I really do like you. Curses are a run of the mill thing."

"Not this one," she mumbled.

"I guess not, if Siren couldn't crack it." They started rocking from side to side slowly. Jules figured the movement would calm her down. "You do know who the caster is, though?"

Circe let out a heavy sigh. "It's an entity from another plane. That's why it's no use," she said, gripping them tighter, "You get it."

His whole spine froze. He halted for a moment, but got back to rocking her smoothly. "I get it. You must be tired," they said, rubbing her back over the sheet, "Sleep on the bed today."

"I don't want to let you go," she whispered, choking a little mid-way. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

"It's selfish," she said, her head still resting on their shoulder, "But it's been too long."

"It's okay. I like hugging. You can have more hugs." She started sobbing again. Her body trembled under his arms. All of it was an attack on his senses; it made their throat squeeze up.

When her breathing had turned steadier and her strength had faded some, Jules put some distance between them. They guided her to bed and made her lie down. Her eyelids were so puffy he could hardly look into her humid eye. Her sniffles stung their heart. "Leave your thoughts for tomorrow," they said, caressing her shoulder over the sheet. "When you cry this much, the only thing to do is sleep."

"I don't feel like I deserve this."

"I told you to leave it for tomorrow," he said, sighing, "But in any case, it was an accident." They paused to think. "How old were you when you were cursed?"

"Fourteen."

"You've been denying yourself affection since you were a kid," they said. "I think you deserve it. Even if you didn't, I want to... shower you in it."

Circe's face snapped back to him. "What?" Her swollen cheeks had turned even redder.

As Jules himself blushed, he threw a hand up and magically blew all the candles out in one fluid gesture. "Go to sleep."

Having the rare opportunity of getting up earlier than Circe the next day, Jules pushed himself off the ground. Though the gesture made their sides twitch and burn, they still offered to sleep on the floor. With silent steps, he got out of her room and into the kitchen to find Vince. "Hey."

Vince looked up from the eggs he was frying. "Morning, Jules," he said. His face looked more worn than usual that day.

"Could you make something for Circe? Something that might cheer her up," they said.

His brow furrowed. "How's she doing?"

"Um, low." Jules averted their eyes.

Vince sighed. "It's such a pity someone would come onto her like that just when she's coming out of her shell," he said, mindlessly flipping a pancake. "I just don't get what the guy was so distraught over. Pathetic, if you ask me."

They let the conversation die out, not quite willing to engage in the lie even further. So they just waited until Vince served up some pancakes. "Here. She likes these sweet," he said in a low voice. Jules picked up the plate with a nod and turned his back to leave.

"Wait," Vince called out. They turned to see him holding out yet another plate. "Your eggs and toast."

They smiled. "You're great, Vince."

The man looked away, focusing on the stove again. "You're taking care of her. That's all," he said.

Circe's red eye peeked at him as soon as she smelled the pancakes. She sat upright in a flash and smiled wide, reaching for the plate. After she sank her teeth in and started chewing, though, her face turned pensive. She swallowed hard and frowned at them. "You walked down the steps with both your hands full?!" she asked.

"Well, yeah," he said, sitting with her on the bed.

"You could have seriously hurt yourself! Even split your wound open!"

They interrupted her. "You're too lenient on me," he said, smirking, "You worry about me that much?"

"Shut up." She looked away, biting some more of her pancake. "You're just... much more solid than I'd thought you were."

"Ouch." He focused his own gaze on his breakfast. "You're much sweeter than I thought, too."

"I'd say meek. In the pathetic sense of the word," she said, her voice going lower, "I tried, but I never unlearned it."

"I don't think it's pathetic. More... heartwarming." Coincidentally, his heart warmed up.

She went silent for a while. "Hey, Jules..." she started. He mumbled something in recognition. "Have you ever dated?"

An unpleasant chill made them clench their jaw. "Yeah."

"Yeah. My ex-girlfriend called me helpless the first time we met. It's like people see right through me," she said. "Then things like what happened last night happen. Because I look defenseless and approachable and I never really unlearned it. Even you saw right through me."

"That's bullshit," Jules said, cleaning his fingers and pausing. "No matter how soft you are, people don't have the right to just manhandle you."

"Eh, it's not just the manhandling." She sighed.

He was flustered to the point of not knowing how to answer. "So you're a lesbian?" he asked, his cheeks somewhat hot.

"No, I'm a disaster," she said plainly. When Jules looked back at her, her face was also red. They both chuckled awkwardly. "But that's what you got out of that?" she asked.

"Well, no. But you did ask me about my love life. That was a bad segue. Actually, just unnecessary," they said, paying close attention to her. "Made me think you just wanted to know more about... that side of me."

Circe choked. After coughing whatever it was out of her throat, she just stared at him for a solid moment, her mouth agape and her cheeks still red. After a long blink, she turned her face away. "I just thought whoever dated you was lucky," she muttered, holding onto her plate with a strong grip.

Jules put their own plate aside, unable to sustain that conversation and eat at the same time. Slowly, as if she might notice his moment of weakness, he touched his back to the wall. His guts felt hot and loose; his breathing was disturbed. "Hey, Circe..." they called in a low voice, "Are we making a thing out of this?"

She couldn't look at them. "I don't know. I'm sorry," she said, putting her plate down as well. "I shouldn't have said that. It's just... you're so easy to hang out with."

"It's good that you're saying things," they said. "I like you too." Their stomach churned so hard they thought they'd puke.

"That's sad," she said, fidgeting with her hands. "You know why. No good liking someone you can't come near."

"Oh, I don't know. That hug was pretty good. It was the same as a normal hug, wasn't it?"

She sighed. "It won't be enough. It never is. People... my ex would always say it was." She tilted her head and her hair hid her expression from Jules. "But people lie."

"I'm not lying, though you wouldn't know because I do have a great poker face," they said, smiling. "I could be yours for the low, low price of your hand on mine. Right now." He extended his hand out to her, palm up. She turned her wide eye to him, freezing up; her hands were trembling on her lap. "I'd be more than happy just watching you from a distance and being there for you for as long as you want," they added.

"You're hopeless," she said, shutting her lips into a thin line. Still, she bent to get her gloves from the nightstand. The red that stained her cheeks turned furious as she put them on, fumbling a little. "You really are such a silver tongue." Her hand slid onto his and he held it, bending down to kiss her knuckles.

"You got quite the bargain. I'm now yours," he grinned, smiling. "Now you're the lucky one."

"I shouldn't have fed your ego," she said, pulling back slightly. Still, she didn't let go of their hand. Her smile quivered. "This is scary," she admitted.

"You can change your mind at any point."

"I trust you a lot right now," she said. Combining her tone with her expression, it sounded like a warning.

"Earning trust is a continuous endeavor," Jules admitted, letting her hand go cautiously. She smiled again and went back to eating. Once she seemed satisfied, Jules decided to press her further. "How did you end up getting cursed by a foreign entity?"

Hesitant, she lifted her gloved hand back to Jules, waiting for them to take it. Once their hands were joined, she took a deep breath. "My hometown was right within a rift," she said, "I made a deal with a... creature."

He gripped her hand harder as he waited for the chills on his spine to settle down. "A deal?"

"Yeah. My eye in exchange for something I wanted," she said, touching around the cavity. She still hadn't put on her eyepatch. "But I guess an eye was too stingy a payment," she chuckled.

Though Jules wanted to ask, he shoved the question back. "It's no wonder the scholars couldn't figure out a fix."

Circe laughed. "I told them the whole story. I think Siren knew she couldn't fix me. She just wanted to, you know... do some limit testing."

The mental image made them wince. "What exactly does the curse do?"

She shifted, biting her lip for a moment. More hesitation? "It shows you your worst possible future. Or futures. That's the conclusion they came to."

"So that's why the Bay would be interested," they sighed, "Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if Wyvern herself had some sort of deal."

Circe let out a bitter laugh. "Wyvern? I'd thought she was everyone's sweetheart."

"I'm a wary person," he said, "Besides, she's a Nightgard. Best steer clear of those."

"You're surprising. I thought you had an empty head." She smiled. "Well, I didn't know who she was. Wyvern herself convinced me that they could help me."

"That gives me the creeps." Jules rubbed their thumb against her glove, hoping it would be reassuring. "Hey, I know you don't like talking about this. Let's forget about it for today. Plans for the afternoon?"

Her smile turned bright. "I'll think of something."

While Circe worked, Jules tried to read one of the books she had in her room. It was no use; their brain was swimming on endorphins, giddy with the image of her shy smile. So, being called up for lunch was a blessing. Circe pulled him a chair right beside herself as Vince served everyone. As always, he'd prepared equal portions for each staff member. "In the Academy we'd go without food if we were late," Jules mused, going through his favorites first.

"I have to portion our food," Vince said in his monotone voice, "Because everyone sucks here."

"Now, that's just not true," Benny said, stealing a meatball from him while he wasn't looking.

"He's talking about you," Circe mumbled.

After a while, Jules leaned towards Circe. To his surprise, she didn't move, allowing them to come closer. Her hair smelled like the lake. "Hey, Circe," he started, pointing at her plate, "Can I have one of your fish sticks?"

Circe pushed her plate towards him. "You can have all of them," she said, uninterested.

"What?!" Benny raised his voice, making Vince glare at him, "Cici never gives up her fish sticks. They're her favorite."

"Let her be," Vince said.

Beside Jules, Circe turned red and lowered her face. Benny lowered himself too, trying to get a better look at her. "No way. Cici, do you have a crush on the good-for-nothing?"

"Shut up," Circe said, biting one of her meatballs. "Shut the fuck up."

"You can keep two of your fish sticks," Jules whispered, pushing them back onto her plate. She didn't look at him.

"You do! Look at them," Benny said, banging his palm on the table. "Kids being cute, sharing their fish sticks."

"Circe is not cute," Jules raised a finger and bit into a fish stick. Crunchy. "She's cool and grim."

"I'm gonna have both of you reverse-impaled," she said, still red, "I'm trying to eat."

"Then give *me* a fish stick," Benny said, triumphant.

"No. Only Jules gets the fish sticks." She frowned.

"Why only Jules?"

She kept the frown on and pressed her lips shut for a moment. It seemed like she wanted to look serious, but the red on her cheeks turned furious. "Because I have a crush on them."

Benny shrugged and got back to his own meal. "Thought so."

"This fish stick means a lot to me," Jules declared, stopping to lick the leftover crumbs on their fingers. Circe's eye widened at the gesture and she soon averted it.

As promised, Circe thought of something for them to do in the afternoon. Thus, they were sat together out in the backyard, enjoying the shade. Jules lay on their side on the picnic towel, trying not to strain his wounded muscle. Opposite to him, Circe sat with a sketchbook. She hadn't put the eyepatch back on after washing the cavity. "You've been wearing it less. The eyepatch," they pointed out. To get a better view of her, they lifted their head, supporting it with a bent arm.

"Yeah. I want to get the skin used to the sun. That sunburn wasn't good," she said, rubbing under her scarred lid.

"You always rub it when I make you conscious of it." Jules smiled, raising his hand to his own eye.

She blushed yet again. It'd been getting easier to make her blush. "You pay too much attention to me."

"I have a crush on you." They smirked.

"I know. I don't get why," she mumbled, focusing on her sketchbook. From that angle, he couldn't see what she was drawing; he could see her charcoal smudged hands, though.

"I don't have to touch you to like you," he pointed out, certain that that was what was on her mind. "I think I've been pretty open about it."

"You have. You're shameless," she said, still not looking at him.

"But I haven't told you you're beautiful. I thought you'd think I was objectifying you." Their heart beat faster.

That gave her pause. "I would."

"I'm sorry. It's not what pulled me in." He sighed and closed his eyes. "I just couldn't help but notice. You're... scary."

"Scary is beautiful?"

Because her voice was lighter, they risked opening their eyes. Hers was wide. "Yeah. You look like such a woman. You know, a grown woman. The kind that no one would wanna cross paths with." His own cheeks grew warm and his smile quivered. By the end of the last sentence, he was covering his mouth with one hand.

She laughed. She actually laughed out loud. The sound made his heart jitter. Better than a shot of caffeine. "That's ridiculous," she said, still laughing. She bent over herself, one hand holding onto her guts. After taking deep breaths, she added: "People have thought I'm pretty before, but in the meek way I told you about. In the way one can, as you put it, *manhandle*."

"Gross." Jules grimaced. "Which do you prefer?"

"Your way." She bit her lip and fiddled with her smudgy hands. "You're quite nice to look at too. Except for the fact I keep picturing that gaping hole in your abdomen."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry about getting shanked and souring your first impression of me and stuff." He said, wincing and rubbing his wounded side exaggeratedly.

"You *should* apologize. That was so unnecessary," she said, frowning. She extended a hand with a cigarette out to them. They lit it, careful so their bare skin wouldn't touch. She got back to drawing as she smoked. "Gambling is a terrible addiction. Such a red flag. Can't believe I'm looking past it."

"Oh, you know. It's always supplemented my income. Now it's my only income," they shrugged.

"So you're not a libertine? What about the alcohol?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Never said I don't have bad habits." He raised his hand. "You're one to talk... Pass me the cig."

She huffed, but obliged. They took a drag out of it. Instant relief. "Indirect kiss," they said, smiling. They'd been wanting to point that out since the first cigarette they shared.

Her face went red again. Three. He chuckled. "That's so infantile," she groaned.

"It makes me warm and fuzzy inside."

"So you want to kiss me," she said. Her voice went lower and her expression mellowed out as well.

"Of course I do. But I don't have to," they said, handing her the cig back. "Simple things like shared smokes are nice enough." She accepted the cigarette and stood there like a statue for a moment, just staring at Jules. Then, she finally took a drag out of it. Her cheeks went red immediately. "Indirect kiss," he repeated, smirking.

"Shut up. Asshole."

"You felt it too. Don't deny it. So immature."

"Your childish antics embarrass me. That's what I feel," she said.

"You like it." Jules was about to turn their back on her when Vince appeared out the backdoor with a tray of cookies. When he laid it on the towel between them, Circe's shoulders jumped up and she brought the sketchbook closer to her chest, blushing again. Vince disappeared without mentioning it, but Jules wasn't so graceful. "So, what are you drawing?"

"Nothing. None of your business," she said, holding onto it tightly.

"I have a feeling it's me."

"You're very full of yourself."

"It'd be very sad if you said that and it turned out to be me anyway," he said, smiling. Her blush grew in intensity and she gripped her sketchbook harder. "You should allow yourself to enjoy your feelings. I said I'd help you have fun. There's nothing more fun than a new crush."

"Fuck. You're *so* full of yourself." She bit her lip.

"You let me get away with it." She sighed and turned her face away. Hesitantly, she turned the sketchbook to face him, her dirty hands smudging the page further. It was covered in sketches of Jules lazing around. They smiled. "That's very good," they said.

"Whatever." She bit a cookie, chewing it slowly as if to avoid further talking. Jules chuckled.

Vince reappeared with cups and a jug, placing them on the cookie tray as well. Jules and Circe looked away like they were kids caught flirting. Wasn't that essentially it? To further the embarrassment, Vince knelt between them, his head turned to Circe. "Hey," he called softly, "How you holding up?"

Her faint smile dropped. She touched her scarred lower lid again, feigning distraction. "I'm keeping my mind busy with... other stuff," she said.

Vince nodded. "That's good," he said. With a slow and measured movement, he reached out to pat her hair, but hesitated; ultimately, he didn't. "You keep doing that." He got up to leave.

"Wait," Circe called, not daring to touch him. He paused, looking back at her. "When are we going into town? I'm running out of tobacco."

He nodded again. "We can go. Is that all you need?"

"My plant died too."

"Oh. Pity." He sighed. "I'm sure it wasn't your fault."

Jules felt pinpricks on their nape when Circe looked at them. "Thanks, Vince," she said, ending the conversation.

As soon as they were alone again, Jules threw a quizzical look her way. "Was the plant important?"

She shrugged. Because he kept staring at her, she sighed and added: "I got it as a gift when I started living here. Because I didn't think I could take care of or be around living things. You get it."

"Yeah. I'm sorry for killing it, then."

"You're stupid. Your wellbeing is worth more than a lily's." She frowned at them, her face distorting around her injury.

"It's about the black magic. Some folks would call that a slippery slope," he said, rolling around on the towel and smiling. "It doesn't give you discomfort?"

"Sometimes. Not on its own, though. But you Umbral people would use it for anything without a care," she said. Her gaze grew distant.

"So you're not a Volcana follower."

"No. Never stepped foot in the Valleys. Magic is just a tool," she said, letting her voice die to a mumble. She closed her eyes and took her time smoking. Eyes closed. Bare hands.

Seeing her that relaxed made Jules smile. "It's people you have to avoid."

"Grim. And cool," Jules repeated, snickering.

"Tell me I'm wrong, though," she said, exhaling smoke.

"Nah. It's why I'm here." He sighed. "Just don't go all bitter."

"I'm not." She squared her shoulders up and looked off into the distance.

None of them budged an inch in regards to sleeping on the bed. Somehow, Jules' makeshift bed on the ground ended up close to Circe's. He'd hardly noticed that he'd been pushing it closer each night. One time, her breathing was steady and he'd thought she'd fallen asleep; however, she got up to put one of her gloves on. When she laid back down, she reached out to Jules with her gloved hand. "Could we...?" she whispered, eyeing him cautiously.

They took her hand. "Of course. I'm always up for intimacy," they replied, squeezing it.

"I know," she sighed. "It worries me."

"You think this won't be enough?" He rubbed the fabric with his thumb.

"Now you're happy with... indirect kisses. Because we're flirting and being silly. We're at the stage where even your hand on mine makes my heart beat faster." She paused, turning her head away. "But once we're past that, you'll get frustrated."

"You won't?"

He thought her cheek's color had deepened, but it was hard to see in the moonlight.

"The difference is I'm used to abstaining."

"So you will." Jules smiled, squeezing her hand again.

She scoffed. "I'm trying to have a serious conversation."

"I'm well aware. You're worried because you're physically attracted to me."

"Fuck off, Jules," she said, letting his hand go.

"I thought that's what we were talking about. Physical attraction. Maybe we should."

Her answer didn't come. "Talk about it, that is. I'm attracted to you too."

"That's the problem. We've already established that you're a libertine. You'll get sexually frustrated." Her voice was stern, but there was the slightest hint of melancholy.

"Do you get sexually frustrated?" Jules asked, feeling his smile widen. When she just scoffed again, he chuckled. "Come on, let's make a thing out of this. Like you said, right now everything's new and exciting. Let's take the dive."

"Whatever." She mumbled, turning her back on him. "I do. Then I rub one out and that's it."

"That's boring."

"Well, what the fuck did you expect?"

"Some crying and screaming. Climbing all over the walls. That sort of stuff. Just so I could measure your frustration."

"I didn't say it satisfies me."

"You're just too stuck on what you can't do. Think about what you can do for a moment," Jules said, still smiling.

"Now you're just pushing it. There's nothing I can do." Her voice trembled on the last note. "I can't even kiss you."

"Kissing is about intimacy. Intimacy is about... breaching personal boundaries. Let's breach each other in different ways," they said, keeping the smile on in hopes it would fend off her gloom.

She finally turned back to him, her brow furrowed. "Like what?"

To be honest, he hadn't really thought about it. They just couldn't stand by while she looked that down. "We can touch each other, gloves on. Or over a sheet. It's thinner. We could get naked in front of each other."

"You're a pervert." Yeah, there was no denying her blushing, even under the moonlight.

"Letting you see me naked would be a show of trust," he said, "And you would be in the innermost ring of my personal space. But of course, I'm also a pervert. I want the thrill of being bare in front of you."

She bit her lip. Her pupil grew. "Take your clothes off," she said, no trace of her earlier bashfulness. It made heat course through his body.

Without a word, Jules pushed himself to sit up and their hands found the hem of their shirt. As they took it off, it obscured his vision for a brief moment, during which the heat turned to frost as he imagined Circe's close gaze. Pants came off easily as well. She'd seen that much before. He held his breath when their eyes met. "Are you feeling it?" he asked with a shaky smile.

She was biting her lower lip again. Her eye burrowed a hole into him. Suddenly, Jules was too conscious of their breasts. Crossing their arms didn't help much. "Your underwear," she said softly, "Will you keep it on?"

"I'll get naked if you get naked," he shrugged.

She pushed herself up as well. With her eye closed, she took her shirt off. Just like that day by the lake, her boobs jumped out, unconstricted by the fabric. As Jules' cheeks grew hot, he had to remind himself that it was okay to look this time. The pull of gravity shaped them perfectly like tears. If he could touch them, he'd place his fingers under their curve and pull them up, his fingertips sinking into them. Circe looked so... Her voice pulled him back. "You're staring," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"You can look. We're both... Looking." She averted her eye and took her pants off too. "Together?" The question came meekly.

"Together."

Circe took a deep breath and they pushed their underwear off at the same time. Jules felt their own face burn. No amount of arm crossing could shield him now. Looking at Circe only fueled the burning. Her soft thighs gave way to a mound of pubic hair that ascended to her belly through a tiny trail. Her thighs. He remembered the way the hem of her stockings

had sunk on them. If Jules grabbed them, would his fingertips sink that way? Would they leave an impression afterwards?

She moved her hand to cover her pubes. "You look tempted," she said, her one eye wide and trained on him.

"Does that bother you?"

She lifted one shoulder. "I can't have you trying to touch me."

"I know. I want to know if the *idea* of me wanting to touch you bothers you. Of me thinking you're gorgeous." He cast his eyes down, staring at his own lap. "I respect you."

It took a while for her to answer. "I'd kiss you if I could. And I'd... hug you right now."

"While we're naked?" he asked. She nodded. "Oh, Circe, you're such a pervert. That's lewd."

"Fuck you. You're the one who kicked this off."

They laughed. Then, the idea came to them. "Would you like to spit on me?"

"What." It made her halt at once, eye still wide.

"Kissing is essentially swallowing each other's spit. You can spit in my mouth. Like a brutal indirect kiss."

"Why do I have to be the one who spits?" she said, stammering.

"If I'd asked to spit on you, you'd think I wanted to degrade you in a fetishistic way, wouldn't you?"

"No!" she nearly yelled. Her mouth stayed agape. "My brain doesn't work the same as yours, you degenerate!"

"It's not my fault that you're a prude." He chuckled.

"Is that what you did in the academy?"

"We can talk about that some other time. Now, wanna do the honors?" he asked. He laid back down and opened his mouth.

She inched closer, hovering above him. "Look at the shit you make me do. This is ridiculous."

"You don't have to do it."

"Shut up." She exhaled. It took her a moment. She bent over him, her light hair falling over her shoulders and close to his face. At last, she spat in his mouth. He swallowed it. Tasted like nothing, really. But the gesture made his lower abdomen hot and he wondered if she knew. "This is really stupid," she said.

"Well, I felt it," he shrugged.

"Don't you feel ridiculous?"

"Circe, you're so gorgeous that I'd let you wreck me."

Her mouth went agape again and she stuttered. "What? That doesn't make any sense."

"You could step on me and I'd be fine with it. See, we don't have to touch to have fun." Though he did say that, he'd give anything to cup her red cheek right then. It'd be so warm and her eye would widen even more.

"Have fun?" she asked, still hunched over them.

"Do you want to?" The thrill was there. Their pulse quickened.

They could see her swallow. She raised her gloved hand. "Jules. Can I... touch you?"

"Yeah. I won't move an inch," they said, nodding.

Circe took a deep breath and took her hand to his face, her fingertips pressing down on his cheekbone. He smiled as they traced his face, outlining their jaw and resting on his lips. "I like your smile," she whispered. It seemed like saying it had taken a lot out of her.

"I like yours better."

"Don't be a brat." Still, she smiled too. Soon her shaky hand was traveling downwards, stopping to trace their clavicle. Could she feel their uneasy heartbeat? They hoped so. They

wanted her to know. She halted, her hand hovering above their chest. She hesitated for far too long.

"It's okay," he said, "You can touch whatever you feel like touching."

Finally, her hand cupped one of his breasts. Her grip was meek at best and her lips were slightly parted. She squeezed gently and Jules held as still as they could, afraid to spook her.

"It's the first time someone gets naked for me," she said, fondling him with awe.

"Are you enjoying it?"

Again, she hesitated. "I didn't want to give you the satisfaction, but you do have a very nice body."

"At your service," they said, smiling.

"You say things in such a lewd way." She said that, but her hand was still caressing his boobs.

"Sorry. I just want to be vulnerable with you." Indeed, his hard nipples made him feel yet more vulnerable.

After growing bored of squeezing his breasts, her hand found the big scar on his abdomen. She poked it and he bit his lip, trying not to move. "Does it hurt still?"

"Just a little tender."

"Serves you right. Now you have something to remind you of your stupidity," she said, rubbing the skin around it with care. Somehow, he'd expected her to poke it again.

"I already have you to remind me."

She paused, pressing her lips shut. Her smile was gone. "Will that be for long?"

"What do you mean?"

"You won't stay with me for long, will you?" Her voice quivered.

"I threw all my plans to the wind. I'll stay with you as long as you want me to."

"I want you right now." She sounded serious. Jules couldn't have that.

"In what way do you want me right now?" they asked, giving her a crooked smile.

"There's not many ways we can... be together." She frowned.

"Such little imagination. Isn't rubbing one out on your own kinda sad? Do you want some help?" By that point, he could hear his own blood rushing.

Her frown disappeared and she looked spooked. They knew she'd get spooked at some point. Her eye was wide and she went pale enough to look ghostly. "Help?"

"Some visual aid. Some light touches over fabric. Let me tease you," he whispered, raising his hand and letting it hover close to her face. When she looked at it, her eye widened even more. "Or I could even play with your clit over a bedsheet."

She shuddered. "Jules..." she mumbled, turning her face away. "Aren't we going too fast?"

"Do you want to stop now?" he asked. She didn't answer; instead, she went very still. "You're wet, aren't you?"

She fidgeted and squinted at them. "You're overconfident," she said, adding a sharp edge to the word.

Jules let out a low chuckle. "Prove me wrong."

"How would I?" Her own confidence faltered visibly as her eye widened.

"So you want instructions?" Jules asked in a low tone. Her lips parted. They looked so moist and soft. "Spread your legs, Circe." She hesitated. Her eye shone under the moonlight. It hit her just right to highlight her soft curves; the rolls of fat on her hips and belly were just so touchable. Slowly, she parted her knees, giving Jules just a peek. The shadows contributed to the thrill of it. "Take your bare hand. Yes, that one." She'd meekly raised it. "Lower it to your pussy and spread its lips for me."

She let out a tiny gasp while her hand inched closer, as if her own movements surprised her. "If you talk like that... It's embarrassing," she whispered. Still, she did as she'd been told. She sat there quietly with her fingers between her pussy's lips, looking at him in expectation.

"Push your fingers close to your vagina. I'm sure you're wet." He smiled as she bit her lip. They could see the tendon in her arm shift under the faint light. "Show me your hand." Her hand rose and, between her outstretched fingers, there were strings of translucent mucus. She looked away. "Yeah, I thought so," Jules said.

She closed her hand in a fist and raised her face to lock eyes with him, frowning. "What was the point? Are you just gonna make me horny to prove you can?"

"No. I was just trying to get you wetter," he said, laughing a little. "I'm not going to leave you hanging."

"You want to...?"

"I want you to cum with someone else for the first time. Would you like that?"

She pursed her lips for a moment. "That's scary."

"I won't ever touch your skin without your consent. Or do anything, really." They smiled at her.

Her face softened. "I feel ridiculous for wanting it."

"Why?"

"I'm risking it just to cum."

"It's not just cumming. It's a bonding activity," Jules said, trying to sound reassuring.

Circe furrowed her brow again. It took her a while, but she ended up nodding. "If you're careful, I guess it's fine."

"I'm not looking for 'fine'. I'm looking for enthusiastic consent."

That made both her hands close into fists. "Don't make me humiliate myself," she said. Jules didn't budge, so she snarled and added: "I'm really wet. I can feel my heartbeat in my pussy. I'm lightheaded. I want you."

"You're so adorable."

"Fuck you. I'm being... vulnerable."

"I know. I'm serious. I love the way you talk." Jules sighed and pushed themselves off the ground. Then, they walked over to the bed and pulled the sheets off. Circe watched intently as they made their way back. "Lie down," he whispered. She obeyed and he laid the sheet over her neatly. "I'll be touching you now," he said as he sat beside her. Jules wasn't sure if her expression was fear or excitement. Maybe a mix of both; expectancy.

He gripped her arm over the sheet first, hoping that touch would prepare her for the rest. Her lips parted. Slowly, he moved both hands to her breasts. Though they couldn't see their outline as well as they wished, her nipples were hard against the fabric; they were the first thing Jules felt as his hands tried to cup her boobs and failed. His fingers sank into them, meeting resistance tender and warm like an embrace. They were heavy to push up. Even better than he'd envisioned. If only there wasn't a bedsheet over her... "That *had* to be the first bit you touched," she said. When Jules looked at her face, it was scrunched up.

"Sorry. I was... eager to," they justified, still fondling her nonetheless.

"Of course," she rolled her eye. There was a hint of a smile on her trembling lips and Jules saw her legs move a little.

"They sag so beautifully, you know that?" they asked, fitting the sheet under them to be able to feel their shape better. "Gravity is but a compliment on them."

Her scowl faltered for a moment. "That sounds rehearsed. Do you say that about every pair of titties you encounter?"

"It *is* rehearsed. I've been repeating it in my mind since you took your shirt off," he said, giggling.

Her blush deepened and her eyebrows went up. She covered her mouth and turned her face away. "You really are a silver tongue."

"I was afraid you'd think I was objectifying you." Even with the tonal shift in the conversation, Jules played with her nipples, lightly twisting one of them to test the waters. Her legs twitched again and her eye closed for a moment. The beginning of a sound died in her throat.

"I've felt objectified before." Her words were muffled by her hand. "With you, it... doesn't feel like that."

"No?" Another twist. She choked.

"You'll make me say it." She paused. "I feel like you respect me."

"I'm glad we have a transparent relationship." He teased both her nipples. They felt as hard as they could possibly be. She whimpered and clutched her own mouth harder. "Circe, it's fine if you're an easy moaner. Let it out." They smirked.

She glared at them. "Shut up." She let her mouth go to exhale heavily. "It's embarrassing."

"It's not. I'm the moaning type, too."

"Of course you are." She smiled and it made a shiver go down Jules' spine.

"Whatever *that* means," he said. He let one of his hands go down her torso, finding her soft belly. He kneaded it, willing to feel as much of her as he could. With his other hand, he squeezed her waist and felt her back rise off the floor just a little bit. She was biting on her lip, still determined to hold back any reaction. When Jules' hand wandered further down, though, the lip she'd been torturing quivered. They stopped where her thighs met each other. "You'll have to open them further for me."

"Jules..." she whispered. Despite the pleading tone, she spread her legs. Her one eye was pinned to them.

"Do you want to stop now?" he asked, trying to sound as soothing as he could.

"No." She swallowed hard. "I'm just feeling lots of things. I've never been hornier in my life."

They sat back and caressed her thigh, smiling lightly. "That happens when a fantasy comes true. Have you thought a lot about what it would be like if someone else did it for you?"

"Of course," she said, immediately avoiding his gaze.

"Tell me about it." The smile just wouldn't fade.

"What? It's insignificant." She kept her face turned away, but her body was still under Jules' hands. Not all that effective.

"Please. I want to hear about the things you do to yourself when no one's looking."

"Only if you tell me about the lewd things you did in the Academy," she said, pouting a bit.

"What makes you think I did?"

"It's obvious."

They chuckled. "Alright. You might not find it so hot."

"It's not about the hotness. I want to humiliate you," she said.

"All you have to do is try. I already said I'd let you wreck me." Jules' smile turned into a smirk when she swallowed again, the twitch in her legs back. "Start talking." He touched the bedsheet to her pussy. It took just a moment for it to become wet. She shuddered.

"Fuck. You know those couple weeks when you're hornier than ever and anything makes you wet?" She asked. Jules mm-ed. The sheet was wet enough with her fluids for him to discern the shape of her labia with his fingers. He found her protruding clit and teased it.

The twitch in her legs was much more noticeable then; she gasped and a little whimper came out afterwards. It made her frown. "What would make me feel even worse was if someone flirted with me. Because then I knew there was someone who'd do me. But I couldn't do anything about it."

After just caressing her for a while, they started rubbing her clit. Her immediate reactions were definitely amusing — not to mention the fact that they were making Jules herself quite wet. "Keep going," they said.

"Before sleeping, I'd go for the most desperate round of..." She was interrupted by her own moan. It made her cover her mouth again. "Imagining whoever it was. Just raw sex. After I came, my conscience would clear out and I'd feel guilty." The volume of her voice kept wavering as she ran out of breath and squirmed.

"Guilty for what?"

"For thinking about it."

"That's ridiculous. You can want things. You can let other people measure risks. You're worth it." He gripped her thigh harder as he masturbated her, the tips of his fingers covered in mucus. Her moans were as deep as her regular talking voice and they were making him melt down all the way to his pussy. "You can give yourself to me."

She covered her mouth with both hands, frantically smothering her own sounds. After a quick succession of shallow breaths, she let it go and said: "I can't."

"You already are. And nothing bad is happening." They smiled at her.

"I feel guilty right now," she said, panting, "For wanting you to *touch me*."

"Don't feel guilty. I'd touch you," he whispered, bending down to get closer to her face.

"I'd touch you all over. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Shut up." That blush. He'd kiss her cheek until she was even redder.

"I'm serious. And your voice is just as gorgeous."

"Jules!" She glared at him, having trouble keeping her frown while she moaned.

"Alright, alright." He just teased her clit in silence, letting her breathing and expressions dictate the rhythm. At some point, her breathing got quicker and her mouth opened into an 'O'. Her spine arched, pushing her back off the floor. Her gloved hand gripped their arm, coming up in a flash.

"Jules," she pleaded. "Come closer. Come closer."

He bent closer again. "Yes, lovely?"

"Spit on me," she said, "I want you to... spit on me too." She paused as her spine arched again, her eye rolling up.

Damn. Jules had spat on lots of colleagues in very similar situations, but that request still made a flame go up in his chest. He melted some more and realized they were also blushing. In that second of hesitation, they watched her begging, her mouth open, and reiterated mentally that she was the most beautiful person he'd ever seen. Perhaps that was not objectively true; perhaps he'd just fallen for her too hard. He spat on her. Just a little bit missed her mouth, glistening on her lip. When she licked it, the flames consumed his lungs.

Suddenly, she was gripping their arm tighter. She was nearly kicking the sheet away as she struggled under his hands. She clung to him as she screamed out: "Jules. Jules. I think I'm gonna cum. I'm gonna..." Her own moans cut her short; her back arched over and over again and her eye rolled up. Her legs' twitching was enough to shake even Jules. If the way she'd begged before had melted him inside, watching that show was making him drip. There was a pain in their core, too: watching her cum and convulse like that and not being able to hold her body tight against theirs hurt even more than they'd thought it would.

When he got back to teasing her, she screamed out and held her legs shut. "You don't want more?"

"No. Stop. I can't handle it," she said. She was panting and her hair was sticking to the sweat on her forehead. "It's too much."

"Fair," Jules said, letting their hand rest on her thigh. "You're breathtaking, you know that?"

"Shut up," she said, out of breath herself.

Despite feeling torn about it, he got up and walked away from her. In her vanity, he found a pair of gloves, a water bowl and a clean washcloth. All he needed. He gloved up and got back to her. "I'll take the sheet off now."

"No..." she mumbled. Her chest was heaving under the sheet.

"It's okay, lovely. I have gloves on," they said, cupping her cheek. At first, she jumped a little, but then eased into their touch. There, with her soft cheek in his hand and her eye closed, she looked so exposed. His heart swelled up. He took the bedsheet off with caution and sat close to her. Then, they parted her legs and held one of them up, gripping her thigh. Their fingers sank into her flesh.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Cleaning you up. Just a little, at least." Jules washed her fluids off as best as they could. She stayed very still, as if moving an inch would make them touch. After finishing and setting the washcloth aside, they took their hands to her inner thighs to spread her. Her pussy lips were easily discernible, with delicate curved edges. "You're very relaxed," he whispered, looking at the stretched hole.

She shut her thighs on his hands. Her skin almost reached the cuff of their gloves. "Stop looking," she said, her voice high pitched.

"I'm sorry." When she let go, he took his hands away.

"That's not it," she said, turning her face away. "It's just... You'll make me wet again."

"I see." They chuckled. "You have no idea how... you."

"Your head's not working right, as always." She sat up and reached out to him, joining their gloved hands with a meek smile. "Jules. Do you want to...?"

"What?"

"I can touch you too." She bit her lower lip.

"It's okay. We can take things one day at a time." They cupped her cheek again, rubbing his thumb against it. The way her anxiety melted into a smile made him melt, too. "I will be with you a while."

Her lips parted and her eye tried to take in all of his features at once. "Jules, I..." She paused, running the tip of her tongue over her lips. They were too close. Jules could feel the warmth irradiating off her. Her face dropped. "Want a smoke?" she asked, her voice more casual all of a sudden.

"Sure." So, they joined their hands and smoked together in silence. Jules could feel his body cool down, the rush dying slowly.

As had become custom, Jules had their breakfast before sunrise with the rest of the staff. Somehow, he couldn't stop looking at Circe out of the corner of his eye. He'd seen her in similar clothes so many times before, but there was something so charming about how clean and proper she looked in her high neckline sweater and her eyepatch. Actually, it was about how different she looked from the night before, when a thin sheet had been the only thing covering her. Seeing her completely bare had just rekindled their appreciation for her daily self. When she noticed him staring, her cheeks flared up and her lips went thin; then, Jules felt a sharp pain on his foot. She'd stepped on it. He tried not to wince, but it was a little hard.

"You two are oddly chipper today, eh?" Benny said, pointing at them with his fork from the other side of the table.

"Not particularly." Circe tamed her red cheeks somehow and went back to eating nonchalantly.

"Like two giddy little birds in a nest."

"Don't be annoying. I know it's your thing, but shut up," she said. Jules could see her embarrassment clearly behind that veil of anger. It did make them giddy; maybe they *were* a giddy little bird.

Benny chuckled. "Look, Vince said you wanted to head out to town. You guys can go. I'll man the kitchen."

"Thanks, Benny." Her tone was calmer. "I'm sorry for the patrons, though."

"Yeah." He just shrugged.

After breakfast, they geared up for the trip; Circe tied on an elbow level black cape and Jules snickered. "Grim. And cool," they repeated.

She scowled at them. "Don't mock me, Jules."

"I would never. You're my lovely." He grinned.

She cast a glance at the bedroom's shut door. "And certainly *don't* call me that," she said, a hiss in the back of her throat.

"Mm." He touched the tip of his index finger to her sternum, dragging it across her clothing lightly. Her eye widened. "You didn't seem to have a problem with it last night."

"Don't hold it against me," she said, taking a step back. "I was in a different headspace."

"I'm not holding anything against you. I loved each second of it." She merely stared back at them, cheeks tinted again. "You can't handle it, can you?"

She sighed and turned away. "Come on. Vince's waiting." She led them outside, walking through the creaky corridors and the empty hall. Something about an inn outside of its functioning hours was eerie.

"I'd never have seen the backrooms of an inn if I hadn't met you," he commented.

She furrowed her brow, throwing him that judgy look. "Do you think about such trivial stuff?"

"Don't you? I'm just... always trying to figure out how stuff works."

She held the front door open so he could go through. "I'm duller than you," she said. Once they were outside, the faint desaturated glow of the rising sun warmed Jules up some.

"What?"

"I'm talking about wits." Her expression was... null. Before Jules could ask her to elaborate, they'd walked up to where Vince waited beside a horse and its wagon.

"Good morning. You kids ready to go?" he asked.

"Good morning. We're good," Circe said, hopping up effortlessly. When she turned to reach her gloved hand out to Jules, he found himself surprised. Still, they accepted it. She pulled him up with steady force; his side twitched as he climbed on.

"You're strong."

She furrowed her brow. "I'll bet you're just too reliant on magic."

After everyone had settled down, the trip began. The novelty of it wore down as soon as Jules realized they were going at a snail's pace. "Is it too far away?"

"Don't be a brat," Circe said in a warning tone. "Sit back." Vince had a subtle smile.

Jules grumbled and shifted. Though they tried to obey and sit still, it failed. "What are you going to buy?" they asked.

"Tobacco," she said plainly.

"That's all?"

"Vince's gonna want to stock up on other stuff. Just tobacco for me."

"How'd you get that nasty habit anyways?"

She squinted, her face scrunching up a little. "It just happened." She paused and her thoughtful expression turned into a frown. "Like you're one to talk."

"From me. She got it from me." Vince's smooth voice seemed to come from nowhere; Jules had mostly accepted him as a silent presence. He smiled at them and tangled his hand in the reins, letting it rest on his knee.

"You don't smoke though." Jules pointed out.

"I quit." He shrugged.

"Why?" Jules asked. Out of all the nasty habits, seemed like the least damaging one.

"It was staining my teeth and always left a bad taste in my mouth. I have to be able to taste things," he said, shrugging too.

"I'd forgotten," Circe mumbled. Her gaze was lost in the endless grass and weeds around.

"Putting a smoke in your hands was the only way to make you stop tugging at and peeling everything else back then," Vince said. His smile had turned wistful.

Circe's face dropped. "Yeah."

His smile dropped too. It was hard not to notice the sadness in his eyes. He went back to his usual silence after that.

The small open market wasn't much unlike Estella's grand junctions of stands, filled with banter and colorful banners. Well, maybe it was. It wasn't grand and there wasn't much banter; no, there were just a few stands set up by locals seeking trades. They soon lost Vince as he handled inn business. Circe got her tobacco without much effort and then they wandered about aimlessly. "You should get another plant for your room," Jules said, "I'm sure some cool old lady has props to spare."

"I'm crap with props." She had her arms crossed, her one eye carefully analyzing some used goodies on a table. There were worn clothes, old sewing supplies and even some cutlery. Then, her eye stopped and widened. She paused. Jules followed her gaze to find a well-loved plushie of a cat. Ever so slowly, she uncrossed her arms and reached out for it. She held it up, squeezing lightly. Her lips were parted.

"That's cute," Jules said.

"Will you take it?" A woman spoke up from behind the table. Jules hadn't seen her walk up. Her eyes were puffy.

"Just browsing," Circe said, placing it down with care. Even so, her hands seemed to hesitate before returning to the sides of her body.

"It *is* very cute," he repeated, trying to make out the glint in her eye.

"It was my daughter's," the woman smiled faintly. "Most of this."

After fidgeting a little, Circe just walked off. Jules shot the woman an apologetic look before following her, quickening their pace to catch up. "You looked like you wanted it," they pointed out.

"I'm a grown woman," she said flatly, still a step ahead of him. The back of her head expressed nothing.

"Grown women can enjoy whatever they want to," they countered. They tried to get on her walking speed to look at her face, but she kept eluding them.

"I don't need silly comforts."

So she said, but Jules' memory conjured up the way she'd bawled her eye out clutching the pillow. Just remembering the sound of her cries was enough to make their chest tighten up. "Sure," they mumbled anyway. Still, as they followed her around, the bug of bother gnawed at his brain. He discreetly searched his cloak's pockets and relief flooded him when he found what he'd been looking for: weeks ago, he'd torn the Umbral Star insignia off his

cloak's clasp and stashed it away. It wasn't much, but it was silver. More than enough for a worn plushie.

Since Circe'd been walking ahead for a while, it was easy to drop his own pace and lose her. She'd notice soon, but by then their mission would be half accomplished. Jules ran back to the puffy-eyed woman's stand and fished the silver star out of their pocket. "Excuse me, ma'am. A bit of silver for the plushie? Bet it could become a fork or two." They smiled.

She took it and turned it, making the faint sunlight gleam on it. "Alright," she said. She handed Jules the cat. When they took it, she smiled a little. "It's hard to part with it. But things are meant to serve a purpose. Figures it's time it comforted someone else."

"Thank you. She'll really appreciate it," Jules said, holding it to their chest. He clutched it tighter when he looked at the woman's face and took in her sad smile and red eyes. "I'm sorry for your daughter." He lowered his voice. The woman just nodded and looked the other way. Trying to shake off the aftertaste of the phrase, Jules ran off, keeping the plushie secure against their chest. Circe wasn't hard to find with her eyepatch, gloomy aura and whatnot.

When her eye met him, it widened and her mouth opened instantly. "Where have you been?" she asked, frowning hard. Though she glared at them, there was a quiver of anxiety in her voice. Jules held their cloak open to present the plushie. Her mouth opened even more, the anxiety converting to outrage when she spoke: "W-You... Why would you get that?!"

"For you. You don't have to admit that you wanted it. I'm giving it to you." They handed it to her.

She took it with the same fear she'd touch him despite the gloves. She stared at its empty sewn eyes and her own eye glistened; her hands were trembling ever so slightly. "You didn't have to," she said, her voice dropping.

"Of course I did," they said, patting the plush cat's head, "Cause you wouldn't."

Tears formed on her lower lid and something squeezed Jules' heart. She hugged the plushie close and shut her eye tightly, taking a deep breath. "You silver tongue," she said. There were no tears left when she looked at them. She smiled. "Is this the way you treated all your hook-ups in the Academy?"

The taste in his mouth turned bitter. He tried to keep his expression neutral. "Is that really what you think?"

She sighed. "No. I'm sorry. That was just... out of reflex."

"Pushing me away?"

"Yeah. I've told you before. It's just hard to believe that someone like you would... me," she said, smothering the cat. She wasn't looking Jules in the eyes.

"So you really, *really* like me," they teased. It didn't take long for her to turn red. "And don't tell me to shut up out of reflex."

She sighed once again. "It's scary."

"Not at all. We're going home and eating fish sticks today. Rejoice," he said, reaching his hand out to her. When she took it, the texture of her glove was sadly familiar. They squeezed her hand. "I'm head over heels for you. So we're more than even."

She started stammering an answer, but closed her mouth before managing to get it out. Instead, she just squeezed his hand back.

Despite Circe's protests, Jules volunteered to help around the inn after they started feeling stable enough. So they wore matching white aprons and waited tables together. At first, he had to headbutt Circe's stubbornness; then, she accepted her new reality and they divided the common room, tracing an invisible line between the tables — half the room for each one of them to wait on. Whenever he'd walk by her, he'd panic in search of a funny thing to say. "Bet a smoke I can toss this cork on that guy's drink?" he said once, pointing at a man all the way across the room when they met midway.

Circe stopped dead in her tracks, balancing her tray. "No. Don't fucking do that." Jules lifted the cork menacingly. It was like a bubble shrouded them and only Circe existed in front of him, all the noise of the patrons dying out around them; Circe and her wide eye. "Jules!"

He tossed it. It arched upwards, but its speed decreased dramatically after reaching the top of its trajectory. Then, it sprinted back up and ended up in the unaware man's cup with a satisfying *plop*. "An entire cig just for me," he gloated.

"You cheated!" She tried to frown, but ended up snickering.

Thus they fell into a comfortable routine, orbiting around each other and the patrons. Only orbiting, never touching. Sometimes Jules would trace her smiles with a gloved finger, but all he'd feel would be the texture of his own glove. Her smiles seemed to always wane with a melancholic note by the end. That rush of bliss Jules got whenever they saw her smile would inevitably turn to anxiety tugging at their heartstrings.

After one particular shift, Circe had taken her shoes off and sat down on the bed. Jules was massaging her foot over her socks while she tried not to wince. "I thought you'd bitch and moan much more," she teased.

"Nah, I like relieving your pain, receiving your praises, etcetera."

"No. I'm talking about working," she said, laughing.

"Oh." Jules furrowed their brow. "Well, how do you think I've survived so far?"

"I don't know. Gambling?" She raised her eyebrows.

"I'm used to work. There's labor in all we do," he said, shrugging.

"I just didn't think you'd want to work here just to... stay with me."

"I'd do much more for you."

When she heard his grave tone, her face fell. "Jules..." She took her foot back, planting it firmly on the ground. Suddenly, he was empty handed.

"I'd like to talk some more about it. Just a little." They were kneeling before her. Felt adequate.

"There's nothing you can do." She reached out for Blobs, the cat plushie. She held it on her lap while she frowned at Jules.

"Then there's no harm in telling me more." They looked at her, trying to pin down a doe-eyed expression. It probably looked ridiculous.

She sighed. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

"What were the terms of your deal?" They dropped the expression immediately, crossing their arms.

Her gaze became unfocused. She stared at the opposite wall for a moment, biting her lip. "It said I was asking for something I really cared about, so I had to offer something I cared about equally."

"Your eye?"

"It seems I didn't care about my eye enough. So that's why it's more of a curse." She shrugged and hugged Blobs tighter.

"Of course. You're too quick to give yourself out. How about..." Jules paused and smirked. They touched their lower eyelid and pulled it down. "*My* eye. Do you care about it?"

Her pupil immediately locked onto him. Slowly, her own eye widened and her mouth fell open. The color drained from her face. Somehow, it was like he'd just offered up the most preposterous idea she'd ever heard. "Fuck off, Jules," she said after a while. Her eyebrows were pointing downwards. "Don't say that shit."

"Why not? I'm offering it to you. You should learn to accept things. You're worthy of them." They still smiled.

"You may not mind, but I do. I'm not comfortable with people I like self-sacrificing. It always comes down to this sort of bullshit," she said, frowning harder. "I don't want to hear another word of this."

"It's not self-sacrifice. I want this too. I want to hug you. Kiss you. And even if we aren't together, I want you to have a normal life without the fear of accidentally brushing against someone. Actually, you could break up with me right now and I'd still want to do this."

"Who's talking about breaking up?" She clutched the cat.

"No one. I'm just saying I love you and that's why an eye is a low price to pay if it means you won't be cursed for the rest of your life, even if that life doesn't include me." Jules held onto her ankles as if afraid she'd physically remove herself from the conversation. She pulled back slightly.

"You can't *love* me," she said, her lips curling. He'd come to identify the telltale signs of her oncoming tears: the parted lips, short breaths and humid eye with a dilated pupil.

"Why not?"

"*Because.*" That hissing sound. She pressed her lips shut.

"Even if I didn't love you, you deserve a clean slate."

"I did this to myself, Jules." Even the plushie on her lap looked sad.

"You were a child. You can't be serious."

"I knew what I was doing. You act like my childhood is some kind of sob story. It isn't." She bent down towards them, baring her canines as she spat the words. "It was pretty normal. I had a loving grandfather. Good role models. I was a happy kid. I just fucked it up myself."

Jules' thorax felt too small when he breathed. They let out a sigh and tried not to frown. "You need to be more lenient on yourself. It was just *one* mistake made by a kid. It shouldn't define the rest of your life."

"I'm the only one who should pay for it."

"You were so quick to offer up one eye. Let me offer up mine," they said, their hands going up until they found her skirt; they gripped her thighs over it, keeping eye contact all the while. Her face burned.

"I can't. I can't do that to you."

"The only thing I want out of it is seeing you dance happily without worrying about the people around." They tugged on her skirt. "Circe."

"It can't be worth it." Her voice was unsteady and her lip trembled. She hugged the plushie close.

"Let me decide how much of myself I want to give to you. You don't have to accept all of it. But don't deny it out of self-loathing or martyrdom. Do it out of assertiveness. Do it because you have boundaries." He took a deep breath. "Come on, Circe. You're not this terrible person you act like you are."

Tears streamed down her cheek just like he'd foreseen. A sob made her shrink, her shoulders coming up. "I don't want to hurt you," she mumbled, the words cut by her crying.

"I was the one who decided it," they said, caressing her over the skirt. "Besides, I can take it. I took that shanking nicely, didn't I?"

At that, she just cried harder. "Jules..." She called for him and paused, closing her eye. She took a ragged breath. "I love you." It came out wobbly and raspy and marvelous. That pull of anxiety in their chest melted into hot-cold butterflies.

"I love you too."

On one of those early morning breakfasts, Jules poked at Circe's side. She flinched and let out a low yelp, which was enough to gather the others' attention. She looked at Jules like a lost puppy and he gave her an encouraging nod. "Jules and I wanted to go on a trip. We needed to know if you guys would be okay," she said, looking down at her plate.

The alarm on Vince's face was obvious. The momentary silence was broken by Benny. "It's okay if you guys wanna elope. Just tell us."

"We're *not* eloping," she said, her hands closing into fists over the table. "It's... something I should take care of back in my hometown. We'll be back after it's dealt with."

The men looked at each other. Benny shrugged. "Well, okay," Vince said in his ever flat tone, "We can look after the inn by ourselves."

"It'll be tight without a waiter," Benny frowned.

"We can do it," Vince repeated, frowning back at him.

"Thank you. And I'm sorry for springing this up on you," Circe said, averting her eye.

"You never ask for anything," Vince replied, picking up her empty plate to take back to the kitchen.

Packing Jules' things was fast: most of it had never been unpacked, aside from there being very little. They hadn't exactly had ample time to get out of the Lunar Bay, after all. However, packing Circe's stuff and general supplies was more of a team effort. They couldn't

help but watch her and notice every little thing, like the slight tremor in her hands. "What are you thinking about?" they asked softly.

"I hate long trips. I hate being stuck in a wagon or whatever it is," she said, keeping her hands busy packing the meat Vince had dried for them.

"I'm sorry, lovely. But it'll be worth it."

She bit her lip. "I'm scared to face them. The people I grew up with." Her voice's volume was diminishing.

"Why?"

"I think seeing me will horrify them." She sighed.

"They should be horrified," Jules said, unable to control their tone, "Horried by the way they treated a hurt little girl."

"They were scared," she said, buckling the bag shut. She paused. "I don't blame them."

An onslaught of words bled from Jules' brain, but they managed to stop them before they spilled from their mouth. "You're better than me," they said instead.

"Do you have everything you need?" Vince asked as they loaded their baggage on the wagon — they'd be hitchhiking to the nearest town.

"Yeah," Circe said, taking the biggest bag off Jules' clumsy hands.

"Are you sure?"

Circe rolled her eye. "Triple checked." She smiled.

"Just making sure." He sighed and hid his hands in his pockets. "Be safe, kids. Take it slow."

"We're not really kids," Circe said.

"I may not look like it, but I'm a mean mage," Jules said. Once again, they needed Circe's aid to climb up.

"Sure," Vince mumbled. "Just... come back."

It made Circe stagger. "I will," she said, like the implication itself was absurd.

"I'm not used to traveling," Jules said on one of the coming afternoons, where all they could do was shield themselves from the sun and bounce atop the wood. "Actually, I didn't even know land was so *big* before leaving the Bay. Vast."

When he looked at Circe, she had her eye lost on the horizon. All she did was let out an "Mm". She'd been unresponsive the whole trip so far; even such blatant attempts at conversation were ignored.

"Circe, are you okay?"

She mm'ed again.

"I'm serious."

Her eye widened and she straightened her posture a little, like she'd just woken up. She produced a cigarette and turned to them. "Can you light it for me?" Though she was looking at them, it was like her gaze went right past them somehow; her eye looked dull.

"Sure." There was no use in commenting on it. They lit the cigarette.

When they reached their next stop, a bigger town, she immediately started looking for a merchant that might be going the same way as them. While they walked the streets, Jules tugged at her shirt's elbow with a gloved hand. "Circe. Circe, stop." She stopped, offering him that vacant look. "Let's spend the night here. We can afford an inn. Just one night," he said.

Still the listless look. "I want this trip to be over," she said after a long moment.

"I know. But you need to rest." No answer. "Please?" He tried the doe-eyed expression.

She sighed. "Alright."

That's how they found themselves in a small room with two beds and a creaky window. Circe had stuck her head out of it as soon as they walked in, basking in the chill breeze of the beginning of fall that Jules had sworn she'd be sick of. It didn't take long for her to start smoking. For what felt like an hour, they left her to it. "What are you thinking about?" they interrupted at last, walking up to the window as well. It was a question they always felt like asking her.

"Just tired," she admitted. "Exhausted." She exhaled a puff of smoke and rubbed under her eyepatch.

"You won't have to travel again for a long, long time. Not if you don't want to." He smiled, trying to encourage her somehow.

"I know. It's the *now* that sucks." She let him have the cigarette, joining her hands on the windowsill. "And how you can't escape it."

"I feel this isn't about the trip itself."

"Yeah. Ugh." She rubbed under the eyepatch again, annoyed. "I fucking hate traveling and tight spaces. It just brings up shit. But you don't have to worry about it."

"You've been... unresponsive. It's worrying."

"It tires me out. I can't help but be silent." She waited for him to take a drag out of the cigarette before stealing it back and finishing it off. She filled her lungs and let it go slowly before turning back to him. "Thanks for forcing me to slow down, though. Sleeping on a bed is good."

While she stared at him with exhausted gratitude, every slight line on her face evident, his chest warmed up and the familiarity of cold butterflies in his stomach reappeared. "You're beautiful," they blurted out.

Her faint smile turned into parted lips and red cheeks. "Shut up," she said, throwing the butt of her cigarette out the window and immediately turning her back on them.

They delved further and further into a part of the country Jules hardly knew existed. As the mountains dwindled and the ground turned easier to travel on, the unknown filled their mind and made constant cold irradiate from their spine. Though the weather was pleasant — Jules quite enjoyed cloudy days —, there was something chilling in the air. Tired of wondering if it was just his imagination, he turned his head to Circe at some point: "Are we getting close?"

"Yeah. Next town and a little more," she said, still looking out of it.

"Are you feeling the rift too?"

That made her attention resurface. "Feeling the rift?"

"Yeah. It's like being watched." They rubbed their nape, shivering a little.

"No." Her shoulder came up and she shook her head slightly. "But it might just feel normal to me. I grew up right over it, after all."

Jules closed his mouth tight. If she could take it, he could take it. Quietly.

They eventually got to a village surrounded by woods and farmland. The sounds of a nearby creek contributed to the picturesque image. However, the rift's pull had increased enough to induce nausea in Jules. "We were taught to avoid these places most of the time," they said, walking down the trail beside Circe.

She lifted her brow at them. "Villages?"

"Rifts." He kept his hand on his nape, creeped out by the odd chill. "This is the first time I'm right over the center of one."

Circe cast her eye back to the trail. "You don't have to do this," she said plainly. "It's fine if you're getting cold feet."

"What? No! I'm just talking idly. I wasn't trying to make a point or anything." They let their nape go to hold her hand and squeeze it. "Nothing would make me change my mind."

She smiled at him. It was just a tiny curve at the ends of her lips, but he would take it. "So... Do you think this is a good spot? In the rift."

"You want to do it now?"

She looked at the village ahead. Just a few more minutes of walking and they'd be among other people. Then, the telltale signs: the humid eye and the parted lips. She swallowed hard. "If you're okay with it."

"Of course," they squeezed her hand again. "Do it exactly as we talked about."

She dropped her bags and knelt on the dirt. Then, she joined her hands and closed her eye, her lips moving in quiet whispers. Was it prayer? Jules just stood there and watched as the clouds passed them by lazily. After a few minutes of that, he heard her sigh. "It doesn't always show up," she mumbled.

Just as she was standing up and patting the dirt off her skirt, a terrible shiver ran through Jules' body. "Oh, I think it's showing up, alright."

"Little girl," the voice came before the image fizzled into being. The creature appeared before them, a mangled project of anthropomorphism, its limbs pointing in directions they shouldn't and joints where Jules had never imagined they could be. It looked coated in sludge. "All big now. Are you back to feed me your other eye?" It spoke without moving the endless crooked slit it had for a mouth. A degenerate smile.

"No," Circe stuttered, taking a step back to grip Jules' arm. There wasn't much he could do either, but it was good to know that holding him brought her comfort. "I... I'm here to ask you to make our previous deal null."

"I gave you what you wanted." The thing bent, looking at them sideways. "You want me to take it back?"

"That's... Yes, I want you to take it back."

"You *really* want me to take it back," it said, bending the other way and blinking its dull eyes. "What are you offering, little girl?"

It just stood there bending at odd places a human-esque thing shouldn't be able to bend, eyeing them down like it posed no threat. But there was something about the way it asked — something in the void of its eyes and mouth. Hunger.

"This is Jules," she said, gripping them tighter. When the creature's eyes turned on them, they went even colder. There was a moment of silence. When Jules looked back at Circe, he could see her hesitation. He just nudged her forward. She took a deep breath before saying: "You can have one of their eyes."

The creature stared at Jules as if assessing meat at the market. "Yes, you care about this Jules deeply. I'll take their eye, but you can't have yours back. Do we have a deal?"

Unfortunately, Jules was on Circe's blind side. He couldn't quite figure out the look on her face. "Yes, we have a deal," she said, the words catching on her throat a little.

The thing raised its bent arm and reached out for Jules' face, its long crooked fingers outstretched. They prolonged into claws and, when their tips touched his skin, every fiber of Jules' being told them to run away. Instead, they turned into stone right at that spot, letting the creature have its way.

Had Circe really done that as a kid? Had she held still while claws dug under her eye and pulled it out, severing its connection with its nerve? Had she screamed when the searing white pain had come on? Jules did scream. He hadn't noticed, but he'd ended up on the ground somehow, clutching the side of his face. Circe's arm was enveloping their shoulder and she was kneeling beside them, holding them close while they breathed in and out. The creature had vanished just as easily as it had appeared.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I knew I shouldn't have done it." Her gloved hand clutched his shoulder like he'd outright disappear.

"It's okay. I'll be fine," they said, even though it felt like the whole right side of their face was crackling and burning. They looked around for a plant big enough to sap energy off of. A tree. They shrugged her off gently and crawled to it, killing it to ameliorate their own pain.

"You're okay?" Her mouth was wide open and she looked out of breath.

"I'm okay. You did the same when you were a kid," he said. His hand came back bloody; he rubbed it off on his shirt. "More importantly... Take your gloves off."

Her eye widened. "Jules..."

"We'll have to find out at some point. Better if it's now." They stretched their clean hand out to her and called for her with their fingers.

She raised her hand meekly and slowly pulled her glove off. Then, she reached out to him, her bare fingers exposed. Any second. Any second, they would touch and he'd know what her skin felt like; Circe, who looked so soft, tender and untouchable. Touchable. Touching had always been casual to Jules; he'd touched whoever wanted to be touched with ease. Until Circe.

Her fingertips found the palm of his hand. Warm. Warmth transferred from them, spreading up his arm. They locked eyes. Her eye and mouth were wide and she looked ghostly. Terrified. When Jules smiled, though, she laughed. He grabbed her hand and locked their fingers; then, he pulled her in for a hug. She laughed all the while and at some point sobs surfaced up, making her body jump against theirs. "It was worth it," he whispered, planting a kiss on her hair.

She pulled back and her hands came up to hold their face between them. "Jules. Can we... kiss?" Just saying the word got her red already.

Smiling was starting to hurt. They pulled her back in to join their lips. They were as soft as he'd imagined. Maybe even softer. They were full and Jules couldn't help but nibble at her lower lip, making her let out a tiny gasp against their mouth. He just basked in all the warmth that she possessed, completely fulfilled in knowing that she was just as satisfied. Her arms held him firmly against her. The kiss, initially shy and sweet, soon gave way to tongues and Circe's hands clutching their shirt.

They broke it off with a smile. "I knew you were just as much of a deviant as me. We're in public, you know," they said.

Somehow, she turned even redder. "You kicked it off!" she protested. Her forced frown broke into more laughter. She relaxed with a happy sigh. "I love you, Jules. You didn't have to come all this way for me."

"I love you too. And I wanted to." He got up and then turned to help her with the bags. "Since we came all this way, how do you feel about actually visiting your hometown?" he asked, pointing ahead with his chin.

There was a long pause as her gaze wandered between the buildings and the distant shapes of people tending to the land. She took a deep breath. "I guess that only makes sense," she mumbled.

"You don't have to."

"Let's do it," she said, shrugging. She took his hand without mentioning it and they started walking the rest of the way. "Your hand's sweaty," she pointed out, squeezing it and giggling.

"Yours too." They wouldn't let go, though.

Circe didn't stop walking even after they'd delved deep into the village, walking by people who gave them wide berth and eyed them warily. Was it the blood on Jules' shirt? The injury? Still, Circe ignored them and walked ahead with purpose. She only stopped in front of

a big building with simple columns. A man who looked much like a Lunarian guard stood in front of it and, when Jules looked back at her, she was frowning. She turned around and stopped a young girl in her tracks.

"Excuse me," she said. The smaller girl looked at Circe like a tachycardic bunny and froze. "Is that not the temple anymore?" Circe asked, pointing at the building. The girl merely shook her head. "Then where is it?"

When she spoke, her voice was barely audible and quite thin. Circe thanked her for the instructions and dragged Jules away. "Why is everyone looking at us like that?" he asked.

"We're outsiders," she said plainly.

"Is that so bad?"

"You may call it cult-like, but this used to be a very tightly knit community," she said. She shut her lips in a thin line. Her tone had soured somewhere around *used to*.

After some more running around with heavy bags, Circe found what she was looking for. The building itself seemed like just a regular house. She walked in without any courtesy, which immediately made a person dressed in all-white inside nearly jump. "Is Fern around?" she asked, unblinking. Her clutch on Jules' hand was tight.

Much like the young girl from before, the man froze up; he managed to point her towards the back of the house. Circe opened a door to instant warmth, revealing a cozy kitchen. A woman with reddish-brown hair had their back turned to them, humming a song as she reached for a mug in a cabinet.

"Fern?" Circe interrupted, her eye wide and pinned to the woman.

As soon as Fern turned her head, she let out a yelp and dropped the mug. It smashed against the floor, sending big chunks of ceramic flying about. Jules winced. "Circe. You shouldn't be here," she said. When she furrowed her brow, the wrinkles on her forehead became far more evident.

"It's fine. I'm not cursed anymore."

Fern just stared at her with wide eyes for a good while. Then, she knelt to collect the ceramic shards. Bending down visibly took a lot out of her. "You shouldn't have brought an outsider with you."

"Jules is fine. He's the reason I'm not cursed anymore."

She laid the shards on the counter carefully. "Is he a Lunarian?" She squinted at him.

"No," Circe lied.

Another while passed by. Jules felt trapped in the tension between the two women, even if he really was just an outsider in the conversation. "Fine," Fern said. Her shoulders dropped. "Would you like some tea?"

Circe pressed her lips together so much they whitened. "Okay."

"Good." She turned around and picked up more mugs. While she poured the tea, Jules tried to make out Circe's expression; she looked as lost in space as she'd been while on the wagon. Fern turned back to them and pointed at the table. "Take a seat." When she smiled, she looked like the stereotypical kind old lady.

Jules' hand felt cold when Circe dropped it to pull herself a chair. Suddenly, she frowned and paused. Then, her eye widened and her mouth opened. She pulled the chair some more with caution. "Blobs?!" she said, obviously trying not to shout. Blobs? Like the plushie? Jules walked up to take a peek. A cat was sleeping on the chair. A big cat. Kind of fat, which was made evident by how it was spread on the cushion. It slept peacefully, undisturbed by the tensions around it.

"Oh, yes. He's very lazy these days. You can put him on the floor, it's... okay." Even while Fern said it was okay, she had to pause to swallow. The implication was clear: she was still afraid of Circe's touch.

"Damn. Blobs. How old are you?" Circe mused, pulling back another chair to sit on and leaving the cat be. Jules sat beside her.

"He's an old man," Fern said. She placed the steaming mugs in front of them and sat with one of her own. They just sat in silence for a while. Circe was still looking at the cat in awe. "Circe... I'm sorry."

Circe's smile dropped along with her jaw. She lifted her head to face Fern. "You are?"

"Of course. I wish things hadn't turned out like that. The Lunarians should have never taken you. I wish we'd found a way," she said, keeping her gaze on the mug.

"Oh." Circe mumbled. "I see." She took a sip of her tea, expression blank. "Can I pet him?" Though she kept her face in check, her voice betrayed her.

"Sure."

Circe petted the cat gently, brushing its coat with her fingers. When it woke up, it made that distinct suddenly-aware-cat sound and turned its belly upwards, giving Circe ultimate freedom. She smiled and picked it up, transferring it to her lap. It settled down without any hassle. Her smile wavered. "My grandfather...?" she started, letting it trail off.

"I'm sorry," Fern shook her head.

"I thought so," Circe said. She sighed and returned her focus to the cat, scratching it under its chin. "You're the best," she whispered.

Jules took her free hand, holding it tight. She smiled at them. It was a tired smile, but he felt like he knew what it meant. In any case, they'd be home soon.

Epilogue

As soon as they got off the wagon, Vince was there to help them carry their baggage inside. Circe got off, wobbly from exhaustion, and wandered to him with her bags in hand. He reached out for them but, instead of handing them over, she dropped them and dove in for a hug, her arms enveloping his torso. Vince froze, arms suspended in the air and hands hovering around her like a cat picked up by its front legs. His lips were parted.

Slowly, his hands dropped to her back and he returned the hug, lowering his head to place his chin over hers. Jules saw the glimmer of tears in his eyes, but he blinked them away and held his eyes shut. "Welcome home, kid," he murmured. Circe nodded, nuzzling his chest. Jules tried to hold back a smile and picked up his own share of bags to carry back inside.

Their first meal back home was as heavenly as they'd been wishing it'd be. As they ate, the one to bring up the elephant in the room had to be Benny. "So, what gives," he started, "Did you intentionally carve out your own eye so you guys would match or something?"

"Benny," Vince mumbled, frowning ever so slightly. Rare.

Jules chuckled. "Something like that."

"*Jules!*" Circe spat after choking on her food.

"That's sick. Sickly. In the bad sense," Benny said.

"It's *not* what happened!"

Suddenly, there was no need to sleep on the floor — or for separate mattresses. They'd sleep together in Circe's single bed, limbs tangled to save space. That and waiting tables for hours caused many different aches in Jules' body, but they decided it was worth it. Besides, work was much lighter on the soul when he could walk by Circe and steal a kiss. It was during cleanup after a long night shift that their change in behavior was finally pointed out.

"You guys used to be much more reserved. Now you're disgusting," Benny said, pointing at the two — they were enmeshed, Jules holding a broom away from them as he kissed Circe. "All over each other. Ew."

They broke it off and looked at each other, giggling a little. Circe's cheeks were slightly red. Jules nodded inquisitively and she shrugged. "Well..." she started. "I guess I should have told you sooner."

Prologue

On the path home, Circe heard a mew coming from under the foliage. The little girl knelt, narrowing her eyes to scout the bushes. After following the mewing for a moment, she spotted a kitten. Its pink nose greeted her before the kitten hissed, its spine arching. Circe retracted the hand she'd tentatively reached out; a cold shroud enveloped it. What if the kitty refused to let her help? If grandpa were there, he'd know what to do. She could run and get him, but what if the kitten wandered off?

Thus, she kept trying to coax it out of hiding with rhythmic whispers. The kitty seemed to calm down, but it didn't budge at all. "Circe?" a voice rose behind her; though it startled her, she managed to stay still. Couldn't risk spooking the cat. She turned her head to see one of the priestesses standing tall. "Hi, sister Fern," the kid said meekly.

"What are you doing down there?" sister Fern asked, looking at the bushes. Her wide eyes seemed to lean towards curiosity, so Circe relaxed a little.

"There's a kitty crying," she said, lowering her voice as she pointed the cat out. "I'm trying to help."

The sister knelt as well, her previously spotless tunic dragging on the dirt. She moved slowly enough not to disturb the cat. "It's so tiny," she said. "Poor thing. It must be hungry." Her head bobbed and she held a finger up, as if she'd just had a realization. She put her hand in her pocket and produced some stale bread. "I was feeding the pigeons, but this might lure it out. Do you want to feed it?" Fern said, smiling down at Circe.

The girl felt her cheeks blush from excitement. She did her best not to let it show as she accepted the bread; she should always be on her best behavior. "Thanks," she said, "What do I do?"

Sister Fern stood up slowly and took a few steps back. "Drop some crumbs on the ground and stand back. Carefully." Circe obeyed, standing back with her to wait.

As the seconds passed by without movement, the cold from before came back; maybe cats didn't like bread after all. However, soon the kitty emerged, wobbling like kitties did. It started nipping at the bread and sister Fern swiftly picked it up. She held it with care, holding it to eye level as it mewled desperately. "It's a brown tabby," she declared, smiling.

"It's cute!" Circe said, tiptoeing to get a better view. She smiled too. The kitty's toe beans were a mix of black and pink. "What happens now? Do we find its mom?"

Fern looked at her and hesitated. Her face dropped for a moment, but Circe didn't know why. "It seems like it's wandered away from its mom. I'll raise it for now," the sister said. She smiled reassuringly. "It could be a temple kitty. You could come see it."

"A temple kitty would be awesome!" Circe beamed.

"Our goddess loves all living creatures. Surely she put this cat on your path so you'd help it, don't you think?" Fern smiled. Her auburn hair framed her face and Circe thought she was as pretty as spring flowers. Like a fairy. "You did good, stopping to help."

Circe stammered. After recomposing herself, she bowed her head a little, pressing her hands together. "Thanks, sister!" she managed to squeeze out. Her little heart throbbed with pride.

Through her temple visits, Circe watched the cat grow; whenever she visited, sister Fern would let her give it treats. Maybe that was the reason it grew chunky. With time, the place grew familiar rather than overbearing and the once spotless, untouchable tunics of the priests and priestesses turned out to be just linen.

One day, when the cat was a big chunk of fur and sister Fern's face had its first wrinkles, Circe walked into the temple; her pace was quick, but didn't break into a run. She twiddled her fingers and threw her gaze about until she found Fern tending to some potted

plants. "Little Circe," Fern smiled. She still called her that, even if Circe wasn't so little anymore. "Come to play with Blobber?"

The cat appeared out of thin air, rubbing itself against her ankles. Its low mew nearly persuaded Circe to bend over to pet it. "No, um... It's grandpa. He woke up really ill today," she said, scratching her own cheek a little. "I thought he was ill before, but he said it was okay, but now it's... I was wondering if you could help. Maybe say a prayer. Sorry."

As Fern listened, her face dropped. She put the water can down. "You know how stubborn he is. Don't let him undermine your worries," she said. "I'll head over there. Just let me get a face covering. You should do the same if you're not feeling sick yet."

"You think it's miasma? I haven't noticed any off smells," Circe said, holding her hands together. Had she?

"The wind's been blowing from the swamp's direction and you live on the western edge of the village. Very well could be," Fern said.

Soon she returned with a scarf tied over her mouth and nose. When they reached the temple's inner doors, Fern struggled for a second, trying to keep the cat at bay with one foot. "Stay, Blobs. *Stay*." At last they walked to Circe's house, going up the slightly steep dirt trail. It was small, built with brown-ish bricks just like all the others. Circe opened the door and her grandfather's feeble voice immediately rose: "Circe? Are you here?" She screamed back a positive answer.

They walked into his bedroom to find him lying in bed. His skin seemed paper thin, dotted by darker spots. "Circe! I can't believe you bothered sister Fern," he said, making a face; his face wrinkled as he chastised her. "I told you not to. I'm *fine*."

"Your granddaughter was right to come to me," Fern said, briskly touching his forehead. Her face remained neutral. "No fever. What are you feeling?"

He clicked his tongue. "Eh, it's nothing. Just the old stomach and a headache."

"Circe?" Fern said, eyeing the girl and raising her brow.

Circe shook her head. "That means it feels like there's an acid pit carving a hole in his stomach and he has a nasty migraine," the girl translated. The old man grumbled some more.

"I'll brew some tea. Do you want some?" Fern asked.

Circe tilted her head. "I'm not sick," she said.

"You don't have to be," Fern said. Though her mouth wasn't visible, Circe could tell that she was smiling by the wrinkles around her eyes.

She followed sister Fern to the kitchen; the older woman insisted on preparing the tea herself, so Circe showed her around. As they waited for the water to boil, Fern spoke up:

"Your grandfather told me a while ago that, when you were a kid, you said you wanted to be like me when you grew up." She laughed softly.

"He did?" Circe stammered, blushing. "That's embarrassing."

"I don't think so. Children are so earnest," she said, filtering the tea leaves out of the mixture. The scent was warm and sweet. "Do you still feel like that?"

"Well... Yes," Circe crossed her arms, averting her gaze.

"You wish you'd gotten initiated?"

"Ah, no. It's just your kindness. I want to be like that," the girl said.

"You're still as earnest as ever," Fern said in a soft voice, handing her one of the teacups. "It makes me happy." Circe just looked down, her cheeks still hot.

After making Circe's grandpa drink the tea, Fern knelt beside the bed and asked everyone to pray with her. Circe repeated her words syllable by syllable, wary of messing up; surely she'd be responsible for any declines in the old man's health if she did. When it was done, he thanked the sister effusively. She stood and straightened her tunic out. "Please keep me updated on his status. I'll keep him in our daily prayers," she said.

"I feel better already," the old man interrupted. Circe frowned a little and thanked Fern again.

"There's no need to thank me. Tending to the community is my main task," the sister said as she took her leave.

During the following days, his state took a turn for the worse. Circe voiced her concerns whenever she saw sister Fern, who'd always insist that he was on the path to healing. However, doubt festered in the girl's mind as she watched him puke, unable to hold food down. When she visited the temple again, she knew she had to put her foot down. She sat with Blobs on her lap as she mustered the courage; it purred lightly.

"Grandpa's not getting better," she spoke up; Fern turned her attention to her. "Maybe I should get out of the village and look for a healer of sorts," Circe suggested, unable to look sister Fern in the eye.

"You must have faith, Circe. The last thing your grandfather needs is the taint of the exterior world right now," the priestess said, her face turning stern. "Have you been doing your part?"

The sudden tonal shift took Circe aback. Something burning cold tore through her body and she swallowed hard. "I'm trying my best."

"Then you shouldn't worry," Fern said, touching her shoulder slightly. She bent to caress the cat's cheek and smiled at it; it purred louder. Circe's guts felt knotted.

She was trying her best. She kept praying, waiting and taking care of him, but nothing changed. As she told herself that she'd have to go against sister Fern's advice and risk it in the outside world, her body felt as sick as the weight on her mind. Internally, she promised that she'd do it; however, she found herself unable to take the first step. What if she brought that

taint upon the community only to find that he'd gotten better while she was out, like sister Fern had said he would? Was it worth the risk? How would an outsider be better anyways?

Her doubts led her to sit on one of the temple's outer prayer booths and close her eyes. She'd been putting a lot of time and energy into praying; this time, it was fueled by dread and hopelessness. When she heard a voice that wasn't her own thoughts in her head, nausea overcame her. It took her a moment to be able to pick out the words.

"Don't open your eyes," it said. The girl obeyed, though she could sense a presence and the feeling of being watched. Her nape felt cold. As Circe's brain fried, the voice seemed able to read her thoughts. "You've been calling for me. I've answered. Make your wish."

A cold, prickly wave of excitement layered itself over the nausea. Circe carefully thought about her grandfather being cured. "If I'm to do that, you'll have to offer something," the voice said. The girl was confused. "You're wishing for something you care about a lot, so you must be willing to give something that has value to you. Will you die for it? Or maybe let the cat die? The woman named Fern?"

She froze. Her eyelids fluttered. Should she open her eyes? She could feel subtle movement about. Shivers ran down her spine. "Yes, I am your goddess. You are the one wishing, so you must pay a price," the voice said.

Circe frowned, thinking over what she'd been told. So, if she made a simpler wish, she should be able to play around the payment, right? "I want the power to tell if he'll get worse," she whispered. That way, she'd know what decision to make.

"Make a quality offer. Show me how serious you are."

Circe took a deep breath, weighing her options. She didn't have the right to offer something that wasn't hers. "Take my left eye."

"Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal."

"Then open your eyes," the voice said softly.

When she did, her throat clenched into a knot and shards of ice ran through her bloodstream. A creature hardly humanoid stood in front of her, its crooked anatomy making it look like it was devoid of bones; its eyes were horizontally misaligned on its face. Though it smiled, it was completely lacking in feeling — in fact, it looked more like its mouth was a slit, carved into a perpetual curve, endless darkness inside.

Circe's paralysis didn't wane as its thin and wobbly fingers reached for her face. She felt suspended, as if in a dream. The searing pain of those fingers forcing themselves under her eyelid woke her to the reality of it, but her scream died out in her throat. After getting a good grip, the creature yanked it away, severing something; Circe raised her hands to press down on where her eye was supposed to be. At the same time, the thing was sliding it into its endless mouth.

It blinked. "It is done," it said; though its mouth didn't move, Circe heard it in her mind. It vanished and she was left kneeling in the prayer booth, hands trying to stomp out the burning hot fire in her wound. It stung twice as hard when tears formed.

Her brain must have blocked it out, but somehow she found herself in the inner temple, too stunned to speak though in her mind she shrieked. A priest she wasn't so familiar with came to her aid, dropping everything and rushing to her. He started talking, but she couldn't focus enough to understand. Then, he reached for her hands, gently trying to pry them from the injury. As soon as he touched her, his face went blank and he froze.

Slowly, his pupils dilated and he took his own hands to his face, pulling down his cheeks as if he wanted to tear the flesh off his bones. His knuckles whitened from the force applied and his fingers trembled; suddenly, he let out the shriek Circe had wanted to let out. She took a step back and started crying even harder.

Alerted by the sound, a few of his colleagues streamed from the hallways, laying their inquisitive eyes on her. She finally found her voice, though she didn't quite process what she was saying before she screamed: "I didn't do anything! I didn't do anything!" All she did was repeat it as they approached. As one of them held the shrieking priest by his shoulders and tried to soothe him, another one — who turned out to be Fern herself — turned towards Circe.

"Circe, it's alright. You're safe," she said. Her face was so neutral and calm that Circe was able to believe it enough to take a deep breath. "What happened to your eye?" she asked. As she raised a hand towards the girl, the priest who'd tried to help her before finally formed cohesive words: "Don't touch her!" The scream was so sudden it made Circe shiver.

Fern paused, her hand mid-air. She let it drop. "Why?" she asked.

It took a while for the man to wind down enough to reply: "She's cursed." After a while of frantic breaths, he shuffled away from the person holding him and took his tunic off, crumpling the fabric in his hands. "I can't do this anymore," he announced.

"Cursed how?" Fern insisted, her mouth turning into a thin line when she shut it.

"I had a vision," he said simply, throwing the pristine tunic on the floor and turning his back. "Fuck this place." He walked away.

Everyone watched in disbelief as he walked off. Circe's heartbeat was skyrocketing. "I didn't do anything!" she repeated, still covering her vacant eye socket. She turned her remaining eye to the floor, unable to endure the stares.

"Do you know what he's talking about, Circe?" Fern asked. Her voice was smooth. She didn't touch the girl. Circe shook her head. "What happened to your eye?" The smoothness turned stern.

Circe hesitated. "Something... took it," she said at last. "I was just praying. I swear."

Fern and the two other priests took some steps back, sharing looks amongst themselves. "Circe," Fern called after clearing her throat, "Did you make a deal?" For a moment, all Circe could do was look at her; her stern expression was shame inducing. She nodded.

"You were greedy and now you've brought this taint to us all," another priest said, furrowing his brow.

"What?" Circe asked, her voice hoarse from all the crying and pleading.

"We can't let the girl roam freely about the community," he said; they went back to talking amongst themselves, leaving her isolated — though she was only a few steps away, it felt like there was a grand sudden divide between her and the others.

Suddenly a blanket was enveloping her and strong arms forced her legs to walk; there was no skin-to-skin contact. Circe squirmed, trying to set herself free. Whenever her exposed face got too close to their liking, the priests that dragged her dodged away. Though she begged to know what they were doing, no one replied. Soon, she was shoved into a bare room and the door was closed. She heard the lock turn, but still got up to bang at the door and scream.

It took a while, but Fern's familiar voice answered: "We need to figure out how to deal with you, Circe. As you are, you'll only bring disgrace to the community. Surely you understand that. Give it time."

"You're locking me here?!" Circe screamed, banging on the door again. Not Fern. Fern would at least care enough to help her clean up her wound, wouldn't she? So why wasn't she opening the door?

"It's not like that. We'll be back to bring you food soon. This is just a precaution," she paused. Circe could hear her taking a deep breath. "Take the time to atone for your sins."

"What happens to my grandpa?" she asked. The words scratched her throat on the way out. She beat her head on the door; the pain felt like the hit of a hammer.

"He'll certainly be better off without your current influence," Fern said.

They did come back to feed her, but still didn't let her out. Though each moment was excruciating and drawn out, Circe noticed a pattern in her feedings; so, she was able to tell the passage of time by her meals. The only way she held on was telling herself she only had to wait for the next meal. One more meal and they'd surely free her; after all, she hadn't done anything. Well, maybe she had. But she hadn't meant any harm.

The next meal went by and so would the next one. The chipped yellow paint of the room's walls grew familiar; Circe would chip it further as she waited for the time in between feedings to drag itself by. During the first few dozens of meals — did that mean what, two weeks? —, she was hopeful. She'd grow more hopeful when Fern's voice came from the other side of the door. That made her actually stand up and splay her hands on the wood. Her feeble hope would lead her to asking questions: "How's my grandpa doing?" Fern's answers would be vague and short, such as just "Better." Circe had already given up on asking to see him. The answer would always be no. She tried asking less, like seeing the cat, but that answer also came negative.

After that, her thoughts grew jumbled and abstract. As she chipped paint off the walls and tracked the eventual insect with her eyes, she conjured up images of what she'd do after she got out in her mind. The vivid quality of these thoughts was such that they were almost like fever dreams. When she got out, she'd actually enjoy doing the things that were merely tasks before. She'd have fun sewing clothes. She found herself actually missing tedium that wasn't idle; monotony that came from repetitive movements, but movements that went towards something meaningful.

At some point, she realized that the gaps in the paint had grown quite big, their irregular edges spreading like vines. The room was dirty yellow and exposed brown bricks.

There came a time that the door opened further than to let food in, pulling Circe out of the depths of her feverish imagination. The familiar priest tunic occupied her vision for a moment, but soon the priest that wore it took a couple of steps inside and allowed space in the doorstep for unknown people. She only vaguely registered their cloth armors. They started asking the priest questions; it took her a while to tune in — or even want to.

"Does she live here? Was she accounted for as a resident of any household? What's her occupation?" Such were the questions asked by a tall man. One of them carried a huge book, writing away in it. She tuned out again until the man's voice grew louder. "What do you mean, cursed?"

The priest frowned. "We'd rather not expose such matters to outsiders."

"We're not outsiders," the man said, his brows arched, "Everything in this country is the Lunar Bay's property. We're accounting for every single adult, child, sheep, and gram of wheat in this land. If this woman is not productive, we're taking note of the reason."

The priest's eyes turned to Circe. His face seemed sour. "The last person who touched her saw something. He said it was the future."

The lunarians eyed each other. The one who was speaking frowned at the priest and raised his voice again. "Then touch her."

"I'd rather not. It's a curse for a reason. The vision really affected him," he answered, his arms crossed over his chest. However, he changed his tune when the man rested his hand on his sword's hilt. The priest motioned towards Circe. His forehead looked sweaty. "Circe. Come here."

She narrowed her eyes for a moment, staring at the tense group. The sooner she complied, the sooner they'd be gone. She stood and her knees creaked; then, she walked over to him and raised her hand, not really daring to make eye contact.

He touched her. Though it seemed like just a brush of hands to her, it made him shrivel up and scream; he knelt on the ground and bent over, hiding his face with his hands. Circe looked at a wall, taking note of all the paint she'd chipped off. It wasn't her fault. They'd made her do it. No use worrying over it.

"What did you see?" the man asked, crouching beside him.

The priest tried to shove him aside. "Leave me alone!" he screamed. The man insisted for a little longer, but there was no change; not even threats could sway the priest.

"Well, it's surely something," he mumbled. Then, he turned to one of his accomplices. "Go find another priest. Tell them we're taking her off their hands. The Umbral Star people could surely find use in this." At last, something about the conversation unsettled her. Circe's eyes widened at him, curiously at the same time his turned to hers. "You're getting out of this room and going to the Lunar Bay, girl. Isn't that grand?"

She wouldn't know. All she did was nod. It didn't really sound like a choice.

Even if the initial hope didn't come back, looking out the coach's window was refreshing after being trapped in a bare room for so long. The long trip was a welcome respite. At some point the soft hills turned into mountains crowding the skyline — a sight Circe had never seen before. Her travel companions didn't announce their names or come within a foot of her. Though she was cooperative, they wore gloves so they could touch her if needed.

The roads got steeper as the trip went on; at their height, they entered a bustling city. When Circe looked out the windows, she saw an open market sprawling through both sides of the road, vivid colors calling the passersby's attention. Still, the coach continued, zigzagging up the irregular terrain until it went through a tall gate. They were suddenly engulfed by big stone walls and gardens. Then, the coach slowed down and came to a halt.

Circe's companions opened the door and led her through a big plaza and into corridors. The walls were so high that the corners of the ceiling seemed shadowed. It was enough to make her hold her breath in awe and feel small. Her heart sank when they opened the door and showed her a bedroom. Even if it had a huge bed with fluffy pillows and a big window, it was yet another room.

"Wait here. Make yourself at home," one of her travel companions said.

She shifted a little, rubbing her own arm. "What am I waiting for?" she asked.

"We sent a letter ahead. Someone from the Umbral Star should be expecting you."

"The Umbral Star?"

His brow rose. "Yes. Some scholar who would be interested in your condition. Not sure who."

That didn't clarify much. She looked down to the ground and quieted down. There wasn't a point in asking, was there? Things would just happen anyway. He left her, closing the door behind him. The lock didn't turn. The lock didn't turn and the sight out the window was lovely. Sun reached her and warmed her skin up. It looked like it was summer out there. Tentatively, she took her hand to the handle and pulled. The window slid open and her stomach curled up, a sudden cold overcoming her. Surely sticking her head out the window was something clandestine, unattainable. Still, she did it and no one appeared to tell her off. It made her smile.

Her mind felt unclouded for the first time in a long while. There was no feverish delusion to be trapped in; not right then, at least. After enjoying the breeze for a while, she started exploring the room. She'd never seen a bedroom so big, nor thought there was a reason for one. It seemed like such a waste of space in a house. But she wasn't in a house, was she? They'd walked through vast plazas and corridors. No house was that big.

As she investigated the nightstand's drawers, there was a knock on the door. Too unaccustomed with the concept of privacy, Circe didn't think to answer. The door opened after a while, revealing a tall woman. The amount of pointy silver she wore was blinding, decorating her thin frame. One of her wrists seemed injured. She shone a smile as bright as the jewelry.

"Hello, girl. Circe, right?" she asked. When Circe nodded, her smile grew bigger and she joined her hands. Her cheeks rose, obscuring her eyes a little. "I'm Wyvern. I'm sure we'll have a lovely time together."