

# Going to whatever

## 1

It had been terrifying to watch. Moss looked on from the amphitheater's rows of seats, trying not to drown in the cheers as the tall figure completely massacred the opposing fighter. His form fell limp on the sand and the winner lifted her dagger for a brief moment before concealing it. Even from afar, Moss could see that her face was somewhat disfigured. "Our very own reigning champion, everyone! The Human Patchwork!" the announcer shouted, making the cheers grow overwhelming.

Human Patchwork put her head down and walked out of the arena, her lankiness making her look feeble despite the show she'd just put on. Moss stood with aid from her cane and painstakingly made her way out of the seating area, stabbing some uncooperative feet with the cane. Her heart throbbed with the hurry. When she finally managed to get out of the amphitheater, she scouted the exits. Shouldn't be hard to find a face like that, but she didn't. Not at first. So she waited, loitering around until a guard spoke: "Nice job today, Human."

"Yeah, yeah," a ragged voice replied. Moss looked up. It belonged to a person just as disheveled, with long hair with the consistency of a bird's nest and badly washed bloodstained clothes. Every visible bit of skin was marked by scars, though the most eye-catching was her face: aside from a few on her nose, a long and thick jagged line dragged from her mouth to her left cheek, like someone had once ripped it open. She looked sickly.

Moss caught up with her as she walked. Human Patchwork squinted down at her. Her height was imposing, unlike her weight. "Hey," Moss said.

"What do you want?"

"Have a chat."

She sighed. "If it's some type of business proposition, I can't," she said, lifting her hands to make the iron cuffs on her wrists evident. "I'm Empire property."

"It's not." Still, the gladiator eyed her with doubt. "How come they call you Human?" Moss asked.

"Human Patchwork."

"But why just Human?"

She bit her lip. "I suppose the humor is in the fact that they don't see me as human anymore."

Moss glanced at her cuffs and her stomach churned. She mm-ed. "I'm Moss," she said, extending her hand out.

She hesitated. "Is that your given name?" she asked, smiling a little. The disfigured side of her face didn't smile along. When Moss nodded, she finally accepted the handshake. "I'm Corvin, but you'll never hear anyone call me that. Use any pronouns you like on me *but* 'it'."

"Alright. Corvin. So we can talk?"

"Sure, whatever." She shrugged, but there was a hint of a smile on her lips. "Follow me." Corvin led Moss through a short dirt path, slowing down so she could match their pace. They ended up in a small cottage surrounded by a short wooden fence, which he overcame with ease. Moss took an extra second to jump it. "You can sit over there on that stump," he said, pointing it out.

Moss obliged, stretching her short legs out. "You live here?"

"I get to. For now," they said. "Mind if I wash up some while we talk?"

"Go ahead."

"Cheers." Corvin unbuttoned their oversized shirt and let it drop to the ground, revealing countless other scars. Their stage name started making sense. Two horizontal scars ways below their nipples were much cleaner than the rest. "What did you wanna talk about?"

"You're a prisoner?"

"Yeah. War defector," they said, gathering a bucket, some water and a washcloth. They splashed water on their face and brushed some wet strands of hair back. "But I've been in the game for long enough to have a modicum of comfort." She pointed at the small house.

"If you're free to walk about, what keeps you here?"

Corvin lifted their head, showing off a healed slash mark on her neck. Additionally, she pointed at her face. "I don't need chains or further branding. I'm pretty conspicuous, don't you think?" She sighed and got back to washing.

"All you have to do is keep moving."

Apparently satisfied with her quick clean up, Corvin got her dagger out of her belt. A dozen needles were seemingly attached to the blade. She took them out one by one and cleaned them up with care. "I've given such things thought, kid."

"Kid?" Moss crooked her neck and smiled. "You're not much older than me."

"Time goes by slower in the arena," they mumbled. After cleaning the needles, they stuck their arm out and inserted each of them under the skin. A small bit of blood welled up and Moss winced in sympathy. "Anyway, what's your interest in me?"

"What are you doing?"

"I could tell, but then you'd know my tricks. Lots of people place bets on me." She smiled that crooked smile again. "Now tell me what you sought me out for."

Moss laid her cane across her lap and took a deep breath. "I'm looking for people like you to travel with me."

Corvin's smile dropped. When she scrunched up her nose, her scars made her skin seem stiff. "So it *was* some kind of business proposition."

"No. Hear me out. I'm sure we're on the same page here," Moss said, smiling wide. Corvin squinted at her, taking a step back. "The Empire has no right to infringe on your life like this. You're not property."

Corvin laughed. "Right or no right, I've got nowhere to go. Your rambling thoughts are years late." With odd glee on her face, she tied her hair up like they were having a casual chat.

"But it's not just *your* life. It's everyone they pit you against and all of us lowborn folks working in land that we have no control over." Moss stood, trying to get a little closer.

Corvin's eyes widened. "Why are you singling someone like me out for your delusions?"

"You obviously need out of here. Besides, you're strong. You'd be good to have in a group."

"An arena has its own rules," Corvin shook their head, "I'm good in there, but that's all. I wouldn't be of much use to you. And as I said, I'm not going anywhere, delusional plan or not."

"All you have to lose is those cuffs," Moss said, pointing at them.

Corvin's lips curled and she rubbed her bruised wrist. "And my life, potentially."

"What life are you living here? You're nothing but a pit dog." She raised her pointing finger to Corvin's face, making her jaw drop. "You kill people like you to line noblemen's pockets, rewarding them for betting on your misery."

"It was either this or execution," Corvin said after recovering. They bent down to retrieve their dirty shirt.

"This is just a drawn out execution. You weren't meant to keep surviving it."

He sighed. "I know all that. You make it sound so simple."

"You only have to get started."

For a while, he just stood there, keeping a tight grip on the shirt. Then, he pointed to the cottage. "Would you like some tea?"

"So you're considering it?" Moss perked up.

"I'm asking you to indulge me," Corvin said, turning away, "No one ever *talks* to me."

"I think that'd be good." She smiled as they led her into the cottage.

It was small and tidy, everything contained in that one room. There was a single window over the stove. Corvin threw the shirt into a basket and put a sweater on with seamless movements. Moss sat at the small kitchen table while he arranged firewood in the stove; then, he snapped his fingers until flames were roaring away. Magic so casually. He put the kettle on and turned to her, crossing his arms. "You're very bold, you know that? Your approach could be improved."

She frowned. "There's a lot I want to do and my time is limited."

"Hmm." Corvin held their hands out and mugs flew to them from the cabinet. "You're not a Lunarian. Chamomile okay?"

"I'm not. And whatever."

"That explains a lot." He turned his back to her to focus on the tea.

"What?"

"You're angry." The sound of water pouring and soft steam floating out the window.

"You should be, too."

"You were right. It *is* a drawn out execution. I'm the walking dead. Dead people don't get angry," she said calmly. She turned back to Moss and sipped her tea. Her expression melted into delight. "Yeah, that's good." She walked over to the table and placed Moss' mug in front of her; then, she sat across from her.

"Defeatist talk from someone who's been fighting to stay alive. That's ridiculous," Moss scoffed. She held the mug with both her hands. The gentle warmth crawled up her arms.

"Let's talk about Corvin, the person. Not the Human Patchwork."

"Is that because you don't want to talk about yourself?" He looked at her with that crooked smile. Her lack of answer led him to sigh. "I was an Umbral Star scholar. But even while I was an undergrad, things were already rough. The first Greyland scandal was right after my first year." He shrugged. "In hindsight, I wouldn't be in this predicament if I'd been less ignorant. Former students were getting drafted left and right. There was no reason I'd be any different."

"I imagine you feel distant from it all when you are a Lunarian." Her next sip of tea was contaminated by the bitterness of the phrase.

"You do. If you don't think it's justified, you look the other way. Fact of the matter is we had the best professors and the most expansive collection of books. Some would call it exhaustive." He finished off his tea and squinted at the bottom of the mug. "That was enough for me to look the other way."

"So you're one of those prepotent know-it-alls?"

Corvin chuckled. "Sure." She showed Moss the bottom of her mug; there was some sediment left over. "What do you think? Looks like a mountain to me."

"Looks like plain dirt to me."

She sighed and put it aside. "Anyway, things turned around fast. I had a girlfriend at the time." They averted their gaze. "We both got drafted."

"She got caught too?"

"No, she decided to serve." She smiled at Moss again. "I see your scowl. But in the end, she and I are the same. Actually, I probably kill more people than your average Lunarian soldier."

"Intent matters." When Moss put the mug down, she accidentally banged it on the table.

"No. Intent is what clears your conscience."

"You really do talk like you're dead inside. That's insufferable." Moss stood up and took her cane. "Wake up to your living body and make a decision. I don't plan on being in Portbright for long."

"Oh? Are you leaving so soon?" Corvin rested their head on their hands. "You haven't told me anything about yourself. You're just a stranger so far. A brazen one on top of that."

Moss growled. "I don't matter in the equation. All you need to know is we have less and less communities free from Empire claws by the hour. And I *will* raise one. If you turn me down, someone else will come."

"Ambitious. You must know a lot about logistics." Corvin's stiff and crooked smile was back.

"Spoken like a true scholar."

"I wonder what you mean."

Moss scoffed. "I'm sure you know. I'll come to your next match, Corvin."

Before she could turn away, though, Corvin spoke up again: "Wait. Your limp. I could fix that for you."

Moss paused, looking down at herself. "Nothing to fix. My leg's just like that."

"Ah, I see. Well met, then. I'm glad you'll come watch the next torture session."

It was easier said than done. In between that match and the next one, Moss would have to survive Portbright for the week. That meant seeking employment, which led her to the docks themselves after exhausting most other options. So she stood by the great river Beltpass, the arteries of the town brimming with life around her. As expected, the foreman

was lowballing her — just like all the others she'd tried. "The wages can't be that low," she said, frowning a little.

"You understand why I can't give the same rate to a cripple," he replied, gesturing in her leg's general direction. Acid welled up in her stomach and thankfully he kept going before she could spit it out. "Besides, are you sure you're strong enough for the job? No offense, but you're kind of small-ish."

"I can handle it." With that, she got the job. It mostly consisted of unloading logs from the boats; she did have to tap into her magic to get it done, but she was used to augmentations. Her flame lent itself well to such spells.

Aside from general exhaustion by the end of her shifts, her leg cramped up, overwhelmed by the strenuous nature of the work. At night, it still burned and ached. She'd hold it close to her chest and clench her jaw, trying to ignore the pain to fall asleep. All that just for enough coin to eat a meal and have a bed for the night; couldn't risk being accused of vagrancy, after all. Every town she visited, she'd be faced with the same circumstances. It all only made her more resolute.

With a sore body and a tired mind, Moss settled down in the amphitheater's sitting area again at the end of the week. The only thing keeping her posture straight and her vision focused was the implicit promise between her and Corvin — the promise that he'd think it over. Way below her, he walked into the arena with the same relaxed demeanor she'd associated him with so far. When his opponent walked in from the other side, that demeanor didn't change, despite the fact that he was easily double Corvin's bodily mass and carried a heavy looking battle axe.



"Today is a lucky day for all who've decided to join us!" the announcer's voice boomed, "It'll be a fight to the death for the champion title! Our up-and-coming Slaughter Pig challenges reigning champion Human Patchwork! Sit back and enjoy the bloodshed, folks."

Somehow, that led the audience to a boil. The people beside Moss threw their hands up in cheers, elbowing her in the face. To her, it was just another instance of getting spat in the face, much like when the foreman had lowballed her; it made heat burn her insides, only further fueled by the fact it had nowhere to go. It couldn't be dispersed. She had to sit and watch as two people were assigned ridiculous titles like 'Slaughter Pig' and forced to kill each other. It all had a theatrical flair to it — a nauseating one at that.

Immediately, Slaughter Pig or whatever the fuck he was called charged towards Corvin, holding his battle axe firmly. It'd be a downward slash. An obvious one at that. Corvin lifted her arm and gestured with her other hand; something glimmered in the air before Slaughter Pig staggered, scratching at his eyes and grunting. The needles. It had to be the needles. His brutish fingers looked like they'd gouge his own eyes out; when he focused back on Corvin, bloody tears were streaming down his face. He bellowed out a word. Despite it sounding more like a roar, Moss was sure it'd been "slut".

He stepped forward with renewed vigor, slashing at Corvin. His tense muscles were apparent, bulging under the skin of his bare arms. Corvin side stepped each attack gracefully, leading them on a round trip across the arena. Suddenly, Slaughter Pig staggered again, taking his hand to his mouth. He lowered his hand and screamed. From where Moss sat, it was hard to see, but the blood and vague white-ish shapes suggested that he'd just spat out some teeth. Another scream died out in his throat when Corvin's dagger lodged itself between his ribs. The audience screamed just as much, though out of pure joy; meanwhile, Corvin twisted the dagger and he squealed, much like a pig being slaughtered indeed.

Corvin ripped the dagger out and stepped back. The blade was tainted. Slaughter Pig held onto his wound, blood escaping between his fingers. His skin was pale, making his scars more evident. Corvin lifted their dagger and the air glimmered again; Moss understood suddenly. She was collecting the needles out of his body. Somehow, they flew back to the dagger. A subtle movement made a scream die in Moss' own throat; the heat inside her turned to ice and she gripped her cane. With the last of his might, Slaughter Pig had swung his axe to Corvin's exposed side. The blade dug right into her waist, cutting deep with ease as if she were nothing but a log. Her body turned crooked and a spray of bright red blood immediately exploded into the air, hitting the sand at full force and painting it crimson. Moss was elbowed in the face again as the people beside her stood up to cheer, like a bunch of dogs screaming upon the sight of food. The cold in her guts traveled down her body, solidifying in her feet. Her suppressed scream had scratched her throat and all she could do was watch. The life bled out of Corvin and a sick regret-

To her utter horror, Slaughter Pig removed the axe, making Corvin's blood spray out at an even higher pressure. There was a huge gap in her side and Moss could see her flesh. Without the axe to hold them in place anymore, they dropped to the sand, eyes wide and skin as white as milk. Slaughter Pig raised their bloody axe, commandeering more cheers. Just as the announcer started speaking, though, the axe traveled at full force to Slaughter Pig's head, splitting his skull open. Moss' eyes shot to Corvin. She had a trembling hand held up. It all seemed meaningless. Why did both of them have to die? Why make that her final action?

But it wasn't her final action. With the last of her strength, she dragged her broken body closer to Slaughter Pig's, painting the arena further red. He still breathed; Moss could see his chest heaving. Corvin's shaky hand found his ankle and his body suddenly started withering away, decaying right in front of them. When he was completely dried up, Corvin rolled onto

her back and held onto her side, her chest going up and down wildly. Her waist was whole again.

"The bloodshed has been delivered as promised, everyone! What a match!" the announcer beamed. It seemed like Moss was the only one still sitting down. Everyone stood and vibrated. She just sat there, watching as Corvin caught his breath, bloody sand smeared all across him. His own blood. "Human Patchwork once again proving that there is no boundary he won't break! Ruthless. Just ruthless."

Something told Moss that none of that had been Corvin's intention at all. The cold dissipated and gave way to heat again. If she had that announcer in front of her, it'd be hard not to bash his teeth in. People in white walked into the arena, carefully stepping around all the gore to collect Corvin. The audience started leaving in droves, occupying the corridor. Moss was trapped within them, her heart beating over their excited chatter. Their pace was too slow, but at last she was out of the amphitheater. She took to the same exit as last time to wait for Corvin. She was prepared to wait a long while, but Corvin was soon out. Their shirt had been turned into mere stained rags hanging from his body. A huge protuberant scar occupied the space the axe had carved into moments before. Blood and sand were stuck to almost every inch of their body. Still, Corvin walked with their head low and hands in their pockets, as calm as ever.

"Best one yet, Human," the guard said.

"Yeah," she mumbled. She lifted her face and her and Moss' gazes met, making her pause. Her shoulders dropped. "It's you."

"It is," Moss agreed.

"Come to talk some more?" they asked, smiling a little. Their long hair was sticking to dry blood on their face and pointing everywhere. The angry heat inside Moss had dwindled, leaving a hollow space behind. She just sighed and nodded. Corvin led her back to the

cottage's backyard again. This time, his movements weren't as fluid when he took his shirt off and started washing.

"You almost died," she commented, watching as the dirt dripped down their body along with water.

"Ah, yeah. Just when you were watching, I did quite badly," they said nonchalantly.

Moss grunted. "Stop acting like you're okay. They may have patched your body up with black magic, but a human is not just a body. You got fucking *cleaved*. I got a peek at your organs."

Corvin's hands were shaky as he tried to get the mats out of his hair. He didn't meet Moss' glare. "It's how it is. But that *was* the closest I've gotten to death." His hands dropped and he sighed. He turned his face away. The tremors intensified and he suppressed them by entwining his own fingers. "You were right. I'm fighting to stay alive. I don't want to die."

"Next time you might really die. Come with me." She said it like a plea, but kept her voice stern.

"You saw it. I'm not strong. What makes me a good gladiator is the fact that seeing me get ripped open is entertaining. Magic is just the dirty trick that makes me win." They got back to trying to untangle their hair, still not looking at her.

"I don't care. I want people to live with dignity. *I* want to live with dignity. But on my own I just get pushed around. We can survive together." She stepped closer. "After how hard you tried to stay alive today, don't let it go to waste."

She heard Corvin take a deep breath. "Yeah, I... It's been so long. I guess I just don't know life outside anymore." They paused and tugged at their hair in frustration. "When you're stuck you get tunnel visioned. It's all been the next match. And then the next match."

"Stop that. Let me do it for you," she said, tapping Corvin's arm.

They stopped. "Really?"

"You must still be in shock. You need to fucking sit down." She grabbed their arm and turned them, pointing at the stump. Corvin's eyes widened. "Sit." They put their head down and obeyed. When Moss touched their hair, they flinched, but allowed it. She brushed it carefully with her fingers, encountering knots and sand. She massaged Corvin's scalp with soap before trying to work the knots out. It took long enough to numb her fingertips out, but Corvin stayed as still as a statue throughout the whole process. Even when she tugged on their hair accidentally, he didn't let out a sound. At last, she rinsed it with water and ran her fingers across it once more. There were still some grains of sand. She circled back to face him. When Corvin looked up at her, his nose was red and his eyes, swollen. He sniffed. "Did I hurt you?" she asked.

"No," they said, blinking hard. "Thank you."

"You should get these pants off, too."

They averted their eyes and nodded meekly. "Okay." While they washed, she headed inside to look for a towel. It wasn't all that hard to find. By the time she came back out, Corvin had gotten most of the blood and sand off and stood awkwardly, one arm crossed over her chest and the other hand idling over her crotch. Moss had thought she was lanky and weak looking before, but only then did it strike her: Corvin was the type to spend days on end bent over books. She wasn't fit to battle and the evidence was there in the form of a myriad of exposed scars.

Moss walked up to her and patted her down gently with the towel. Then, she wrapped them in it like a cloak. "Come on. Inside," she said, coaxing her with a hand on her back. She shepherded Corvin to the bed and made her lie down, towel and all. She pulled the blanket over them. Corvin looked at her with wide eyes and lips parted all the while, seemingly confused. "Rest."

More tears streamed down Corvin's face. Now that they'd been dried off, it was undeniable that they were actually crying. "Moss..." they mumbled, losing track of the sentence.

"Yeah?" Moss stood, her hand in her coat's pocket.

"You're a weird one. Thank you."

"Be quiet and close your eyes," she said, ignoring the slight warmth in her cheeks. Once again, Corvin obeyed. She looked on discreetly until she was sure they were sleeping. Then, she started rummaging through the cottage in search of food, only to find meager rations. She lit the stove without the aid of magic, taking her time to ignite the firewood. Despite the pain in her leg from working on her feet all week, she still stood and cooked, putting the little food she'd found to use. When she put her weight on her leg, it trembled. Whenever she'd feel pain, physical or not, she'd take in deep breaths and bite her lip. She'd learned early in life that that was all she could do.

She poured some of the boiling hot potato cream into a small bowl and tore a piece off the stale bread she'd found. She took the meal to Corvin; both her hands were busy, so she limped on the way there. The extra effort made her wince. "Corvin. Wake up," she said.

Their eyelids fluttered open and they stirred, running their tongue across their lower lip. It seemed like they'd drooled while sleeping. They brushed their hair out of their face and blinked hard a few times. "Moss?"

"Yeah. Eat up." She extended the food out to him.

His eyes widened and he sat up. The towel slid down, exposing his chest again. "I've already decided to join you. You don't have to keep being nice."

Moss snorted. "This is not being nice," she said, swallowing down some bitterness, "And I'd do it anyway, because I know what it's like to be hurt and alone. I'd want the same. Now eat."

Corvin cast their gaze down and finally accepted the food. She dipped the stale bread in the cream and took a bite off of it. Her eyes lit up. "This is delicious," she said.

"I doubt it," Moss scoffed. She really did. The cream was diluted, watered down so there'd be enough; of course, there was no salt or any other seasoning either. The bread was hard to the touch.

"It's hot," Corvin argued like that was a positive trait of some kind. "No one ever cooks for me."

Moss felt her brow drop. She sighed. "I'll eat with you," she said. There was no use in pretending that she didn't need to. She'd dropped her cane against the opposite wall; not having it right then made her wince at every step she took with her right leg, even though she was putting as little weight as possible on it. She served herself and got back to Corvin, standing awkwardly.

"Sit with me," they said, patting the space beside them on the bed. Moss obliged, relieved to be able to stretch her legs at last. She ate some. As she'd thought, it was absolutely tasteless. "Not to pry, but how are you dealing with the vagrant laws?" Corvin asked, peeking at Moss out of the corner of their eye. Their careful expression made Moss wonder if they thought the question would actually offend her.

"Just as well as you'd expect." The bread was so tough she had to really crouch down on it. "I have to take whatever pittance they offer me just so I don't get whipped and thrown out of town. It's a pain. Usually I only have to deal with this during the winter."

"How come?"

"Hunting and gathering is enough otherwise."

Corvin's eyes had a sudden sparkle to them. She mm-ed. "It's not winter," she pointed out, "Yet you're here."

"I'm tired of swimming against the current on my own." She scooped up the last bit of her potato cream. It was cold already. "This is where you'd go to find people."

"Knowing all that, I can understand where your delusions come from." When Moss squinted at her, she corrected herself: "Sorry, *grand plans*. I'll go with you."

"We need to get these irons off you," Moss said, pointing at her cuffs.

"Yeah. Any ideas?"

Moss set her bowl aside. "Give me a blunt object and I'll smash them open for you."

Corvin snorted. "A *plausible* idea."

"Augmentation spell."

"Even then..."

Taking a deep breath, Moss held her hand out, palm up. "Here. Sense my flame."

After one more doubtful look, Corvin held her hands between theirs and closed their eyes. While they concentrated, all that was left for Moss was feel their touch. Their fingers were long and frail and the skin on their hands felt paper thin, prone to being broken; scars gave it texture. Suddenly, sitting there with someone else holding her hand, Moss felt tired, like her body had relaxed. Corvin's eyes snapped open and they let her hand go. "Aren't you full of surprises, now," they teased, giving her a crooked grin. "You'll find a hammer in that cupboard over there." Before Moss could stand up, Corvin lifted their hand. "Actually, I'll just..." they muttered, gesturing to the side. The cupboard's doors swung open and countless objects flew to the ground. The hammer fluttered up and sped towards Corvin's hand; she caught it firmly by the handle. "There we go."

"On the floor," Moss said, taking it from her.

Corvin obeyed, sitting down on the floor and placing one of her arms against it. "I'd be grateful if you didn't shatter my bones instead."



"I won't." She knelt with them, raising her arm and applying her own dose of casual magic. The familiarity of her own amplified strength coursed through her and she struck the iron with all of it. The impact reverberated, making Corvin flinch. No luck. On the second hit, the hammer's head broke off and was projected away. Moss cursed and stretched to retrieve it. Then, she gripped it with both her hands and lifted them above her head.

"You're going to hurt your hands like that," Corvin interrupted, widening his eyes at her.

"Stay still." She banged the hammer head against the iron anyway, multiple times. The pain shot through the flesh of her hands and hit all the way to the bone, sharp. At last, the lock broke. "The other one now." She closed her eyes to regather her breath. She held onto the hammer head with an iron grip, trying not to let her fingers tremble; however, her whole arm felt like jelly.

"Your hands..."

"It's nothing. Come on, now," she said, frowning at him. Reluctantly, Corvin placed his other arm in front of her. She repeated the process painstakingly. Just when it felt like her muscles would give out, the cuff broke. Moss held her hands open, dropping the hammer head on the floor; her fingers trembled and refused to stay stretched. There were deep dark marks on the palms of her hands. She breathed in deep.

Corvin's hands shot up to hers, helping her stretch her fingers out. Temporary relief flooded her tendons. "Let me heal it," he said, eyes still just as wide.

She tore her hands away. It burned. "With what?" She squinted at him.

"Just a sliver of my vital force."

Her mouth contorted. She eyed him up and down, taking in his thin frame and his countless scars. The towel did a terrible job in hiding his fragility. "No," she said, raising her

tone. She got up by pushing herself off the ground with her wounded hand; it made her bite into her lip too hard.

Corvin looked up at her, mouth agape and humid eyes. "You've just met me. Why go to such lengths?"

She pressed her thumb into her palm, trying to ease the pain. "Because this is the way forward." Moss held onto her hand, pressing harder; digging into the wound also relieved it somehow, even if just for a second. "It's not even personal. It's a matter of principle. So stop acting like I did you a favor." Since Corvin just blinked and looked on in silence, she sighed and added: "I'll fetch my things. We'll be out by sunrise tomorrow. How does that sound?"

"Whatever you say." They smiled. "I almost called you 'kid' again, but I guess you really aren't one."

"I'm twenty fucking years old." Moss growled as her cheeks burned.

"Awe. That was the springtime of my life." Corvin's smile grew wistful. "Graduation."

"You're acting like that was so long ago for you." She rolled her eyes.

"I told you. These four years have felt longer than all my others combined." They let their breath go. "Go on, now."

She took her cane and her hand cramped up when she leaned on it. She kept her expression neutral. "I'll be back."

## 2

Moss walked into the cottage unceremoniously, carrying her bag and wearing her knife on her belt. Corvin lifted their head from where they stood, washing the dishes over a tin. "You're back," they said, their features softening. Beyond them, the window displayed the cold and dark Lunarian night. They had that comfy sweater on again. It was a bit ragged.

"Of course I am," Moss replied, furrowing her brow. She closed the door behind her and walked up to the kitchen table, dropping her bag. "Why are you doing the dishes?"

"Well, they're dirty." He shrugged.

"You won't ever use them again."

Corvin looked over his shoulder and half-smiled at her. "Whichever prisoner inherits my champion title will."

"Speaking of," Moss said, pulling a chair and plopping down on it, "are there any other prisoners in conditions like yours we might be able to take with us?"

That earned her a snort from Corvin. Moss frowned harder. "No. In any case, you wouldn't want most of them near you. Trust me on this one."

"There are many people locked up for petty crimes. Petty crimes that aren't moral failings." Moss rested her head on her hands and narrowed her eyes.

"Oh, Mossie," Corvin sighed, chuckling right afterwards. The sudden nickname made Moss blush. She recomposed herself and squinted harder. "Those types don't become gladiators. Gladiators are traitors like me and people like that Slaughter Pig guy, may Umbra veil him."

"What about him?"

"I mean heinous crimes." Her voice dropped a little. "Anyhow... Are you sure we can make it, even just us two? Maybe it's best to hold off on dragging other people into this until we're sure we can feed ourselves."

"I wouldn't have asked you to join me if I wasn't sure I could take care of you," Moss said sternly. "You don't have to worry about a thing."

Corvin paused. She shook the water off her hands and turned to Moss, leaning on the counter. She had an odd grin. "Reliable. I like that in a partner," he said, his voice turning almost velvety.

Moss' thoughts halted and her cheeks warmed up again; she raised her head, eyes wide. "Huh?"

"I mean partners in crime," Corvin chuckled. His cheeks were also a little tinted. "You do plan on committing many crimes, don't you?"

"I suppose so."

He let out a long breath and started drying off the dishes. "You know... My girlfriend way back when. She'd been training to become a royal guard. She got in as a soldier. Wanted to be knighted someday," Corvin rambled, her gaze turning distant. "Never thought she'd be drafted, but then thought serving and coming back in one piece might increase her odds. So she went for it without considering anything else."

"Where's this story going?" A bit like an apprehensive cat, Moss slowly lowered her head to her hand again. It twitched in protest, slight pain shooting down to her elbow.

"She was like you. Ambitious. Focusing on some delusional grand plan. What were the odds she'd ever get knighted? Man." Corvin sighed, but still smiled.

"I'm nothing like that. Don't compare me to someone so individualistic." Moss grumbled and pulled the spare chair to prop her leg up. "I'd never serve an Empire for my own individual gains. Besides, what she failed to account for was that she was born a peasant and she'll always be one. Through her attempts to make use of the system and ascend, she became a pawn to further others' suffering herself."

"Oh? You speak like you know her," Corvin taunted, smiling.

"I don't have to. I'd never bow to a draft. I haven't come so far to fold now. Not to that. So don't compare me." When the heat that'd sparked up inside Moss started to die out, her cheeks grew warm again and Corvin's shit eating grin made her want to shrink.

"So fiery." She laughed some more and whistled a tune as she put the dishes away.

Moss took deep breaths to stabilize herself, hoping the shame would drift away. Once she'd regained her composure, she risked the question: "Do you still have feelings for her?"

"Mm. It's a weird thing, really. I got over her the second I defected. It's like... She instantly became a part of my 'before' life. Do you get it?" As soon as the counter was clean, Corvin leaned on it, looking pensive.

"I don't know. I'm not one to let things go," Moss said, pressing her lips shut right after.

"Yeah..." Corvin muttered, that grin rising again, "You do seem the type."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Moss fought the urge to roll her eyes and sighed. "We should sleep a little before leaving. I'll wake you up."

"Aw, sleepover!" Corvin threw her hands up.

"You're oddly chipper," Moss said, lifting an eyebrow.

"I guess I am." He averted his eyes, a silly twisted smile on his face. He worried at the ends of his sweater's sleeves. "There's only one bed."

"You take it."

"Moss-"

"You won't dissuade me. Just take it," she sighed.

It was still dark outside when she shook Corvin by the shoulder. They woke with a hazy look on their face, but soon their eyes widened when Moss presented them with toasted bread. She'd woken up earlier to rekindle the fire and toast it on the stove. "Eat up. It's the last of the bread," she said.

Corvin took it hesitantly. "What about you?"

"We'll be walking a lot today. Eat the little you can," Moss said, grabbing her cane and walking back to the table to double-check her bag.

"You'll be walking too," Corvin said, scoffing.

"I know my limits. Now eat." Satisfied, she buckled it all up. Behind her, she heard Corvin bite into the crunchy bread at last. The weight of her knife was still on her belt where it should be. There was nothing left to worry about. Suddenly, a hand gripped her by the nape and forced her head up. Her muscles tensed up and, if she hadn't known it was Corvin, the person would have gotten elbowed at full force. Moss grumbled in revolt as bread was shoved into her mouth, crumbs dirtying her face.

Corvin bent to smile at her at the edge of her field of vision. "You'll eat, you little bitch. Stop acting cool." Moss frowned and grumbled some more. Corvin forced the bread into her mouth with a wicked grin. "Go on, chew."

So she chewed and swallowed, scowling all the while. She got rid of the crumbs with the back of her hand and frowned at Corvin, elbowing her away. "I can't believe you just did that."

Corvin took a step back and laughed. Moss blushed, realizing it had been a long time since she'd last heard someone laugh out of genuine enjoyment. "You're not the only one who knows how to be forceful," Corvin said, "If you're gonna play it like that, I'm gonna do it too."

"I said I'd take care of you." Moss shrunk when Corvin put their arm around her shoulders.

"We're partners now."

Moss turned to see that they were still smiling. A weird warmth overtook her chest and she pressed into the palm of her hand, hoping the pain would ground her. She took a deep breath. "We need to hide your face. Do you have some cloth?"

Corvin flicked their wrist and the cupboard doors flung open again; soon there was a ragged piece of cloth on her hand. "Like this?"

"Yeah." Moss took it and came face to face with Corvin. Ignoring that lingering warmth, she wrapped their head with the cloth, making sure that it covered their mouth and the biggest scar as well — the one that made them most recognizable. She stepped back to evaluate her work and realized she wasn't all too confident about it. "Be sure to keep your head down."

Fortunately, the sky was still pure black and the streets, deserted. The faint light of the moon guided their footsteps. Pain and overexertion delayed Moss', but Corvin accompanied her pace without mentioning it. "Where are we headed?" Corvin whispered, bending down to get their lips closer to Moss.

"North. But we're taking the west exit because there's something I left behind." It was so quiet out that Moss could hear her own heartbeat. It displeased her, as if there could be footsteps somewhere behind her and she wouldn't hear them because her heart was going so hard. The truth was that Corvin was right: he was terribly conspicuous.

After a long walk, they did manage to get out of town. Moss ventured away from the dirt road, walking among trees and rocks to the spot she'd marked. Corvin stayed behind, watching her with his hands in his pockets. She bent down to dig up a pile of leaves and loose dirt; a sigh of relief left her mouth when she saw that it was still there. She picked up her bow and quiver and put them on her back, walking back to Corvin. "That was it," she said.

"Oh, a bow. How rustic," Corvin said, craning their neck. "I did think your arms felt quite buff."

Moss staggered, nearly tripping over her own cane. Her heartbeat grew louder. "You felt me up?!"

"Not on purpose. Well, you saw me naked. No biggie." Corvin shrugged.

She huffed and straightened herself out. "Nevermind. Just... follow me." After a deep breath, she muttered: "For fuck's sake."

"You're so uptight."

Still riled up, Moss decided not to answer.

Moss kept them walking in the woods the whole day, avoiding roads or settlements near Portbright. She'd rationed food the whole week to have some for that day, which meant they could focus on just making progress. Still, the irregular terrain made everything more strenuous to Moss. She had to ask for regular breaks. Whenever she did, a little bit of anxiety would bloom inside her, making her wonder if Corvin would complain. But they never did. In fact, they seemed happy to sit down on dead leaves with Moss, watching as she stretched her leg.

"I want to know things about you too," he said during one such pause. He was lying on his side, head propped up on one hand while he watched her with attentive eyes. As soon as Moss opened her mouth to answer, he interrupted: "Don't say that you don't matter or whatever. We're partners now." He gave her one of his crooked smiles.

She sighed. "What do you want to know?"

"You said you don't let things go. Were you talking about dating?" Corvin asked. She grinned wider when Moss pressed her lips shut and averted her eyes. "What was their name?"

"Her name was Astrid." She frowned. "Does that really matter?"

"You have no idea how starved for mundane conversation I've been," Corvin said, rolling on the ground to get closer. The spark in her eyes made Moss believe her. "What happened to Astrid?"

"Nothing. She despises me." Moss couldn't look at them.

"Juicy! What did you do to make a girl hate your guts?"



"It's just how it is." Moss took her cane and stood. "Let's keep going. I'd like to make more progress before sundown."

"You're dodging me," Corvin accused, stepping in front of her to force eye contact.

Moss smiled, letting some bitterness shine through. "You might find out what would make someone hate me if I keep talking. That's why," she paused, "we'll just keep going."

"So young and so dramatic!"

"*Walk*, Corvin."

During dusk, they set up camp and ate the last of the rations Moss had gathered around the campfire. The loneliness of the woods was quite grounding; having Corvin with her was fresh, though. It made things different in a way she couldn't quite name yet. When night fell, she unbuckled the rolled up blanket from her bag. "We'll have to share for warmth. Do you mind?" she asked.

"That's alright." Corvin smiled. They really didn't seem to mind at all.

They laid together over the forest floor, roots and pebbles poking at Moss' side. Despite those small discomforts, what sucked her attention up the most was Corvin's body glued to her back. Human warmth burned. It had been too long.

Moss woke up with the first beam of sun and realized she was trapped by Corvin's arm. She lifted it carefully and stared at their face for a moment. Something like embarrassment made her pulse quicken. A bit of Corvin's hair stuck to dry drool at the corner of their mouth. He looked at ease, though his paleness contrasted with his scars made him look permanently fragile. She imagined that he really needed his sleep. Still, she had to shake him awake. "Corvin. Pay attention," she said, keeping her voice low. He mumbled something and focused

his eyes on her. "I need to get us some food. You can sleep in. I'll probably be gone for a long while."

"But if you go I won't be warm anymore," he grumbled, tugging at her coat's sleeve.

"I'll rekindle the fire."

"Stay, Mossie." She dragged out the syllables.

The embarrassment grew into a blush. Moss tore her sleeve away from her hand.

"Neglecting time will kill the weak."

"You're so edgy, I can't take it anymore." Corvin let their hand drop and yawned, closing their eyes. "I'll sleep if you're gonna be like that."

"Good."

As she'd predicted, finding and butchering prey took her many hours. By the time she got back to Corvin with fresh meat in her bloody hands, it was already past noon. When she emerged from the trees, Corvin nearly jumped from the spot she'd been sitting at. "Was that a poor bunny?" Corvin pointed, scruffing up her nose.

"Rabbit," Moss said, "Set the coals."

"Couldn't you at least have washed your hands?"

"Couldn't spare the water." She arranged the pieces of meat over the hot coals with care, ignoring the heat on her hands.

"That's gonna taste like pure smoke."

"Don't complain."

"I'm not complaining." Corvin sighed and grabbed Moss from behind, blindsiding her; her arms enveloped her waist. Moss' organs jumped inside her. "You're a dream, Mossie."

"I'm not a dream." She bit her lip. Her body felt cold where Corvin touched her and her guts churned.

Corvin chuckled. "Right, because you're real."

"That's not what I meant."

"Well, just don't change. Keep treating me like this. That's all," Corvin said, lowering her voice.

"What you see is what you get." Moss used her bloody hands to push Corvin's arms away.

"I don't know. I feel like you have this façade." Corvin laid down and rolled to the side to get into her field of vision.

Moss furrowed her brow and averted her eyes. "Façade?"

"Yeah. Like a layer of pretend you wear."

She swallowed hard and ignored Corvin by turning the meat. It burned her hands a little.

Need for water forced them to hike to a small tributary of the Beltpass. The stream was clear and Moss could see the many rocks and pebbles close to the margin. She knelt and pulled her sleeves up to wash all her tools thoroughly. Corvin sat beside her, watching intently. "Do you carry a whole butcher shop in your bag or something?" they asked, amused.

"All my possessions are in here," Moss said, buckling it all up again. "We should wash up. We'll walk a distance from the stream for a few days afterwards." She sighed and took her coat off. If she didn't make a thing out of it, getting naked would be no big deal. Corvin agreed without a second thought and soon they were both nude in the cold water. Moss kept her back turned to them and scrubbed her hands thoroughly; dry blood was a pain to get off. She'd been absorbed in her task when a light touch on her back made her shudder and straighten her spine.

"Lashing marks," Corvin said in a low tone.

"What about them?" Knowing that Corvin was staring made her skin burn.

"Law troubles?" Moss just nodded. "I'm sorry about it," he said.

Moss snorted. "Have you looked at yourself?"

"My scars don't take away from yours." Corvin's voice was mellow. Moss could hear faint water splashes behind her. "Which look too healed to be recent. No teenager should get whipped."

"You should worry more about your own condition." Somehow, hearing that talk annoyed her; her jaw was so tense that her temples hurt. However, turning around to get the scars out of Corvin's sight meant flashing her.

"Empathy doesn't suffer from scarcity."

"It is wasted on me anyway," Moss said, looking over her shoulder with a frown.

For a moment, Corvin's jaw dropped. Then, she chuckled. "You could have just said it was a touchy subject. I'd have gotten the message."

Moss' cheeks burned and she turned her eyes to her hands. "I'm not touchy."

Corvin didn't push it. There was an odd weight in Moss' mind, like she'd been unfair somehow. She shook it off, regarding it as nothing but a silly thought. Moments later they were laying on the grass, letting the sun dry them off. Corvin kept them warm through heat transfer. "You're addicted to magic," Moss remarked, keeping her eyes on the clouds.

He let out a light chuckle. "It's part of me, so I wouldn't call it an addiction. You know..." His tone grew wary. "Now that you brought the subject up, can I ask you another question?"

"I guess."

"That flame of yours. Why?"

Moss opened her eyes and turned on her side to face Corvin despite their nakedness. She frowned. "What do you mean, why?"

"You don't consider yourself a mage, do you? Why would you go after something so risky if you're not going to use it to pull crazy magic stunts?"

"I didn't do it for the magic."

"I can't think of another reason for a flame merger."

Moss just shrugged. She turned to look at the sky again, covering her chest with one arm. "Stop thinking about me."

"But then I'd be bored!"

"I don't care if you're bored. I care if you're alive and healthy." Moss closed her eyes again, ignoring Corvin's sudden silence.

After a long while, they piped up again: "If we can't talk about you, can we talk about other things?"

Moss sat up and reached for her shirt. She put it on and turned to Corvin with a sigh, judging herself sufficiently covered to face her. "Yes," she said plainly.

"I can live with that."

As they approached a town, Moss sat Corvin down one afternoon and knelt so they'd be at the same eye level. She stared them down, letting the silence ground Corvin enough to gather their attention. "Listen. I'll be going into town, but your face is too recognizable. Before that, I'll get as much food as I can for you. Do you think you can be alone for a few days?"

"Of course I can. I'm an adult," Corvin said, displaying pretend overconfidence. He scoffed to add credibility.

Moss sighed and held him by the shoulders. "You were a scholar and I wager you've always lived in civilization. Am I right?" Corvin nodded. Moss peered deep into his eyes.

"I've been alone for a long, long time. Getting food poisoning out in the middle of nowhere all alone is a bigger threat than it sounds like. So. I need you to be honest with me."

Corvin shrunk under her grasp and close examination. "Why do you need to go into town anyway?"

"Talking some more people into this."

"Aren't we fine like this for now?"

"I'd like to have something stable by winter. I'm done working my numb fingers, worrying about frostbite and sleeping in the cold." Moss paused, frowning at a visible knot in Corvin's hair. She let her shoulders go to undo it cautiously. Still, Corvin winced. Letting her hands drop to her thighs, Moss took a deep breath and her face softened. "But you don't have to worry about a thing. Just tell me honestly if you can handle yourself."

"I can handle myself. I have vitality leeching at my disposal. Food poisoning is not a threat."

"Black magic?" Moss asked, furrowing her brow.

"If you insist on calling it so, sure."

"Okay. Look, you rest and warm yourself up. I have to be out there by dusk." Moss stood with her cane, taking a step back.

"Why?"

"Rabbits are crepuscular."

Corvin shut her lips tightly for a moment before speaking with a frown: "Why do you have to do everything yourself?"

"Huh?"

"I'm feeling useless. You've been doing everything."

Moss turned her back on her and gathered her equipment. The arrows clattered inside the quiver. "I'm not engaging in this discussion."

"We're *partners*."

"I said I'd take care of you. Besides, there isn't much you can do right now." Before Corvin could continue arguing, she added: "Didn't you say this was a dreamy quality of mine? There you go. Enjoy it."

Behind her, Corvin grunted. "You're very hard to deal with."

"I'm well aware."

One of the rabbits, Moss butchered thoroughly; the other, she merely skinned and eviscerated, mindful of the creeping darkness and her short time. While the pieces they'd eat that night were roasted, she presented Corvin the corpse. "I was thinking you could freeze this. Would you know your way around cutting it up?"

"Of course," Corvin said with a faint, hesitant smile. She reached out and took the rabbit, holding the slippery flesh of its leg with only two fingers. She nearly dropped it on the dirt.

Moss narrowed her eyes. "Don't make me lecture you."

In an instant, ice overtook the meat. Their campfire roared for a moment, like the flames had just been fed. "I'm sorry," Corvin said, averting her eyes. She laid it carefully over a piece of cloth. "I'll keep it frozen."

"Does raw meat disgust you?" Moss asked, craning her neck like she'd been presented with an enigma. She sat beside Corvin.

"And blood. I hate dealing with them. I don't mean to disrespect the food or your efforts."

"I thought you'd be desensitized to such things." Moss glanced at their many scars and a flash of the moment they'd been split open sprung up in her mind.

"I think it's the opposite." Corvin smiled. Her stiff half smile was yet another evidence of violence.

Moss sighed. "I'll leave you my tools. Eat properly while I'm gone."

"Aw, you're worried about me." Corvin's smile grew into a grin and she touched her shoulder to Moss'.

"You're here because of me," she said, keeping her expression stern, "If anything happened to you, it'd be unforgivable."

Corvin tilted his head, his ashy hair dropping from his shoulder like a curtain. "You're so stiff. I really do wonder what made you this tense."

"Holding myself accountable is not a fault."

"You're excessive, though."

Moss had tons of things she could reply, but all of them felt too revealing to air out. So she just exhaled slowly and kept quiet.

"I just mean that you can rely on others. Like me. I'm also responsible for myself in this situation," Corvin pressed on.

"I know."

"You do?" Corvin asked, raising his brow.

"I do."

"Then why-"

"Drop the matter and eat your dinner."

At the first sight of light in the sky, Moss had already sorted through all her things and arranged what she'd leave behind neatly — bow, arrows, meat cleaver; all stuff she couldn't carry or that Corvin might need. She woke Corvin, who'd been looking quite abandoned since



she'd gotten up. His eyes opened only partly. "Mossie..." he mumbled, grasping at the air in her direction.

"I'm going. I'm leaving you enough water and food. *Don't* venture away from here. I won't stay away long enough to make you. Tell me you understand," she said softly, squatting beside him.

"I understand." He reached out to hold her hand meekly. "If things start looking down, come back immediately. I feel responsible too." His face softened.

"That's just absurd." Moss remained very still, petrified by that light touch and show of concern.

"You don't have to argue about every little thing, you know. You can just say you understand and indulge me," Corvin said, rolling his eyes.

Moss smiled a little. "I understand," she conceded. She stood up. "I'll see you in a few days."

"Bye-bye." Corvin returned her smile, his eyelids partially closed.

### 3

Exiting Portbright to walk into a much more rural settlement was whiplash inducing. People regarded Moss with caution, sending narrow side glances her way. She'd expected that. She was all too familiar with such places. And, just like she'd expected, she got stopped by a guard after meandering a while; he questioned her on what business she had there. When she said she was just passing through and looking for temporary work, his expression eased somewhat. He pointed her westward, to the edge of the woods surrounding the river. "We have some log shipments due to Portbright. Surely even you can do some wood chopping."

"Of course." Again, it burned and she had to allow it to.

"This is a small community, you understand. We really don't want the trouble of a vagrant beggar."

She just put her head down and walked in the direction she'd be pointed to. In all truthfulness, she'd put too much strain on her leg the past few days. It caught up with her as soon as she got to the chopping; when she'd put her leg back for balance lifting the axe above her head, it'd tremble and make her stagger. With inaccurate hits, work took double the time. She soon had to sit down to stretch her leg out.

A shadow obscured her. She looked up in fear of seeing the foreman, but the sight of another axe on the person's hands made her relax a little. Just a fellow worker. When the woman smiled, Moss relaxed even more. "Are you okay down there?"

"Yeah. I'll get up soon. Just had to take the weight off my leg," Moss replied, finding herself able to smile as well. The stranger's seeming concern was a moment of respite.

The woman bent down to hand her a flask. "Here, have some water." Moss took it from her timidly and, after another reassuring nod from the woman, drank some. "I think what you're doing is pretty admirable."

"Excuse me?"

"You're pulling your weight. Most cripples take advantage of other people's goodwill and just coast along." She said it all still smiling.

Moss choked on the water she'd been drinking and coughed it up. Her sudden bout of dizziness indicated the familiar rise in her blood pressure. A wry laugh escaped her mouth before she realized it. "Are you serious right now?"

"Of course," she blinked, unaffected by Moss' change in expression, "We've had to chase out our fair share. Honestly, should all be put in workhouses to learn some work ethic, the lot of them. That would fix things up."

*You understand why I can't give the same rate to a cripple.* She could hear her heartbeat in her ears. Her stomach burned again and so did her chest. Her hands were hot and eager. She was tired of burning all the way to her wit's end and lowering her head. The sudden

eagerness that made her limbs tingle also made her regain her energy somehow; she gave the woman back the flask, took her cane and stood. With a deep breath, she held the cane with both her hands. Her arms were hot and her vision was blurry.

Moss swung the cane with all her might at the woman's ankle. The hit connected with enough force to make her arms buckle. "Walk now, bitch," she said, forcefully enough to scratch her throat. A scream pierced her ears and tore through the veil of anger. Her fingers went numb.

Later, Moss found herself walking in the woods again. Daylight soon ran out and she had to stop. She curled in on herself, assuming fetal position on the ground. Without the blanket, she hugged her bag for some comfort, but found none. No food and no light. The anger had conjured acid and burned through her stomach before; then, as she laid on the dirt, hunger cut deeper. Despite all that, the only thing on her mind was cold shame and a question: what would she tell Corvin about her excursion?

She was up at the crack of dawn and soon got back to camp. Corvin's still form under the blanket made her let out a huge sigh of relief. Her muscles relaxed without her meaning to let them. Her own reaction caught her off-guard and she had to chastise herself mentally. Of course Corvin was fine. It had been just a day. They'd survived four years of gladiating. A night without her was nothing. Why had she worried so much? Moss knelt beside her and touched her shoulder, shaking her as gently as possible. "Hey, Corvin."

"Mossie?" she blurted out mid-yawn, stretching her arms out. She sounded sleepy. Moss kind of felt bad for waking her. Suddenly, Corvin sat up and widened her eyes at her. As usual, her hair looked like loose hay. "Mossie! You're already back." She paused, her mouth agape. Slowly, she raised her hand and touched Moss' cheek lightly. It hurt. "Your face... You look like you got punched."

Moss rubbed her own cheek, averting Corvin's touch. "I'm fine. I got banished." She knew she was blushing.

"What? In *one* day? That has to be a record of some kind," Corvin said, immediately laughing. "How did you manage such a feat?"

There's no way she could bring herself to talk about it. "You were right," she said instead, smiling faintly, "I'm too bold. I come on too strongly."

"You can't just walk up to people and try to recruit them. Oh, you have such a moxie for these things." Corvin's face lit up and his mouth opened into an O for a moment. Then, he laughed again. "Mossie. Moxie. Ha."

The blush grew in intensity. "Don't."

"It's too late. It just fits too well." He smiled. "I was just thinking about that, in fact. A twenty year old kid who thinks they can lead a revolution. It's a little funny."

"That's not what I'm trying to do."

"Oh?"

"I just..." Moss paused and let another deep sigh out. She moved her hand up to cover her eyes, trying to soothe herself. When she spoke, her throat felt... exposed. She had half a mind to move her hand down and cover it. "If nothing changes, I can't keep going on."

"What do you mean?" The mocking tone had disappeared from Corvin's voice. Moss thought she'd heard a note of concern, but still couldn't manage to open her eyes.

"I don't know how long I can continue living like this. But I can only rely on myself." She stood, one hand on her knee for stability. She let her eyes go and looked down at Corvin's wide pupils. "That's why I'll make things change. Because it's the only option. The alternative is dying."

For a long moment, Corvin just stared at her. That sensation of vulnerability grew into queasiness. "Are you... depressed?" Corvin asked with a serious look.

"I'm not depressed." Moss shut her lips tightly. Her chest compressed and breathing hurt. "I'm burning out."

"It's okay to be depressed."

"I *can't* be depressed."

Corvin put his head down for a moment. Then, she stood and grabbed Moss by the shoulders. Before Moss could react, she was pulled into a hug. Corvin's body felt skinny against hers, hardly able to provide any comfort. But oddly enough, it did; it made hers warm up. The blush returned, though with a different feel to it. "I already told you we're partners now. You don't have to rely only on yourself," he whispered.

"I've only known you for a few days." Anxiety scratched at the back of her brain. Words had little weight to them — especially to some people.

Corvin's hand came up to the back of her head and made her relax it against him. Moss' eyes stung. She shouldn't allow herself to be hugged like that. Just shouldn't. "That's true. But I'm sure I'll be here a while. Maybe you'll change your mind later, *Moxie*."

She huffed. "Are you really gonna call me that?"

He snickered. "Does it bother you?"

Moss let the tension in her neck go. Corvin's clavicle was sharp against her face. "Call me whatever."

"You're *soo* cool," he said, laughing to himself. Her cheeks burned up some more and she closed her eyes, allowing herself to be held. When Corvin pushed her away gently to look into her eyes, she realized she'd relaxed too much. Awareness shot through her and she steeled her face, trying to recompose herself. "Did you get hit anywhere else?" Corvin asked, rubbing his thumb on her swollen cheek. Moss shuddered.

"I'm okay," she said, "It's nothing, really."

"Let me heal you."

"What? No. There's no need for that."

His hands went down to hers, turning them palm up to showcase her blackened bruises.

"Your hands are still battered. How can you even do anything like this?"

Moss closed them up, hiding the wounds. "I already told you. Because it's the way forward. It doesn't matter if it hurts." It was true. Even leaning her hand on her cane had been excruciating. She averted her eyes.

"If you keep treating yourself like this, you really will burn out," Corvin whispered, chuckling lightly. They tilted their head, trying to catch her escaped gaze. However, she only turned her face away.

"You more than anyone should know this. If you stop or let flesh slow you down, you're as good as dead."

"As I said," he sighed, still holding her hands, "I'm here now. Let me have your back. Or, if that's too much for you, at least let me repay you."

"Repay me?" Moss at last looked up at them, surprised to see they had a light smile on their face.

"You took care of me and talked to me. I feel indebted to you."

Corvin's hands were as warm as Moss' face. "I just treated you with common human decency. That's the bare minimum."

"Look at me." His voice was soft. She acquiesced, intentionally perceiving him. She often did. All the marks on him formed an exposition of past violence. Still, he smiled. "You understand why I can't help how that makes me feel, Moxie."

She could feel her heartbeat on her throat and it blocked her airway. She couldn't answer; a choking sound came out of her and it only embarrassed her further.

"So let me do it. There's plenty of live things around us to use," he said, briefly looking at the plant life beyond her.

Moss looked down at their joined hands. Her heartbeat became obnoxious. "Okay," she mumbled finally.

Like it was nothing, Corvin raised one of her hands to a nearby tree. It wilted under their touch and Moss' body tingled. When the tree was completely dead, Corvin opened Moss' hands, touching her palms. It didn't hurt. Moss looked down to see that the skin seemed completely fine. Corvin smiled at her. "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Moss swallowed hard and put her head down, stepping away from them. She bent down to retrieve her cane. "Thank you," she mumbled, stammering a little.

"Are you embarrassed?" they asked, outright laughing when she kept her head down. "I'll make sure to keep taking care of you, then."

"That won't be necessary."

"Speaking of which... Are you hungry? You must be. There's still frozen meat left over."

"I'll prep it," Moss said, immediately turning to the remains of the campfire.

Corvin laughed again, holding her by the arm; he snapped his fingers and the smoldering charcoal grew hot red. "No. You'll sit down."

She looked up at him to find that he was staring her down. Under their forceful gaze, she sat, her lips curled in protest. When they fetched the corpse, Moss had to groan. "You *really* don't know how to butcher. Those cuts you made wasted so much meat."

"It's fine."

"It's not. Food-"

"I *know*, Moxie. But just this once. Alright? You don't have to look if it pains you so much."

Moss sighed and brought her knees up to her chest, hiding her face. She wouldn't look. "I don't know why you're so insistent. I'm the one feeding you because that's what I know how to do," she said.

"I can learn. Even if you keep up the contradictory independent attitude, this is my life now. I need to be able to navigate through it," Corvin said. Anticipating Moss' next words, they added: "And don't say you'll take care of me. Of course I enjoy being cared for. But you need care, too."

"I've been fine all these years." She kept her eyes tightly shut, cringing at the thought of witnessing Corvin's butchering skills.

"You know you're done with being alone, though. You've said so. It's okay. I'm also done."

A weird sensation spreaded across Moss' ribs, like many fingers were feeling her up. She took a deep breath. "I think," she started, immediately pausing. Hesitation. "Human beings are made for community. The only thing that gives me any bit of relief is the idea of cooperation." Breathing was hard. Corvin remained quiet. "But I'm someone who has to do a lot to become deserving."

Corvin's sudden laughter made her shrivel up and blush. She pressed her arms harder around her knees, still unable to look up. "I wish you heard how absurd you sound. You're not undeserving of being a part of society, Moxie."

"You don't know me."

"That may be, but I have the impression that someone has hurt you deeply and fucked up your perception of self. Just the slightest impression."

She heard the familiar hiss of hot charcoal. Must be fat dripping on it. Were heart cramps a thing? If so, her heart was cramping up. It hurt. "Nothing anyone could do could mess with my perception of self."



"You just said we're meant for community. Social creatures. So that's, once again, contradictory," said Corvin, sounding oddly nonchalant. How could he? Moss bit into her lip. "Other people can fiddle with your shape. You act like you've been hurt before. There's no shame in that."

Even with just such vague statements, Moss' brain conjured up images of the past. She resented it. "If I hadn't been hurt, I wouldn't be the person I am today."

Corvin outright cackled. It startled Moss enough for her to look up, finding her bitter smile. "Right, you'd be happier and more well adjusted."

"I'm stronger now," Moss mumbled, shrinking more, "Because of it."

"Are you really saying that to someone like me?" Corvin asked, narrowing her eyes. She walked back to Moss and sat by her side, making her feel even smaller. Was Corvin angry? Was Corvin even capable of getting angry? She felt silly for not wanting to find out. "Do you really think the things you watched people do to me made me stronger?"

Ever so helpful, Moss' brain once again brought up the image of Corvin's blood spraying out into the air. It'd be cruel to imply that had been for the best. "Well... I don't know about you. Just about me."

"You're not exceptional. A broken pen is still a broken pen. You can mend it, but it won't act the same way it did before. It will be something different. You're alive *despite* everything. So am I." Corvin brought her hand up to Moss' face, making her tremble. When her thumb brushed against her cheek, Moss realized it didn't hurt anymore. "Don't you dare tell me all my scars are really blessings in disguise. That's the kind of talk I won't tolerate."

"It's all I have left." She averted her eyes.

"It's not. You're something different now and you can be happy in different ways."

Their touch was making her cheek tingle so much it felt numb. "Does this kind of talk get you off or something?" Moss grumbled.

Corvin chuckled. "You could say that I'm inclined to care about you."

Moss' heart sped up, sending currents of heat all throughout her body suddenly enough to make her dizzy. She turned her face away from their touch, unwilling to let Corvin feel that warmth on her cheeks. "The meat will burn," she said flatly.

"It won't," Corvin said, moving her hand to transfer the meat from the charcoal to the wooden board through telekinesis. "I want to hear your thoughts, Moxie."

She stayed quiet for a while, biting into her lip until it hurt. "I didn't mean to say that what happened to you was for the best. It irks me and makes me want to scream. But when it comes to me..." She put her head down again. "*I* don't need to be happy."

The weight of Corvin's hand on her hair put her head further down. Her fingers moved gently through Moss' hair and she cursed at herself mentally when she felt her eyes burn. "I feared you'd say that. Come on, it's okay, Moxie. I'll feed you. We don't have to talk anymore." Despite the raspiness, Corvin's voice sounded so soft to Moss' ears.

"Okay," she mumbled, trying not to choke on the sob she was holding back.

Despite being well-fed, they couldn't make much progress that day — straining her leg for so many days on end was taking its toll on Moss and she had to sit down and stretch frequently. At the height of the afternoon, Corvin stood tall beside her, watching her pained expression with some sort of interest. "We should stop for the day," they said.

"Not because of me. There's still plenty of daylight," Moss replied, keeping her voice firm.

"You're obviously pushing it. If you want to walk further *tomorrow*, you need to rest *today*." When Moss started getting up, he put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down. "We'll only keep going if you let me carry you."

Moss scoffed. "You can't even lift me."

"Magic."

"I'm *not* letting you carry me. Forget it." She growled.

Corvin chuckled. "What, because you can't let yourself be carried? Because you're too strong for that? Hmm?" They put their hands on their waist, smiling down at her.

"No." Well, of course she couldn't stand the thought of allowing herself to be carried. Corvin was insistent, though. "We don't have enough food for you to keep burning through with magic."

"Then I guess we're stopping." She shrugged and sat down beside Moss. "That's good! We get idle time together."

The word *idle* burrowed a hole in Moss' head, creating a cold hollow. She gritted her teeth. "You should be pressuring me. Not making me sit down." She paused. Her eyes unfocused. "This isn't right."

"Chill out. You're young. You have a lot of time to freak out still."

"I'm on borrowed time already."

"Are you just edgy or terminally ill?" Moss didn't answer, making him sigh. "Anyway. What's your game plan? Where are we walking to? Don't just say 'north'."

"Portbright was my best bet. But I only managed to convince you."

"And that's because I had nowhere else to go. You really do have such a moxie for it."

She lowered her head, deciding to ignore the taunt. "Now... Those settlements that are now just used for sheep farming. Then..."

"I know a place," Corvin interrupted. "Close to the mountains on the way we're headed." Moss gave them a side glance, trying to understand his weird smile. "You might not like it, but it's free of Empire influence."

A shiver passed through her; she tried to suppress it. "You mean within the rift."

"For someone who's not a Lunarian, you're quite familiar with local geography. Yes, I mean within the rift." Corvin's smile grew bigger and he squinted at her. "You dislike it," she affirmed.

She held back another shiver, becoming tense. "Who doesn't?"

"It's not that deep in. It's true that certain excursions have been repelled in the past... To use an euphemism, at least. But if we're just seeking to spend the winter, I'm inclined to think otherworldly forces will be kinder on us."

Moss' body was cold. She didn't doubt it. If Moss herself weren't part of the group, she'd say the logic was risky, but solid. "If that's what you want to do, I'm fine with it. We can do it in time." Though she'd told herself she'd never wander close to that rift, she couldn't hold Corvin back more than she already was.

"Goodie, we're all settled. Now you can rest easy." Like it was nothing, Corvin ruffled Moss' hair. "Lay down, Moxie." Moss obeyed begrudgingly. "I'll watch over you, so sleep."

She stayed quiet for a while, rueing her own compliance. It didn't last long, though. "I can't fall asleep in the middle of the day. I can't relax."

"Predictable. Well, since you won't let me prod you, you go ahead and talk to me."

Moss' cheeks gained that distinct warmth again. She did wonder how someone like Corvin could be so upbeat. "Did you really get over your girlfriend that quickly?"

Corvin's laughter made Moss' face burn brighter. "Going straight for the gossip." After it died out, they took a deep breath. "I'd like to think so. Some things can never come back. My prior life may as well have been a dream."

"She was nice, then?"

"Too nice. I guess I always knew it would end. Because good things don't last." Corvin tilted her head and her hair fell over her shoulder, obscuring her face.

The anxiety that had settled down inside Moss welled up again. She didn't think Corvin would say that. "I don't know. I never know when things are nice." She turned her back to Corvin, staring at dead leaves. "I always think they are, but it always turns out I was wrong." Embarrassment started to seep through, but somehow it died out when Corvin ruffled her hair; their hand lingered there. Moss relaxed.