

Spring comes every year

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1 Qualifiers

An electrical surge jolted her body awake. Gael gasped and opened her eyes, looking down to discover what constricted her body — old wrappings, the melded feeling turning into a sensory hell. With strength she didn't know she had, she ripped them apart; some of her dessicated skin came off, but there was no pain. Looking up, she confirmed her suspicions: from behind a big glass pane, a girl stared at her in shock. There were sigils scattered about and the air smelled of burnt herbs.

"I didn't consent to this crap," said Gael, her voice coming out so hoarse it was almost unintelligible. "I'm... sorry? I sorta didn't think I'd pull this off," the girl replied with a shaky smile. Under the soft light, her brown skin looked quite pale. Gael tapped the glass pane and looked around. There were other embalmed corpses in display cases like hers. "I can't believe they did this shit to me," she said, a sour taste in her mouth, "Everyone knew what I wished for my corpse." The girl seemed to lose her balance for a moment, but managed to get back on her trembling legs. "You're obviously not happy. Maybe I can try to unbind this and..." Gael raised her voice, interrupting her: "Once you start, there's no easy way out. It's like being born."

She raised her fist. More wrappings tore along with dry skin. In theory, it should work... As she pulled her elbow back, the girl's mouth formed an "O" and she started to yell something, but Gael went ahead with full force. The glass smashed easily, shards flying like hail, and she kicked what was left out of her way. In a desperate motion, the girl swung around to look at the door, her curly hair jumping along. There was no noise outside. Gael could hear her taking a deep breath. "Seems like you didn't botch the spell after all, kid," she said. The girl frowned, "I'm twenty-two." Gael stepped down from the display, crushing glass with her bare feet. Hardly tickled. "So?" she asked, raising her brows. "Didn't you die at like,

twenty-four?" the girl asked. "So what? I'm still very much your senior," she said, "Sit down before you fall. You look faint."

She obeyed, sitting slowly on the floor. Her head bobbed as if she was dizzy. Gael spared a moment to look at the inscription under her own display case, curling her lips downward. How distasteful. "Now, why the hell would you raise me? Are you that much of a stupid brat?" she asked, her rough voice getting higher. "Well, we have this huge competition coming up," the girl said, her confidence wavering even more, "I thought I could use you." Gael froze, arms crossed tightly. It was more of a forced paralysis — she knew that she'd act out if she moved. "Fucking hell," she bit down hard, trying not to shout, "I can't believe you anchored me here for some stupid University thing. What you're getting for this is expulsion." The girl laid down on the mosaic tiles, splaying her limbs. "It's not stupid," she argued, closing her eyes, "The winner gets tutored by the best cleric available." Gael stared down at her, trying to burn her with her gaze. "Seriously? What the fuck happened to just making a pact and putting your nose to the grindstone like the good old days?" The girl sighed. "Your inscription says you died, like, twenty years ago," she said, "That's not that long ago."

Gael covered her face, pressing it hard for a bit. Talking was a little hard; her intercostal muscles didn't move all that well when breathing. "What kind of competition is it?" she asked. "Duels." She increased the pressure, feeling tempted to bite her own hands. "You are aware that the undead can't use magic, right?" she forced her voice to remain low, "You could have gone for someone with more brawn than brain." The girl shrugged. "I picked you for the shock factor. A student getting Gael under their command is pretty badass," she said, "Plus, getting necromancy right is a feat by itself." Gael's feet crunched more glass as she took a step forward. "You robbed me of my rightful place by my goddess to flaunt me around?" she asked, "What is a cleric without her magic but a punching bag?" The student sighed again. "Look, I started regretting it as soon as you began talking," she said, "But as you said, we're

rolling with it now. Okay? Raising you was one thing, unbinding is another." She got up painstakingly, collecting her bag. "I'm Lena, by the way. We should get back."

Not finding a quip to retort with, Gael followed Lena out of the sanctum. It looked and smelled as dusty as always, the old stone stained by time. "This place looks much the same," she murmured. "Seriously, stop acting like you died a century ago," Lena replied. Preserved pieces of art and organic matter lined the walls and the exhibits; Gael used to respect the space, but she'd never wanted to be part of it. They managed to get to her room without getting caught, passing through the fields and getting to the cabin near the edge of camp. The woods made the air humid. As Lena closed the door, Gael stood awkwardly, far too conscious of the wrappings melded to her body. "Ideally, you don't want to keep a mummified corpse in a humid space," she said. "Ideally, you'll soon be dead-dead again," Lena said, kicking her shoes off and putting her glasses on the bedside table, "I'm sure it's fine."

Gael crossed her arms and pursed her lips. Sure. "So, what's your game plan?" she asked. "It starts tomorrow morning," Lena said, taking her student robe off and hanging it up. After realizing she wasn't saying anything else, Gael asked: "Is that all you got?" Sitting down, Lena nodded, suddenly looking a little uncertain. "Yeah, the rest's on you," she said. "Did you think this through at all? Do you even know what my style was?" Gael squinted at her, "Or did you really pick me just for the shock value?" From her nervous smile, she guessed the latter. "Well, I know you were like... a close combat cleric despite being a Sidexa kid," Lena said, "Which sounds good enough." Gael rubbed the bridge of her nose. Her skin felt as dry as old leather. "If I have a staff, I might be able to pull something off without magic," she said. Furrowing her brows, Lena asked: "Isn't magic the point of a staff?" Gael sighed. "A fighting staff." The girl let out an "ooh" before saying: "Yeah, I can arrange that, sure."

Morning rolled around and, after enduring all of Lena's hair routine, Gael also had to endure her desperate attempts at disguising a walking corpse. She threw a spare student robe over Gael, pulling the hood up. "Kid, I don't think this cuts it," said Gael. "I just need to sneak you in," Lena replied, rummaging through her drawers, "Then I can deal with the fallout... I think." Triumphant with her findings, she handed Gael gloves and some tie-up cloth shoes. Gael put them on and scoffed. "You think."

They walked out to the overgrown grass that surrounded the student cabins. The dew immediately dampened Gael's shoes and bandages, making her put on a frown. "Give it a week and I'll be hosting ten different fungi," she whispered. "You'll be fine," Lena retorted. The campus was much busier than Gael had ever seen it, students scuttling about. After getting a wooden staff, they headed towards the gymnasium, which seemed to be the place everyone was congregating at. Students smiled and waved at each other from across the rows of seats; laughter and banter filled the air. Yeah, school event day. Damn, Gael felt like a mere doll. They found seats and she noticed Lena eagerly stare at the arena below. "You have guts, I'll give you that," she said, "Not the guts to take hits yourself, but to be as reckless as you are, sure." Lena seemed to snap out of it. "What?" Gael sighed. "Oh, whatever."

A voice boomed, seemingly coming from everywhere around them. Gael immediately spotted the announcer, though. Definitely a Sidexa devotee as well. "Simmer down, students!" he commanded, "The judges will now make their entrance." The banter quieted down a little, which seemed enough to appease him. Older clerics walked in, each wearing the color of the deity they were devoted to. One of them caught Gael's eye. Her hair and posture were immediately evocative of someone she knew; the color of her robe didn't match up though, plus the distance was too great to tell. They sat down at a big table that lined up with the arena. "That's her" Lena whispered, leaning towards Gael's ear, "The one that'll tutor me if we win." She pointed at the cleric that had called Gael's attention. "What's her name?"

she asked. "Genevieve." The word came down like a punch to the throat. Despite biting her tongue to keep quiet, Gael ended up producing something that sounded like a dog's whimper. Lena looked at her in concern; Gael shook her head and smiled.

"Presenting our contestants!" the announcer raised his arms, standing right at the center of the arena. "From the right bracket, Olmus' Blake Ashford!" he said, pointing at the crowd; a light was cast upon a student's green robe. Novice illusion spell. The kid got up and made their way down, standing close to the announcer. Gael didn't have to ask Lena for confirmation; that was Genevieve's kid. The crooked nose was evident even from a distance. All grown up now. The image and the time distortion would have made her puke if she was alive. As the other contestants lined up in the middle of the arena, the light was finally cast upon them. "Sabrael's Lena Gaerhart!" Lena pushed her glasses up and exhaled slowly. Then, she got up and straightened her light blue sash out before starting the descent. To the audience's general confusion, Gael followed her lead.

As they entered the arena, the announcer walked up to Lena in hurried steps. The contestants stared at Gael, their eyes focusing on the shade of her hood. She crossed her arms and shifted, feeling the sand under her dead toes. "Are you entering an undead minion?" the announcer asked, turning off his voice projection, "We don't have that on record." Lena swallowed hard. "Yeah, can I run that by the judges now?" she asked. He looked back at them and they nodded with annoyed faces. Thus, she went ahead, Gael in tow. "Just a minor registration hiccup, folks!" the announcer addressed the audience again. The pair stood in front of the judges' scrutinizing eyes. Gael grabbed the hem of her hood and pulled it down, looking off to the side. "You forgot to register an undead minion?" one of the clerics asked, "Did you get the deceased's family's consent if possible?"

Even for a dead person, Gael's gut felt abnormally cold. And light. She supposed they did remove her insides, but still... "Ah, um, the deceased is soulbound," Lena said, fidgeting

beside her, "So you can confirm consent directly." With an encouraging smile, she nudged Gael forward. The chill spread to her fingers as she slipped her hood back down. She immediately felt Genevieve's eyes glue to her, but avoided her gaze by staring at the judge directly in front. His mouth was agape. The others' were, too. Genevieve's was probably shut. Tightly. "Yeah, I consent," Gael said, trying to break their stun before they expelled Lena or something. They didn't have to know she hadn't actually consented. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Genevieve's blurred form stand up; she knocked on the table with force. "This is preposterous," she said in a low tone, "You had no right to violate the sanctum. This warrants not only removal from the competition, but expulsion."

Before Lena could defend herself, another judge spoke up; it was a man in green. "Miss Gaerhart, don't you think young Gael earned her rest? It's simply disrespectful to raise her for this," he said, sparing a kind look at Gael. "It's not just disrespectful. It's absurd," said Genevieve, "A lot of us were classmates of Mayfield's. We knew her on a personal level. You're stirring memories of grief through your reckless actions." Gael sighed and finally looked at her. Their gazes locked. She held her staff tightly. "I'm right here, Gen. I'm really soulbound," she said, watching Gen's face contort; her crooked nose crinkled. "I agree it was reckless, so I doubt she knows the correct unbinding procedure. She'll need your tutelage to unbind me." Under the growing discomfort of Gen's stare, Gael had to distract herself with something. She tore the gloves off; the fabric was far too prickly. "Besides, my wishes were completely spat on by this institution when you embalmed and displayed my corpse. So let's not speak of disrespect. Maybe this will be a second chance for you to get my death right. Let's do this dumb student tournament thing."

An awkward moment of silence passed before the judges started talking amongst themselves. Not Genevieve though. She kept staring Gael down, unmoving. There were gray streaks in her hair and her facial muscles didn't hang from her bones the same way they used

to. As far as Gael's memories went, she'd looked much different yesterday. That hadn't been yesterday, though. "If Gael Mayfield herself doesn't see a problem with her entry in this tournament, we must approve it," the man in green said, "But your violation of the sanctum is a far different story, one we must further deliberate on. For now, go on."

"Looks like the show is back on!" the announcer's voice rained down on them again. It was getting kind of annoying. The pair lined back up with the others and waited; Lena kept shifting beside Gael. "Starting from the left bracket—" he paused, turning and pointing at a lanky girl in lavender—"Sidexa's Colleen Wickton!" She took a step up and cleaned her glasses with shaky hands, waving at the crowd. A small-ish crowd in lavender went wild. "SMASH THEM, COLLEEN!" someone screamed, obviously straining their vocal chords. Colleen went red. Gael couldn't help but smile. Seemed like the Sidexa kids still stuck together, though there were more of them now. "Against Olmus' Ysolda Moore!" A smaller one walked up with a frown and stretched. The Olmus crowd roared more politely than Sidexa's and stood up ominously for a second.

The other contestants took shelter behind the judges, vacating the arena. "This will either take too long or too little," Lena whispered to Gael as they watched the duo take opposite sides. "Why?" Gael indulged. "Well, it's Olmus and Sidexa. No offense," Lena replied. Gael chuckled. "None taken. Not all clerices have to be combat-focused. But these happen to be, so this should be exciting," she smiled, "The best fights are the subversive ones." In the spotlight, Colleen took her shoes off and kicked them to the side. "See? She's grounding herself," Gael pointed out. Lena merely furrowed her brows at her. "Start!" the announcer shouted, running out of the arena and joining them on the sidelines.

Colleen took a deep, shaky breath and splayed her hands out in front of herself; Ysolda raised her fists and took a regular fighting stance. As Lena had predicted, they took far too long getting in range of each other, Colleen dodging punches and jabs. Not a lot of magic

involved. Suddenly, Colleen drew shapes on the air and closed her eyes. Gael saw it coming from a mile away, but Ysolda was a second too slow. A focused ball of light materialized itself and effectively blinded her. Not missing a beat, Colleen drew on the sand with quick leg movements and the ground betrayed her opponent, propelling her forwards; easy as that, the lankier girl tripped her and pinned her down. Despite being much stronger, Ysolda struggled and couldn't get up. The announcer finished the countdown and the fight was over. "See? How come she didn't stand back up?" Lena whispered. "Shifting sands," Gael pointed out. "Ah. I missed that."

As the ground turned solid again, Ysolda stood up and shook hands with Colleen. The announcer jogged up to her and grabbed her hand with a wide smile, raising it up. "Our first winner, Colleen Wickton!" As predicted, the lavender group stood up and screamed their lungs out. Gael cheered on as well. "Stop it," Lena hissed, "You're fighting her if we win the first duel." Letting out a chuckle, Gael clapped some more. "So what? It's all in good spirits." Watching Colleen be warmly received by her classmates, Gael's smile lost a bit of its spark.

Everyone settled down, leaving space for the announcer to start again. "Kicking off the right bracket: Olmus' Blake Ashford!" Ah. Blake parted from their row, their robe's green band reminiscent of grass under the light. Their hair was exactly the same color as Genevieve's. Her kid, but about the same age as Gael had been. Her chest cavity felt like it was caving in on itself. Well, that wasn't impossible, was it? "Against Sabrael's Morgana Hawksly!" To weird chanting from the audience, an exhausted looking tall girl in light blue marched to stand opposite Blake. Her robe was a size too big and dragged on the sand, only contributing to her gloomy vibe. "Fight!" Not losing a second, she tossed a bag of herbs to the air and started gesturing as fast as she could, squinting in concentration. "She's got balls," Gael muttered. "Well, she'll pass out or something if she does what I think she's doing," Lena replied. As she kept working on her spell, Blake had already finished some work of their own

and was now going on the offensive. They threw a fast punch and Morgana dodged backwards, pacing to the outskirts of the arena while trying to keep her concentration.

It took a few more dodged punches and a kick to the shin for her to finally finish her conjuration. The air shimmered and a creature that looked like some kind of beat up wolf with broken bones appeared — not in corporeal form, fortunately. Though it looked like a trick of light, Sabrael didn't work with that. It jumped on Blake with intent, going for their arm as if it wanted to bite it off. Well, it most likely did. There was contact, but Blake came out of it without a scratch. "When did they cast that shield? That was *slick*," Lena said, failing to be quiet. "Right at the start," Gael answered, feeling some weird kind of pride, "Pretty slick, huh."

Morgana kept her hands together and her concentration up all the while, but eventually Blake worked through the minion and punched her square in the face without meeting resistance. She'd spent all her energy on keeping the spell up. "I guess she had the balls but not the foresight," said Gael. Morgana didn't get back up, blinking on the ground with bloody sand smeared on her face. As Blake was declared the winner, Lena scoffed. "They shouldn't even be in this competition," she whispered, "Their mom is literally one of the judges. Like, they have a great cleric in the family to learn from."

Gael mostly tuned the next duel out. She could hear the roar of fire and see the sparks, but she wasn't so interested in watching two Armus kids duke it out. Her eyes wandered to Genevieve, who was sitting ahead of her; she could only see the back of her head, her wavy hair folding up near its ends. Her robe was light blue, much different from the indigo it had been before — like the color the kids in the arena sported. She felt her throat clench. A switch, huh. A radical one. The announcer's annoying projected voice got her out of her head. "Locking the next bracket, our winner is Russ Hearthing!" he shouted, lifting the guy's hand;

a bit of his singed and frayed sleeve fell off. The Armus crowd was split between roars of victory and words of solace for their defeated classmate.

"We're up," said Lena, pushing her glasses up. "For the last duel of the day, we have Armus' Millicent Woodham!" A girl with an indigo band walked centerstage, cracking her fingers. Her blonde hair looked dirty. "Just Milly, please," she said, stuttering a little. "Against Sabrael's Lena Gaerhart, who is entering a pre-conjured undead minion as a champion," said the announcer; while looking at Lena, he added: "Please keep the ruleset referring to this situation in mind. No interfering. No energy transferring while the duel is on." She nodded. "Right-o." As Gael walked up, she expected the usual cheers or even silence; however, what she was met with was overwhelming booing. She turned to find out that the whole Sidexa group was standing up, hands cupping their mouths. There were words jumbled in. She could mostly pick up bits like "disrespect", "disgrace" and "unbind." With a smile, she started cracking out a gesture, but realized it would be for naught. "Can you project my voice for a second?" she asked the announcer instead; he acquiesced. "Thanks for worrying about me, friends, but it's fine," she said, trying to keep her smile calm. The booing subsided, even if they didn't look so pleased.

"Then... Fight!" the announcer shouted, stepping off. Gael got in a fighting stance with her staff and Milly raised her hands, keeping them tentatively open. "This isn't right," she said, transferring her weight from one foot to another nervously. Though it was odd not to have the cover and artifice of her alteration and illusion spells, Gael shortened the distance between them in wide steps, forcing Milly to draw back with a jab of her staff. She shuffled away from each movement of Gael's at the last second; suddenly, she tore a charm from under her robe's sleeve and started saying something. Gael had the idea of dodging whatever it was, but they were so close together that the roaring column of sudden flames still got her shoulder. Casting a shield would have been much faster — if only she could. She drew back

in a hurry, tapping the fire out with one hand. The uninvited smell of burning flesh plagued the air.

"Okay, no, that's enough," Milly's shaky voice came from up ahead. Gael lifted her head to see her rubbing her own arms. "This isn't okay," she concluded, walking off the arena's limits. So, Gael was left standing there, feeling pitied like a stray dog. The main lights were on her and she could feel the stare of many eyes. Sounding just as confused, the announcer said: "That's it, everyone! Lena Gaerhart locks the bracket!" Lena walked up and waved in thanks, getting booed by the Sidexa section again. "Be sure to come back for the semi-finals in two days," he said. He didn't seem as cheery as he sounded. As people started filtering out, Gael felt oddly empty. "Well, that was underwhelming," said Lena. "Yeah. And you're not a crowd favorite," Gael replied, looking back towards the judges, "Can I meet you later? I want to take a look at something... for old times' sake." Lena messed with the strap of her satchel for a moment. "I mean, I guess," she said, "I'll be in the solarium."

Taking an unnecessary deep breath, Gael took some steps against the rest of the contestants' flow. Her eyes were on Genevieve, who was collecting her things and talking to the other judges. She started blanking on the things she'd intended to say. Though Gael felt the weirdest bout of nostalgia, the pain was still fresh. Before she could recollect her thoughts, Blake walked into her field of vision; they walked up to their mother, patiently waiting. Gael staggered. That wasn't really her place. Actually, none of... *anything* was. She pursed her lips and took a step back. In that very instant, Genevieve locked eyes with her; her mouth parted ever so slightly. Before Gael could find out if she'd call out to her, she turned tail and pulled her hood up. No one had to look at her dead self more than necessary.

2 A day off

Classes had been cancelled for the whole week due to the event, so the next day Lena was lazing about in her room, happily sketching something out. Gael was looking at the junk she'd piled up in the tiny space, pulling drawers out and lifting memorabilia to her eyes. It was a little foggy outside and she was getting antsy. "I was thinking," Lena interrupted the silence, "It's kinda crazy that you and Genevieve know each other." Furrowing her brow, Gael put the little statue she'd been looking at down. It looked like it was supposed to be a representation of some creature from another plane. "How so? We were both the same age and studied here, so..." she said, though it stung some.

"Yeah, like, sure. Logically," Lena said, pausing and tapping her pen to her cheek, "I mean, I guess you didn't really seem to me like a real person before." Gael froze up for a moment, but soon bit her lip and looked down. "Great stuff, kid," she murmured in response. The collection of lower plane creatures on Lena's shelf felt even more distasteful after the comment. "I guess that sounded bad. Well, it's hard to think of dead people like that. Especially the ones who died a while ago," she added. Silence thickened. She went back to doodling. "Anyway, I kinda wanted to know if you guys were close," she said. Gael hesitated. It wasn't really her business to spread information on the living. "You could say so," she replied.

"Wow. It must have been awesome to see her then. Bet she was the campus star," Lena said. "She was on a different path back then," Gael said, rubbing her arm. Something felt off about it. Could be the whole being dead thing. "How so?" Lena asked. Shrugging it off, Gael turned back to her wardrobe and started messing with some tomes jumbled in there. "Even for a Sabrael kid, you're obsessed with adjacent plane creatures, aren't you?" she asked instead, feeling her lips curl downwards once she closed her mouth. Lena turned back to her,

her eyes lighting up when she saw the book Gael was holding. "Ah, yeah, a little," she said, "That's the illustrated guide to Eviscerators."

After looking at the pictures, Gael pressed her eyes shut a bit and sighed. She put the book back. "So I noticed." A moment passed. "Oh. Yeah, sorry, I guess all these might be a bit uncomfy for you," Lena said, letting out an awkward chuckle. When Gael merely stared at her, she added, as if it hadn't been clear enough: "Considering your, um, death and all." Gael grunted and looked away, ending the conversation. She didn't really need verbal reminders; she'd been thinking about it enough. Her body looked far too whole, not really matching her memories. No way to know what the fuck those morticians had done to her corpse to make it presentable.

The day snaked by and the uncomfortable silence stayed between them. Gael had been bored out of her mind by the time someone knocked on the door. It was enough of a shock that Lena jumped off her chair and swung it open. Genevieve stood there, looking a little out of her element; awkward, even. Still, Lena seemed intimidated. "Oh, hey, professor... Is everything okay?" she asked. "I'm just here to ask Gael to accompany me on a walk," Gen said plainly. On her corner, Gael gripped her own arms. Lena stepped aside. "Um, sure?" Gen stuck her head in, her eyes widening when they found Gael's. "Mind talking for a while?" she asked. Feeling stiff, Gael walked up to her. "Yeah, I'd like a walk."

They walked side by side, Gael keeping cautious distance. Gen's pompous professor's robe caught on the tall grass a little. It felt like the silence between them crackled. "Sorry, I've thought of so many things I wanted to say to you over the years that I don't know where to begin," Gen smiled, lines forming around her mouth. The sentiment caught Gael off guard. As far as she knew, they weren't exactly on speaking terms. Or, well, *hadn't been*. "Are you sure you don't mind?" Gen asked, looking at her with the same cautious feeling on her face.

"I'm sure I don't," Gael said and smiled, her chest tightening up, "I might like it, in fact. Are we headed anywhere?"

Genevieve's eyes gleamed. "Remember that curve in the creek where the rocks cave in?" she asked. "Everything's very fresh in my mind," Gael replied. "Ah," Gen's smile dropped, "I'm sorry for that." Their pace was a little lighter after those shared few words. As they entered that sparse bit of the woods, Gael found the guts to ask what she wanted to; her time was limited, after all. "So you don't... resent me anymore?" she pursed her lips, wary of Gen's shocked expression. "Oh, Gael, no," she sighed, pushing a branch out of their way. It seemed to take a while for her to gather her thoughts. "You should have never had to feel like that. I guess at that age it was natural for me to be childish enough to resent you, even if it was wrong," she took in a deep breath, "But I didn't have the time to make it right."

From the tiny hill where they stood, they could see the creek. The water level was lower than Gael remembered. When she looked back at Gen, she found that she was being stared at. "If your memories are so fresh, I suppose you must be rightfully angry," Gen said, joining her hands. Gael looked away and pressed down on her own arm. "I was never angry. Just... hurt," she mumbled, pausing for a while; "Do you understand me better now that you're under a god of sacrifice too?" Gen shook her head and got back to walking, shuffling down the hill in the water's direction; Gael followed suit, minding the roots and thorns. "Faith or no faith, I should have respected your wants," said Gen, "And respected you enough to be upfront. Ah, I guess everything just felt end-all-be-all back then."

The words were nice, so why did everything still sting so terribly? "I... I guess I'm glad to hear that and I should feel vindicated or something," Gael reasoned, "But it doesn't sit right with me." They walked along the shore, Gen gracefully overcoming rocks and pebbles. "As you said, this is all recent to you. I don't expect you to forgive me like that," her voice came softly, "It can't feel good to hear me speak of this so calmly when it still hurts you. It's... I've

had many years to come to terms with it and... mourn you." Gael took a deep breath. Briefly, her brain asked her to imagine what it would have been like if Gen had died in her place. The thought made her sick and she pushed it aside. She couldn't imagine coping with that.

"Here it is," Gen said, smiling at her and pointing to that concave spot in the rocks. She crouched and Gael imitated her, noticing that there were lots of colorful crystals grouped in the tiny cave. Her eyes widened. "What's this?" she asked, trying not to sound too awed. "I've been collecting them here," Gen explained, putting her hand in there and grabbing some. They made pleasant clacking sounds. She deposited them in Gael's hands; their cool temperature was nice on her dead skin. "Nice collection." Gen seemed a little embarrassed. "They were for you, actually," she explained, looking away, "I thought that exhibit wasn't a good place for you. It was the very opposite of what you wanted. So I kept this little private spot as a tribute. You liked your rocks and you liked it here. So, there you go."

"They're minerals," Gael muttered, sitting down and clacking them together like an amused child, "Sorry, I don't really know what to say. I'm glad this place is still here." They spent some minutes like that, listening to the water flow by. A nice, chill breeze brushed against Gael's face. It really did feel like a day off from classes with Genevieve. But Gen wasn't a student anymore and Gael would never graduate. "Since you're under Sabrael now, I suppose you didn't stay with that guy after your pregnancy, huh?" she asked, feeling her stomach go cold. "Of course not," Gen said, a hint of remorse in her tone, "A relationship born out of cheating would never really go anywhere anyway."

The word made Gael's ears ring. She held a quartz up against the sun, trying to catch the light and pace her own thoughts. Only yesterday Genevieve would have never used the word "cheating". Wasn't that the kind of admission Gael had wanted to hear? Why didn't it make her feel any better? "When did you make the switch? To Sabrael, I mean," she asked. Couldn't imagine Gen switching like that, especially not to Sidexa's just as strict sibling.

"Shortly after you died," she replied. Gael kept quiet, putting the quartz back with the others. The implications of Gen's answer weighed down on her. Though she didn't say anything, Gen added: "I guess I didn't feel deserving of having romantic bonds anymore after I was able to admit what I did to you."

"That makes it sound like you're punishing yourself," Gael pointed out, unable to keep the bitterness within, "Faith shouldn't be about that." When Gen chuckled, Gael frowned. "It's been a long time," Gen said, "Maybe I was self-pitying and seeking penance at first, but I feel like I've found my place now." After standing quiet for a bit, Gael shut her eyes and let her head down, clutching the minerals on her lap. "This isn't fair," she said, choking up, "But you're sounding so level headed and I don't want to sound childish." She could hear Gen take a deep breath. "It's not childish, Gael. And it isn't fair at all. Nothing about it is," she said, "What happened to you should have never happened." There was a pause. "I feel like saying 'thank you' for what you did that night would be wrong. I'm grateful that Blake got to live this life for sure because of you, but it shouldn't have happened," said Gen, her voice lowering.

Gael could feel her throat clenching. She felt like she was burning up. Even Genevieve was bringing that night up when it was the freshest thing in her mind. "You wouldn't thank me if you knew how quickly I changed my mind," she forced the words out, trying to shut her imagination down, "I only stayed because I thought I could win. When it became clear I couldn't, I regretted it so much." Even just thinking about it spreaded an indescribable chill across her body. "That's only natural, though. It doesn't subtract from what you did," Gen said. "None of us would have thought you didn't regret it, though the administration did paint this saintly picture of you to lessen things back then." Gael looked up tentatively. "The others...?" Gen nodded. "Everyone was fine. You bought enough time for the professors to get there and control the situation," she said.

Gael looked down at the minerals she'd been playing with. Sighing, she put them back in their little cave. "I would have preferred not to know what they did with my body," she murmured, dragging her fingertip against the damp rock, "I want to go home." The sad note in her own voice caught her by surprise and made her feel pathetic. Also, the sentiment itself seemed out of the blue; she couldn't say where home was, but she felt she had just been there. "You mean... An adjacent plane? Do you remember what it was like?" Gen asked, looking at her with full attention. "I don't. There's just... this feeling. Like I was fine and now I'm not," Gael said. A moment of silence passed and Gen's soft expression turned hard to read. "What Gaerhart did was completely out of line. You only have to say a word and I'll see to it that she's cast out of the tournament," she said, "I'll teach her to properly unbind you." Gael shook her head. "I'll see this through. She's just a kid. She wants to catch your attention," she said, "Well, and you know I like events like this one." Gen chuckled. "Maybe a little too much."

By twilight Gael was already back in the cabin. Lena received her wide-eyed, her hair in disarray and hands smudged with charcoal from whatever she'd been drawing. "So, how was it?" she asked. The question dragged Gael out of her own head. "Huh?" Lena signaled vaguely. "Genevieve. Did she say anything about me? Am I really getting expelled?" her voice went up as she pointed at herself. Gael merely blinked at her for a while. "Are you sure you've already realized I'm a real person?" she asked, taken aback. Fortunately, the snark seemed to work. Lena straightened her posture. "Sorry, I guess I'm just panicking," she said, pushing her glasses up and looking off to the side, "Um, well, got a game plan for tomorrow?" Gael sat on the floor, hearing a weird crack come from herself. Her body was so stiff. "You need to feed me more energy before the match," she said, "There's not much else to do."

3 Semifinals

Oddly enough, walking back into the gymnasium and hearing the students' banter was enough to soothe Gael's nerves. She could almost tune everything out and pretend it was their biannual face-offs. As the remaining contestants took their positions around the arena, Lena was shifting so much her gestures were reminiscent of bubbling water. "Are you sure you can do this?" she asked, "I'm betting my marbles on you." Did she really have to kill the faint buzz? "You had the guts to do what you did and not the guts to take some hits to the face, so you don't really get to lay the pressure on, kiddo," Gael replied, crossing her arms. "But, um, you'll try, right?" asked Lena, a wobbly smile on her face. "I'm not the forfeiting type," said Gael.

The judges walked up, taking their seats. As Genevieve pulled her chair back, she waved discreetly at Gael. The simple gesture tugged at her heartstrings and she lifted her hand back, somewhat uncertain. Everyone settled down as the announcer projected his voice. A simple greeting to the audience made the students cheer in return. "Without further ado, our first fight is Sidexa's Colleen Wickton against Sabrael's Lena Gaerhart!" He waved towards the lit arena and Gael and Colleen walked in, taking position. Though the Sabrael crowd was oddly quiet, the small group of Sidexa kids compensated for their silence: "ASK HER, COLLEEN!" Gael lifted her brow as they assumed their fighting stances. "So, Gael..." Colleen started, her cheeks a little flushed, "Big fan. We were wondering if you'd like to hang out sometime while you're... around." The whole thing took Gael by surprise; she stuttered a little. "Fan?" she asked, burning up some. "Um, yeah... Maybe you'd... share some tips?" Colleen asked, smiling.

"At your leisure, guys," the announcer said. Sounded kinda miffed. "Sure," Gael smiled back, "Let's see what you got." At that, Colleen beamed, her eyes twinkling under the light.

Gael took the first step, lunging forwards; Colleen danced away and lifted shaky hands. Her fingers drew big, open shapes in the air. The sand transformed in the space between them, turning treacherous. Gael stepped on it anyway, not surprised to find solid ground. It had obviously been an illusion spell instead of alteration. She breached the gap between them and jabbed at Colleen, whose eyes widened. She threw herself to the side and rolled away on the ground.

As Gael turned and lifted her staff to sink the dull end on her shin, Colleen's hand shot up with more desperate gestures. Flashbang. Gael closed her eyes to avoid it and went ahead, lifting the staff up and bringing it down with force. She held back when she felt it connect; Colleen let out a gasp. The girl managed to break free and roll away. Though she struggled to get up, she did, bending to the side of her injured leg. The rest of the fight flowed like water, Gael stepping ahead and Colleen skirting around her; all the while, the student would be casting spells to no avail as Gael read and avoided them. However, as she swiped and charged at Colleen, she felt increasingly stiff. Her body made odd, dry sounds. She wasn't an expert, but that didn't seem normal. An undead creature should have relentless force as far as its master fed it.

Thankfully, soon Colleen's body gave in. She was sweating and panting, tired out from dancing about on an injured foot. "I forfeit," she declared, stepping out of the arena. Her face was red from exertion. Again, Lena was declared victor and took the stage with a smile to be booed. Gael approached Colleen, holding her own side with steady fingers. It felt hard. Maybe the stiffness was just a side effect of death. "You good?" she asked, watching as the girl sat and looked at her hurt shin. "Yeah," Colleen sighed, "Oh, man. That was embarrassing. I really let everyone down."

Gael chuckled. "Embarrassing why? You did great." Colleen raised an eyebrow. "I feel like I was too slow. I couldn't get any hits at all." Gael shook her head, tapping the staff on

the floor as she thought of a reply. "No, I wouldn't say slow. It would have worked out perfectly if you weren't against another Sidexa cleric," she said, "I just happen to know the casting process of all the spells you used. Well, I was some semesters ahead of you, so..."

She looked off to the side, realizing she'd just reminded herself. "If you're really into dueling, maybe try to be more vague and open-ended with your gestures. You won't need that much clarity after you've practiced the spells enough," Gael concluded, trying to give her an encouraging smile. Colleen seemed thoughtful for a while, but soon nodded. "That's actually really helpful. None of my classmates are interested in dueling, so... I guess that advice is a novelty," she said, smiling back, "Anyway, you didn't answer earlier. Wanna meet up with us in the solarium afterwards? Just the Sidexa kids." The proposal was tempting enough. Maybe Gael would be able to feel more at home. "Yeah, why not?"

They watched on as Blake and Russ were called to the arena. Being close enough to really see Blake's features, she felt both like no time had gone by and she'd never catch up. Their expression was severe, perhaps too severe for a student tournament. Just like in the qualifiers, Blake fought patiently, blocking and guarding their space more than attacking. No resemblance to the destructive force Genevieve used to be in their biannual tournaments, huh. Then again, she had a much calmer air about her these days than Gael could ever recall. Close by, Lena seemed bored out of her mind, tapping her foot; however, Gael thought the way Blake just watched and shifted away from oncoming blasts was nothing short of entrancing. That required a lot of concentration.

Ultimately, Blake found a break within the barrage of shots; with no time limit, these duels could become a battle of resistance. Taking long, rushed steps, they were all over Russ, pushing him to the ground with far more force and weight than they should possess. Well, it seemed like an augmentation spell to Gael, but she hadn't seen it being casted. It was over like that. "And our final duelists are Lena Gaerhart and Blake Ashford, everyone!" the

announcer shouted, even his voice almost being drowned out by the audience's roars. "Be sure to come for the final match on Friday!" At least two more days of that. She couldn't say it was entirely terrible, but the prospect still made her throat and eyes burn up.

Footsteps made her lift her head and the person who entered her field of vision made her freeze. Blake was coming straight for her and her body felt more solid than ever. What could they possibly have to say? The tension dissipated when they turned to Colleen, who was just by her side, supporting most of her weight on one leg. Blake pointed at her shin. "Can I fix that?" they asked plainly. The girl perked up. "Oh, if you would!" she smiled. With apparent effortlessness, Blake knelt, hands flowing along her leg; it was done in the span of a blink. Colleen had a wide smile and thanked them at least three times.

As they got up, Gael couldn't hold herself back. "So it's you and me, huh?" she commented. That got their attention. Their dark eyes focused on hers — their father's eyes. She still remembered them. Their gaze went through her like sharp needles. "Indeed. But you don't really have reason to win, do you?" they asked, smiling, "Since you're championing for Lena." Gael smiled as well. "Still, fighting you looks like fun." Watching Blake so closely made Gael feel on the brink of implosion. Adult Blake was a time anomaly, an impossibility of Gael's existence. Of course, not really — she was the one who didn't belong. "If you say so," they said with a blank expression, waving and walking away.

The Sidexa kids came down from their seats and surrounded them. "You coming?" Colleen asked, taking Gael out of her brief stupor. "Yeah." The small group joined the waves of students around them, flowing out of the gymnasium. Treading the path Gael had treaded so many times before was bittersweet; the warmth of the sun on her skin only made her think of rotting further. "So... Fan?" Gael asked, perhaps looking for validation, "How come?" By then they'd entered the wide, open space of the solarium and most of the group had found pillows to plop down on. "Oh! Well, we used to have a professor who'd use your strats for

combat examples," Colleen said, carefully setting a plant pot aside, "He's retired now though." Gael sat, conscious enough of her stage of decay not to sit on fabric. "What's his name?" she asked, mentally taking a guess. "Tristan Greening." Thought so. It was a little embarrassing to think of being cherished by others for so long and not doing anything to deserve it anymore.

"Back in my day, Sidexa students didn't really pay any mind to offensive tactics," Gael pointed out. "It's still not our main focus," some other guy said, "But it's fun to fight amongst ourselves." Colleen smiled. "Yeah, I tried to apply some of your tricks today, but I guess you can't fool the one who devised them." Gael felt her eyes widen; if she were alive, she'd be blushing. "I, uh, thought you played it great when you tried to pass off an illusion spell as alteration. That'd typically work," she said, "Though there are things that would fly best against mindless creatures."

Though she felt comfortable enough talking about magic, soon the conversation shifted to other topics and she just listened on. Their banter had an odd nostalgic pull; it seemed like she'd turn her head and see her own friends just walking in. "We noticed Blake helping you out, yeah?" one of the guys asked Colleen, making her shrivel up and look away, "What's that about?" Her face was red. She took her glasses off and pretended to be busy cleaning them. "Nothing, really. They were just healing my leg." Another one of her friends smiled wide. "Bet you were really happy. Maybe that means they're interested in you," she teased. Colleen shook her head and put her glasses back on. "No, they were just... caring for a living thing, like Olmus kids do," she said, sighing. Still, she had a distant look to her eyes.

"Yeah, it's best if you don't pursue that, seriously," the guy said, "Dating outside of Sidexa is just heartbreak." The other girl objected, furrowing her brows: "Don't be a buzzkill. You don't even have any dating experience, so it's not even anecdotal evidence." Though Gael felt the words sour her mouth before they even slipped out, she spoke up anyways. "I have.

And I agree," she looked away, a little wary, "Should have stuck to Sidexa or someone who was ace. Or both."

Colleen shifted. "An allo person could be okay with a relationship without sex... Maybe?" she said, losing confidence throughout the sentence. The knot in Gael's throat grew. "They may say they're okay with it or even convince themselves that they are," she said, blinking hard, "Well, it would be fine if they at least admitted it." The other girl piped up, brow still furrowed: "That sounded very specific." Gael caught herself. "Yeah. Sorry," she said, turning to Colleen, "You'll be okay, kid. Give it a shot and talk a lot." Maybe that was shit advice. Even if she could, she'd never give it another shot.

4 Characteristic spring day

Tournaments offered far too much time off — time that Gael didn't want to spend cooped up with Lena. Though her gut felt oddly hollow at the prospect of going through with something she'd just imagined, she made the trek anyway, dragging her decomposing feet through the tall grass. How come it looked just about the same height it used to be back when she was alive? She went beyond the second rusty gate, following the trail up to staff housing. After asking around for a while, she found her destination.

She came to a halt in front of a small brick house, full body chills overtaking her. Vines overtook it, etching their roots into the orange-ish brick. Assorted bushes lined the entryway, threatening to take the trail itself over. Too haunted to knock on the door just yet, Gael let the plants distract her, folding at the knees to inspect them. Though she was barefoot and all, she didn't feel any connection to the earth; it was quite the isolating feeling. She hadn't felt that detached ever since Sidexa had taken her in.

Light footsteps dragged her out of her pitiful thoughts. Just by the corner, someone watched her with a furrowed brow shaded by a large straw hat. Their messy black hair was tied back and they held a battered gardening can. "Gael Mayfield?" they asked. "Oh. Hey... Blake," she said, propping herself up. "You're here for my mom?" they proceeded, casually adjusting their pulled back sleeves. "Yeah," Gael crossed her arms. "She should be back soon," they said, going back to watering some flowers, "Do you want to come inside?"

"Um, it's okay. You have a nice garden going on," she said, motioning at all the plants, "I can just stand here." At that, Blake looked back at Gael and smiled. "Thinking about it, you would be the type to appreciate it." They were slightly taller than Gael and far more well-built than she'd ever been, even though Genevieve was that much shorter. Not fair. "You guessed it," she smiled too, pacing between the bushes. "I've found Sidexa folks tend to,"

their voice was just as soft as the water hitting the soil, "And it matches what my mom has said about you."

"Genevieve talks about me?" she paused, standing there like a scarecrow. "Sometimes. Apparently I owe you thanks," they pointed to the back of the house, "So you're free to see more." The two walked there together. Blake dropped the can and cleaned their hands with a dirty rag. "Good to know I'm deserving of such graces," Gael smirked. The back of the house was indeed just as lively as the front; perhaps even more. She felt her eyes widen at a circle of assorted mushrooms. "Did you grow your own fairy circle?" she asked, feeling a twinge of excitement she didn't remember feeling in her last months of life. Blake sighed, not looking too pleased. "It's a work in progress. They aren't fans of sticking to growing where I tell them to," they said.

Grabbing onto that feeling, Gael kept exploring the nooks and crannies of the garden, asking Blake as many questions as she could think of. They seemed glad to answer, ever with that calm look on their face. After a while, she stopped, scratching her arm. It bugged her. There were parts of her body that offered no sensation at all. Blake looked at her patiently; Gael imagined they pitied her somehow. "How come you seem so composed for a twenty year old? Like you're all figured out?" she asked, shocking herself to find resentment in her tone. Blake chuckled. "What's there to figure out? I like life as it is," they said, smiling.

It hit Gael like a punch to the gut. She almost folded in on herself. In such nice weather, under a tame sun, hearing words like that came with a bout of nauseating nostalgia. She chuckled as well, though it came out nervously. "Yeah..." she mumbled. Out of the blue, the backdoor opened, its hinges screaming to alert them. "Blake?" Genevieve peeked her head out. Her eyes widened and her mouth hung open when she saw the visitor. "And... Gael?" Seemingly finding humor in it, Blake smiled and turned away. "Mayfield seems to be, as you would say, one of us 'dorky tree-huggers' as well," they said.

"I guess I wanted to have another chat," Gael said, scratching herself some more. "Sure," Gen smiled a little and opened the door wide, "Come on in." Gael acquiesced, walking into the very same type of organized mess she'd find in Gen's student cabin back in the day; kitchenware cluttered the counters and plants hung from the ceiling. She pointed at them. "Blake's?" Gen rolled her eyes. "Yeah, kid's keen on turning the house into an indoor jungle," she said. An odd melancholy tugged at Gael's heartstrings. "They seem... nice," she said. "Through no influence of their parents, I assure you," Gen sighed.

She turned to grab a jug. "You want some-" she started, interrupting herself when she faced Gael again. Her face dropped and she put the jug back on the counter. "Sorry, Gael," she said. "It's okay," Gael replied, trying to smile. Why was she trying to spare Gen's feelings? "So, what did you want to talk about?" Gen asked. "I don't know. It's all too much," she said, trying not to touch anything. She paused and took a deep breath, even if there was no room in her lungs for it. "Tristan was a professor here too?" she asked.

"Yeah. He retired from teaching last year and got stationed in some northern town," Gen said, pouring herself some tea. "So you guys had to, like, endure each other's presence?" Gael asked, a bewildered smile forming on her face. Gen brushed her hair aside, averting her eyes for a moment. "We're friends these days," she said after some hesitation. Another punch to the gut. Frozen in place, Gael couldn't stop her face from dropping. "Things were hectic after you passed. Tristan did hate my guts for a long time. But he also hated himself," Gen said, "Still says it was his fault you were even there that night. I guess grief brought us closer."

Grief. The word pierced Gael's leathery skin and she hated it. She was right there, but to everyone else she was long dead. Though it seemed immature, she couldn't help but feel a burst of anger at the fact they'd all moved on. She did know it was only natural, but it still stung. "Hey. It will be okay," Gen said, making her raise her eyes to her again, "You want to

be unbound, right?" Gael nodded. "I hate it. I feel trapped in this... corpse." Her own corpse, but how could it be? She perfectly recalled being torn apart. "By this time tomorrow, we'll be making progress. I promise," Gen said, her smile faltering, "Though I know those words may mean little to you... Sorry."

Indeed. Hearing that left a sour taste in Gael's mouth. She had to spit it out: "I feel like I spent the spring of my life on someone who never even loved me." After hearing the scorn in her own voice, she regretted it instantly. She averted her gaze, unable to stare at Gen. Her eyes burnt. "I did love you," Gen said, "Which was why I didn't want to let go even when it was the right thing to do. I was selfish."

Gael lowered her head, meeting her own distorted hands. "Yeah," she mumbled, turning to grab the door handle. "Was that all you wanted to know?" Gen asked; Gael wanted to believe her tone was passive aggressive, but it only sounded cautious and... sweet. "I guess I wanted some sort of closure," she admitted, "But I don't think I'll get it. Who knows if I'll even remember this." She opened the door and stepped out. "See you tomorrow, Gen."

5 Finals

"I fed you a lot of energy," Lena said the next day, closing her fist in determination, "So you can definitely beat them. Right?" It was true; she'd transferred enough energy to Gael that it'd left her dizzy, sitting on the ground and chugging juice. "I always try," Gael said, not finding the spark to be excited about it. "Okay. But you *can* do this, right?" she chuckled nervously, "Should I have picked a different dead person?"

Gael couldn't help but sigh a rotten breath. "Or you could have put yourself in the arena and used a corpse without soulbinding it. Better yet, just use one of those freak-ish otherly creatures instead," she said, sounding more stern than she'd hoped to. Lena winced; "Yikes. Okay, okay. Maybe next time." They took their places and Gael stared at Blake's blank face as they waited for the announcement. It was scary how unreadable they could be; it was that familiar laser focus concentration Genevieve used to show, though without the murderous intent.

By that point, Gael was a little beside it all. Truth be told, she wanted it to be over already; it was hard to care about someone else's goals when your feet were being overtaken by mold. The announcement sounded deafening and the duelists immediately got to it, Lena twiddling her thumbs on the sidelines. As the fight progressed, Gael realized Blake was mostly unhittable — as an Olmus devotee, their shields were much more potent than anything she'd have been able to cast herself. At that moment, she could only rely on her reflexes and inhuman force to block their augmented attacks. As she did so, blocking a punch with the side of her arm, she heard something crack. But what?

Blake seemed to have heard it too, frowning. Still, they didn't let up; instead, they started coming on the offense even more, eventually managing to hit the same spot again. Something broke off from Gael's arm and fell to the ground. She paused to look. "Clay," she

mumbled, feeling her eyes widen and her chest contract. But Blake didn't pause. They grabbed her by the shoulders and sunk their knee on her gut with full force, but she didn't really feel it.

When she managed to de-tangle herself from them, Blake's face seemed filled with pity. It made her burn with shame. "What?" she asked, raising her staff. "I'm sorry. It seems like they stuffed you up," Blake replied, raising their fists as well. Gael's body went through all the motions of crying, but no tears came out. Guess there was nothing left to cry. "So it seems," she said, her own voice sounding shaky.

Still, they got back to it, chips of clay flying off Gael with each augmented impact. Maybe she'd given up; maybe she couldn't take it anymore. In any case, it ended with Blake stepping on her chest and holding her against the ground. The duel ended. "I took advantage of a bad moment of yours," Blake whispered as they helped her up, "Because I'd get more out of winning than you. Sorry." Humiliated, Gael looked off to the side. "Don't apologize. You won fair and square."

As Lena lamented her loss, Blake's Olmus classmates silently congratulated them and the judge in green got up to shake their hand; Genevieve quickly swept her kid in a back-cracking hug. "Oh, I was really counting on this," Lena grumbled, walking up to Gael. "Don't worry. You're still alive. You'll have countless chances to improve your magic," she sighed, "It's not the end of the world." But her own end of the world had already come and gone. After staring at the clay that filled her gaps for a while, she took her hand to her gut and felt it thoroughly. They'd definitely filled her up and stitched her up with skin that didn't belong to her. All of that did happen. Her memories didn't lie.

"Hey, Gael," Genevieve called softly, standing in front of them. Lena turned both tense and bubbly. "We should get started on preparations." Lena piped up: "Preparations?" Gen furrowed her brow, seemingly growing taller. The professor's robe actually made her look

even more intimidating than she was in her twenties. "Today exclusively, I'll be mentoring you in private," she said, "But only because you have to be the one to unbind Gael. Understand?"

Despite the hostility, Lena squealed in happiness. Genevieve only raised her brow further. As they looked for a secluded area, there was a spring to Lena's step. They ended up stopping in a place Gael was quite familiar with: a clearing within the woods that housed a fairy circle. "Still here..." she mumbled. "Yeah, kids still beat the shit out of each other here," Genevieve shook her head, "Even though we tell them to be more moderate about it." Gael smiled. "That's quite hypocritical of you."

She just lingered around as Genevieve patiently tutored Lena. As clouds streamed by above them, a nagging anxiety slowly took hold of Gael, making her throat clench. She knew for a fact that having her soul unbound was better; it had felt better, even if she couldn't remember what being in the same plane as Sidexa was like. Still, she didn't want to go. She realized it was because she didn't want to be dead. That was obvious, wasn't it? Her self-pitying was cut short when light footsteps announced their presence.

A radiant Blake walked into the clearing, easy smile; they approached politely, as if asking for permission to be there. "Thought you'd be here," they said, "Wanted to bid Gael farewell." It seemed like someone had smothered Blake with flower garlands. Their presence seemed to turn Lena bitter, but she remained silent. "Thanks, kid," Gael smiled. "I've heard about your burial wishes," they said, "Maybe I'll use your corpse as fertilizer." She chuckled. "I'd actually really like that."

"Are you ready to give it a try?" Gen asked Lena in the background. "Of course," she said. "It's time to go, Gael," Genevieve walked up to her, an odd mix of feelings bleeding through her face, "Rest well." There was a knot in Gael's throat and she didn't know how to answer.

6 The spring of Gael's life

When Gael sat upon the girl's chest with a grin, her muscles were already strained; she locked the Armus girl's arms with her legs so she couldn't cast at Gael and smiled until the countdown ended. "That's it! Gael Mayfield takes Genevieve Ashford out of the competition!" the announcer shouted, making the audience go wild. As Gael used to say, the subversive fights were the best ones. Genevieve pushed her away and she got up with the aid of her staff. Then, she extended a hand out, which Genevieve gracefully ignored in favor of getting up on her own. "I want a rematch," she said, patting sand away from her clothes. "I'm afraid there's no rematching in a competition, girlie," said Gael, still grinning. "Not in the arena," said Genevieve, "In the fairy circle."

"Oh?" Gael teased, leading her out of the arena, "And what do I get out of that?" Genevieve kicked a pebble out of the way with her boot. "Not being a pitiful coward," she said. "Then I guess I have no choice," Gael shrugged, lifting her staff to stretch herself out, "I'll have to beat the shit out of you." She watched as Genevieve's nose wrinkled in anger and her eyes narrowed. "The same tricks won't work twice," Genevieve smiled while unwrapping her hands, "Your fighting is nothing without them."

As they walked through the sidelines, Gael heard steps rushing behind her and soon someone wrapped their arm around her shoulders, weighing her down. "Gael, you adorable dork, you, thanks for being our golden ticket," he said, too close to her ear, "Those jugs of wine are ever so close now." She elbowed him away. "I expect to get half of your share, Tristan," she said. He made a face and looked over her shoulder. "What does shortie want?" he asked, eyeing Genevieve. "Aren't you getting a little too familiar?" she said, managing to look even more displeased. "A rematch. I'm indulging her to prove my superiority," Gael replied, proudly sticking her chest out. "Great!" Tristan said, throwing his arms up, "Just say the word and I'll be there with the drinks."

Genevieve shook her head. "No, don't you dare bring your loser friends. It's me and you," she paused, turning sharply to her, "Fairy circle. Mid afternoon. Tomorrow. I'll bash your face in." While Genevieve walked away, she ripped the band out of her long hair, letting its full volume down. "Wipe that look off of your face," Tristan said, bringing Gael back to reality, "You look like you *want* her to bash your face in." Gael smiled and got back to walking, swinging her staff mindlessly. "What can I say?" she started, shrugging, "I have a soft spot for pretty girls who can and will beat me up."

Tristan rolled his eyes. "You know, sometimes I think you take your pent-up sexual frustration out on these duels. Not very honest to Sidexa," he said, giving her a side glance and smiling faintly. "What? That would be perverted," Gael choked up, stuttering, "And I'm *not* sexually frustrated. I don't think I've ever even felt that." He kept staring at her, his smile widening. Her face relaxed. "But you're just teasing me. Asshole," she said. "You know it," he chuckled, "So I really can't go?" Gael bit her lip and looked up, seeing Genevieve's distant form power-walk away. "You heard the girl," she smiled, "But maybe you can watch the rematch of the rematch. She doesn't seem like the giving up type." Tristan gave her a chastising look she didn't really get. "She doesn't want witnesses because she plans on murdering you," he said in a lecture-y tone, "These Armus guys are kinda scary."

Of course, Gael found herself in the meadow the next day. Genevieve was already there; contrary to the day before, she wore her after class clothing, which was just loose pants and a sleeveless shirt. Her back was turned to Gael and she was in the middle of stretching, her back muscles sliding seamlessly under her skin. Gael looked away, feeling her eyes widen. Not really fair. The Armus devotees did set an impossible standard of fitness. Thankfully, she had magic to rely on.

"Heeey," she called out, trying to seem more calm than she really was. "You hesitated enough," Genevieve said, turning to her with sharp eyes, "Thought you were gonna turn tail." Gael paced closer, holding her staff between her shoulders. "I should remind you that I'm the one who crushed you yesterday," she said, laughing. However, Genevieve didn't seem to find any humor in it; her eyes were narrowed. "Enough talking," she said, "Stretch." Gael blinked. "I don't stretch." Genevieve furrowed her brow. "Then I'm telling you to. Take your body seriously," she said, bandaging her hands, "Aren't you devoted to the goddess of all things physical? Go on."

Feeling knots in her forehead, Gael dropped her staff and lifted her arms. She looked at Genevieve quizzically, but all the other girl did was gesture for her to go ahead. Though the way it was phrased made her feel watched, Gael went ahead, her eyes tearing up at how sore her muscles felt. "Right. All stretched up," she declared at last, "Now hop in." She pointed at the huge circle of mushrooms and assorted fungi in the middle of the clearing. As they took positions on opposite sides, Gael felt a smile form on her face. She kicked her shoes off. "But, seriously, what are the terms? What do I get?" she asked, adding when Genevieve frowned: "Come on, loosen up."

Genevieve sighed and dropped her fighting stance, holding her eyes shut for a moment. "What do you want, weirdo?" she asked, "It's not like you're gonna win anyway." Gael looked around, fully aware she was content to just be fighting in the meadows. The temperature was right and the sun wasn't overbearing. Good day. "Eh, haven't thought of it," she said, "Pick for me." Genevieve sunk her face in her hands and rubbed it, sighing loudly. "I don't fucking know you. How am I supposed to know what you want?" she said, throwing her hands up. Gael shrugged. "Dunno. That's the fun of it."

Genevieve shook her head and her gaze grew distant. Then, she turned to Gael again, her eyes sharp. "Fine. Summarize yourself. Don't bore me." Taken aback, Gael froze for a

second; she melted herself back with a nervous laugh. "Me. I like..." she started, having to pause for a moment. She looked around, the chill breeze caressing her cheeks. "I like life as it is." When she looked back at Genevieve, she seemed like she wanted to bash her own face in. Gael felt she had to clarify: "That is, um... I like walks. I like laying down on tall grass. Um, I like looking for rocks? And drinking. I drink a bit. Maybe more than I should..."

Genevieve clapped for attention. "Shut up. Fuck, you're boring. You're exactly the kind of dork I'd expect to see in Sidexa," she shouted, sighing again, "You're simple minded, I got it. I'll show you a secret spot in the woods if you win. Sound good?" Though Gael knew she should feel offended, she felt her cheeks flush. "Sure, I can fight for that. What do you want if you win, then?" she asked. With enough force to sway her ponytail, Genevieve shook her head. "No way. If I have to guess, so do you. Go," she said.

Gael's mind was blank. She hopped on each foot for a bit, trying to get some blood flowing to her head. Damn. "Well, if you win... I'll participate in your daily workouts for as long as you want," she said. Understandably, Genevieve leered at her, lips curled downwards. "Why would I want to hang out with you? How is that a fucking reward?" she asked. Gael stopped hopping and shrugged. "You seem like a bit of a sadist, so I thought you'd like that. You get to rub my defeat in and stuff too." That gave Genevieve pause. Then, she got into her fighting stance again. "Yeah, okay." Gael had thrown the sadism in just for the fun of it, so... "Just like that?" she asked. Genevieve nodded. "Yeah. Countdown."

Getting comfortable with her staff, Gael started the countdown. Genevieve's eyes had her pinned down almost to a physical level. As soon as she said "one", Genevieve was on her, throwing a punch so fast and close that her knuckles flooded Gael's field of vision. She raised the staff to swerve the hit and dodged away, feeling something flutter in her gut. Despite missing, Genevieve got back on track without missing a beat; she came at Gael relentlessly, almost disarming her at some point.

At such a short range, the first thing Gael could think to do was shift the ground; being barefoot, it was quite the quick cast. As that chunk of earth turned to soggy, deep mud, they sank a little. The surprise made Genevieve stagger, losing balance. Already feeling her lungs strain, Gael took the chance and raised her staff above her head. Best to get her while she was out of it and save some breath. However, as soon as she moved, Genevieve recovered and drew with her fingers mid air. The sudden surge of a column of fire heated Gael's torso up and, at a wild contrast of temperature, a chill made her fingers rush; she managed to move her hands along the staff enough to cast a shield just in time.

"Are you actually trying to kill me?" she asked, her shortness of breath betraying her. "I think you can take it," Genevieve replied, struggling half as much. Finding support in the mud somehow, she tackled Gael, hugging her waist and slamming her head against her belly. As Gael hit the floor, the impact on her spine reverberated across her body and she let the previous spell go; the mud turned back to solid ground. Genevieve held her tightly long enough to cement her position on top of her with her legs, using her knees to press on her waist. The punch to the stomach came so fast that Gael only realized what it was when she was already curling in on herself and swallowing down the acid that came up her throat.

"I told you the same tricks wouldn't work twice," said Genevieve, towering over her. A drop of her sweat hit Gael's forehead as fast as her next punch; it connected to her cheekbone and she could have sworn it was hard enough to crack it. The vibration gave her an instant headache. Kicking up had no effect whatsoever and Genevieve's balance was too good to throw her off. She only struggled further to hold on to her pride, trying to keep Genevieve at bay with the staff. It was like being attacked by a vicious dog.

"Okay, okay, I surrender," she shouted, just in time to avoid some knuckles to the teeth. The sound of Genevieve's laughter was sweet as she got up, leaving Gael down in the dirt. "But I want a rematch," Gael said, getting up with the aid of her staff. "Maybe after you pay

your dues for this one," she replied, "Meet me tomorrow under the rusty gate at dusk." When it seemed like she'd turn and walk away, she paused and gestured in Gael's general direction with a smile. "Don't go get that healed. It will be great to see you all bruised up," she said, the smile turning to a grin, "See you tomorrow, Mayfield." Gael's mouth tasted of copper, which only added to that dejected feeling of standing all alone in a clearing. "Yeah," she mumbled.

At breakfast the following morning, passing by the blue-clad Armus folks was a walk of shame. They snickered amongst themselves and Genevieve grinned at her. "Good morning, Mayfield," she said, an odd glint in her eye as she added: "That's a good look on you." Gael felt her cheeks heat up, thankfully realizing no one would notice her flushing with how swollen and red her face already was. She brushed one of the bumps with her fingers. "Thanks," she mumbled, "I'll be back for more." That should sound cool, right? And throwing a smile in should seal the deal. However, Genevieve seemed to hold her laughter in.

When she found her usual sitting spot, Tristan choked on his food. "She did bash your face in!" he nearly shouted after coughing up. "Not really," Gael said, sipping her coffee nonchalantly. "Did no one want to heal you up?" he asked. "Something like that," she mumbled, looking away. "For fuck's sake, go ask someone already. Can you even see out of your left eye?" he said, waving in front of it. She covered her right eye with one hand and her field of vision was suddenly obscured by her swollen cheek. "Some. Don't worry, though. The rematch of the rematch's gonna come," she said, smiling.

"No!" Tristan groaned, "You should just focus on getting us that tournament wine. This is not the time to be prancing about with those Armus jerks." Gael laughed. "I thought you were excited about me dueling," she said. "Yeah, cause I thought you were gonna win and get us some respect or whatever," he said, "But you're doing the opposite showing up like this." She avoided his scrutinizing gaze with more coffee. "It's a temporary setback."

As they walked out of the cafeteria, Genevieve caught up to her with a grin and narrowed eyes. "Be sure to wear comfortable clothes," she said, making it sound menacing somehow. "What was that about?" Tristan asked once she'd walked away. Fast walker. "Mm, nothing," Gael mumbled, "Just some post-battle humiliation." He furrowed his brows disapprovingly. "The lengths you'll go for a pretty girl," he sighed. Looking away, Gael shrugged. "She did beat me fair and square, so..."

After the purple-ish hue of dusk had settled on the sky, Gael trotted through the tall grass up to the rusty gate that led to the student cabins. As promised, Genevieve was there, seemingly unaffected by the chilly breeze despite being in a sleeveless shirt again. "Took you long enough," she called out. "Well, 'dusk' wasn't the most specific measure of time," Gael said, panting a little as she settled down beside her. "Are you seriously tired just from getting here?" said Genevieve, "Dude..."

"No. Shh," Gael replied, straightening herself out, "So, what are we doing?" Genevieve simply started stretching; something in her eyes told Gael to do the same. "Running. Should be easy enough for your laid-back little brain," she smirked, "All you have to do is follow me." Gael's face was hot again. "Sounds good." By the end of the preparations, Gael's body was already burning.

Suddenly, Genevieve took a step closer and reached her hand out towards her cheek. At first, Gael flinched, but managed to stand still. Her fingertips brushed her skin lightly. "The swelling's going down already," Genevieve said in a lower tone, "It's gonna start bruising up soon." Her eyes lit up and she smiled a buttery-soft smile. Though it made no sense, Gael's gut fluttered. "Yeah, um, I'm gonna look all black and blue," she spat, feeling like a complete idiot who couldn't hold her tongue. Still, it made Genevieve laugh. "Yeah, you are. Suits you," she said.

Just like that, she turned her back on Gael and started running. Stunned, Gael was left behind with a flurry of bizarre things inside her to deal with. She shook it off and managed to catch up; thankfully, Genevieve's pace was steady. They ran in silence for a while, Gael trying to keep up. The irregular terrain only made it harder. "So, why Armus?" she asked after working up the courage. Honestly, she was just a little compelled to know more about Genevieve. "Focus on your breathing instead of talking," she said, "You'll have an easier time." Gael pouted. "But I wanna chat!" Genevieve's lips curled downwards, but she gave in. "It's what comes easiest to me," she said, "Isn't it obvious?"

"Cause you're a little ball of anger?" Gael asked, smiling. Genevieve narrowed her eyes to look at her for a split second. "Yes, Mayfield," she took a deep breath, "Not all of us can be carefree rock lovers." It stung somewhat, but Gael still smiled. "How come? You can come rock hunting with me whenever you want," she said, "Now that we know each other." Fuck, Genevieve had been right. Her lungs were burning up from the effort. "Sounds boring," Genevieve mumbled. Silence settled in. Surprisingly, she was the one to break it: "How badly damaged do you have to be to find solace in Sidexa?"

Gael staggered and felt her eyes widen, blanking out at the suddenness of such a question. Ahead of her, Genevieve's steps also faltered when she picked up on it. "Sorry, I didn't think you were actually..." she raised her voice, her eyes also widening, "That was insensitive of me." Gael blinked it away and got back to running. "It was just... really straightforward," she said, trying to focus, "But you know, some people just feel the calling. Like Tristan. As for me, I'm... doing good. Happily alive." She smiled, though it was a bit shaky. Genevieve narrowed her eyes and looked straight ahead, perhaps trying to hide her expression. "The more you explain it, the more it sounds like I touched a nerve," she said, "Don't explain yourself." Somehow, that made Gael smile. "Am I boring you?" she asked.

"Eh, you can keep talking. It's white noise for my run," Genevieve said. Gael couldn't see her face. "So I sound good?" An audible sigh. "Not what I said."

"Why are you so happy to look at my bruises?" Gael asked, the oddity of it making her gut flutter again. Genevieve frowned at her like she was the weird one. "I just like to know that I can beat you. Not you specifically. Anyone," she said. "And here I was, feeling special," Gael muttered. She saw a tiny smile out of the corner of Genevieve's mouth. "You did beat me the first time," she said, "With your little tricks, sure, but it's something." Though Gael could go on and on about the validity of her 'little tricks', she chose to keep it simple: "So I'll have to beat you the third." Genevieve grinned. "I'd love to see you humiliate yourself further," she said.

Before Gael was ready to stop, the sky had darkened considerably and they were back under the rusty gate. She bent over herself, supporting some of her weight on her knees as she took deep breaths. Somewhere beside her, Genevieve chuckled. "Let's actually torture you tomorrow, Mayfield," she said. "Seriously, just call me Gael," she panted. When she looked up, Genevieve seemed to be thinking it over. "And... can I call you Jenny?" Gael asked, a hopeful smile coming up on her face. At that, Genevieve's nose wrinkled and her whole face contorted. "I'll straight up murder you," she said. "Then Gen?" Genevieve softened. "As long as we're alone," she conceded. "So I'll be your little secret?" Gael asked, smiling wide. Genevieve narrowed her eyes. "I can't be associated with a dork like you," she said. Silence fell in and all Gael did was smile while staring at her; Gen shifted under her attention. "Well, see you tomorrow... Gael," she said, averting her eyes. "See you, Gen."

The next afternoon they were able to meet at the clearing in the woods again. "Looking great," Gen gestured at Gael's bruises, "You're so obedient, keeping them." The comment made Gael's face immediately burn. "I just got... curious, that's all," she said. Genevieve

laughed. Her voice was a little high-pitched, almost like a creaky windchime. Gael liked it.

"You do seem the type," Gen said. "What type?" Gael asked, blinking. "The type to be easily swayed," she said, smiling, "Nevermind that. Today's aerobics day."

Remaining obedient, Gael followed her lead. It wasn't like she was excited to exercise daily, but... Maybe she really was easily swayed. "Your next tournament duel is tomorrow morning, right?" Gen asked, spooking her enough that she messed up the exercise. "Yeah, why?" Though Gael started trembling from head to toe while trying to pull off more sit-ups, Genevieve was keeping the pace. "Why do you fight?" she asked, "I mean, you're one of the only Sidexa students that does." Gael thought about it for a moment. "Well, growing up I didn't really have anyone to hang out with, so... It's fun going all out for once," she said. "That's all?" Gen lifted an eyebrow, pausing. "To be honest, I like being the underdog," Gael admitted, "I love the rush I get when I beat someone like you."

"So you just like having your ego boosted?" Genevieve asked, "That's endearingly pathetic." Of course, the term 'pathetic' should offend Gael, but she had already been disarmed by 'endearingly'. "I think it's as good a reason as any other," Gael said, pausing to breathe, "I do things because they feel good. Why do you do it?" Genevieve got up and shrugged, chugging some water. "I have a lot of pent-up energy," she said, drying her mouth with the back of her hand.

A little wobbly, Gael got up as well. Then, a sudden brush of fingers was enough to make her guts jump. Genevieve had her hand by Gael's neck, her fingertips touching her skin ever so lightly. "You're all sweaty already," she said in a near whisper. Then, she raised her hand and applied pressure to Gael's bruised cheekbone. The burst of pain made her wince. "Does it hurt?" Gen asked with a smile. "Some," Gael replied. "I guess I'll grant you that rematch before they fade," Gen said, "After your duel. Sometime this weekend?"

The warmth of Gen's touch on her wounded face was too distracting. "Yeah, sure. I... want you to show me that spot in the woods," Gael said, stumbling on her words some, "If I win. And we can even do some rock painting." Hearing that, Gen chuckled and let her hand drop. "Don't you have your little friends to do that with? Why would you want to make me do something like that?" she asked, smiling wide. "Honestly? I thought a change of pace might do you some good," Gael said, watching Gen's expression turn to confusion, "And I'm a little interested in what you'd paint."

"I have no fucking idea. But I'm not concerning myself with it because you're not winning anyways," Genevieve said, "Now drop to the ground and give me some push-ups." Despite Gael's muscles' cries for mercy, she obeyed, following Genevieve's lead. However, she paused when the sky started to go orange. "We should probably get out of the woods," she pointed out. "Yeah. Good stopping point," Genevieve agreed, "Though we could deal with a couple otherly creatures, I'm kinda not in the mood." They spent a moment winding down and then got up and gathered their things. Gael felt disgustingly drenched.

"Hey, Gael?" Gen called as they made their way back to the cabin area. "Yeah?" Gael replied, somewhat out of breath. Having longer legs was good when your walking and running partner had much more stamina; at least she had that going for her. "You're up against some Sabrael loser tomorrow, yeah?" she asked. Strands of Gen's bang were glued to her sweaty forehead. "Yeah," Gael said. "Crush them," Genevieve said, smiling with what looked like pride. "You're... cheering me on?" Gael asked, a bit bewildered. "If you did better than me, you have to do better than all of them," she said, "Don't let me down." Gael smiled back. "Okay. Thanks, Gen."

The next day, shimmering lights shone upon Gael in the arena as her hand was lifted above her head and shouts grew. Her tired shins quivered at supporting her weight; her chest

heaved. Inevitably, her eyes wandered to the indigo section of the anfiteater, finding Genevieve's smile. She had her arms crossed and her face was as smug as when she'd beaten Gael in the woods.

When Gael walked off the arena, wobbly from the effort, Tristan ran down from the seats and threw his arm around her. "That was great! Even the Armus fuckers were cheering for you!" he said, shaking her. Yeah, that was something brand new. Of course, Genevieve had been the one to stand up and shout something like "NO MERCY, MAYFIELD," first. Speaking of which, she appeared beside them, walking at a leisurely pace. Her Armus robe fit her like a glove; she looked like a floating fairy wearing it. Gael smiled. "Good job, Mayfield," Genevieve said, a knowing glint in her eye when she reverted to Gael's surname, "Though you shouldn't have allowed them to spill your blood, you know." By that point, the glint in her eye was almost blinding.

"It's just a scratch," Gael shrugged, knowing that wasn't really the point. "I hope those weren't all your new tricks back there," Genevieve said. "Nope. No way," she replied, ignoring Tristan's staring. "Good," Gen leaned in, whispering: "I have cleaning duties this afternoon, by the way. So you're spared." Gael could feel Tristan's gaze burrow into her nape. "I'll clean with you," she said, perhaps too eager. Though seemingly taken aback, Genevieve smiled. "I won't refuse that. See you in the solarium then... Mayfield." With a deep sigh, Gael waved. "See you, Genevieve." She grinned at Gael one final time before trotting off.

"The fuck was that?" Tristan asked, frowning at her, "Are you crushing on an Armus girl?" At that, Gael sighed a less content sigh than the one before. "Just having some harmless fun," she said, "One sided fun." He scoffed. "At least you're aware that it's one sided," he said. "Is it so unbelievable that she could be into me?" Gael asked, though she did think the answer was 'yes'. "Oh, she could, *Mayfield*," Tristan said, mimicking Genevieve's tone, "It just wouldn't be anything good." Hearing that, Gael's mind hopped to Genevieve's comment

about 'pent-up energy' and she winced. "Yeah," she mumbled. "Look, at least you get to win and drink that wine with us. Some dreams have to stay dreams." Tristan patted her shoulder. "I guess," Gael said. Though she was sure she'd already convinced herself of what Tristan was saying, hearing it weighed her down.

When Gael got to the solarium in the afternoon, Genevieve was waiting for her with the supplies already organized. The diffused sunlight cast a warm glow on her. "Hey, Gen. What area are you in charge of?" she asked. Gen gestured around and pointed at all the scattered pillows and blankets. "This. Get stacking," she said. Gael hopped to it, watching out of the corner of her eye as Gen tied her hair up.

As they got everything out of the way, Gael started humming until she got confident enough to sing. "What are you singing?" Gen asked, making an annoyed face that seemed mostly forced. "The tidy up song," Gael replied, folding a blanket and whistling along. "How can you be so obnoxiously positive all the time?" Gen frowned. "How so?" she chuckled. "I mean, how can you be excited about cleaning?" Gen clarified. "This is my way of convincing myself that I tolerate this," Gael said and went back to singing. After a moment of silence, Genevieve spoke up: "And it works?" Gael paused to smile at her, kneading a soft pillow. "Wonders." After walking over, Genevieve swiped the pillow from her, lingering there for a little longer. "Teach me the lyrics," she said.

Gael beamed and cleared her throat. "So it goes like... 'Tidy up, tidy up, put your things away'," she started; she sang the whole thing for Genevieve and clapped along. Though Gen didn't seem amused, she thought she could see a faint blush in her cheeks. "I can do that," Genevieve said, turning around and going back to... well, putting things away. They sang together as they swept, mopped and then put everything back in its place; the afternoon flew by. Gael could see the hues of the sunset beyond the glass panes of the solarium's ceiling.

"That's it," Gen announced, throwing her arms up, "You can go back to your little boyfriend now." Gael blinked, the word emptying her mind. It took her a while. "Tristan?" she asked, curling her lips. Gen lifted her brow. "He's *not* my boyfriend," Gael raised her voice as her face heated up, "Seriously, the most intimate thing I'd ever do to him would be shoving earthworms into his mouth."

Gen narrowed her eyes at her, but finally smiled wide. "Okay," she said, "I'll see you tomorrow then. For our duel." Gael felt cold sweat drip down her back and giggled. "So you wouldn't see me tomorrow if he *was* my boyfriend?" she asked, her lips trembling. "What?" Gen drew back, furrowing her brow, "How is that related to anything?" Gael stumbled upon her words as soon as she opened her mouth. "I'm stupid. Stupid. Sorry. It isn't," she forced a chuckle, "I'll... be at the fairy circle tomorrow afternoon." Genevieve laughed a little too. "Yeah, you're stupid. Have a good Friday night, Gael," she said with a tiny smile, "I suppose you and your little friends will be celebrating today's victory?" Gael nodded. "We have a little get together," she said, twiddling her thumbs, "Would you... like to come?" She knew how darkened her cheeks must look under all the bruises, but stared at Gen anyways. "I don't think that's a good idea," Gen said, her face just as hot, "I don't really mix well with losers." Gael nodded and looked away. "Sure," she mumbled. That was probably for the best — Tristan would school her if she showed up with an Armus kid.

After using the subterfuge of illusion spells, Gael was satisfied to see Genevieve knocked down on the floor. With a trick of light and perspective, she'd made her staff seem shorter enough to actually strike Gen right on the forehead. The satisfaction didn't last long; seeing her writhing on the floor with her hands on her head made her drop to her knees, chucking the staff aside. "Gen? Did I hit too hard?" she asked, grasping her wrists gently to look at the injury. However, Gen didn't let her forehead go. She wrinkled her nose at Gael.

"Are you trying to give me a concussion, bitch?!" she shouted, wincing. "Just thought you could take it," Gael said.

Gen's features softened at that, but her mouth and nose were still wrinkled. "Does your head hurt?" Gael asked. Gen nodded. "Can I massage your temples?" Gen nodded again and, when Gael's hands brushed her face, her cheeks felt hot. As promised, she rubbed her temples diligently. "Sorry for giving you a headache," she said softly. "I'm tougher than that. Don't be dramatic," Gen was frowning again. When she looked up to see Gael's concerned face, though, her features softened. "I'll show you the secret spot," she said. That was enough to make Gael celebrate, doing tippy-taps on Gen's shoulder. "Great! Good thing that I brought my painting supplies, then," she said.

Suddenly, Gen was poking one of her bruises with a frown; Gael winced. "Were you that confident you were gonna win, weakling?" Gen demanded. "I always walk into everything headfirst, so..." she replied, chuckling. Gen stopped applying pressure; her eyes widened and she let her hand drop. "You do?" she asked, sounding almost cautious. "Huh? Yeah. If you never prepare, you're always prepared," Gael said, giving her a thumbs up. It made Genevieve smile. "Okay," she said, "Help me up then." Gael grabbed her hand, but hesitated. The touch was soft, warm and gave her goosebumps. "Are you sure? Don't you wanna stay down a little longer?" she asked. "No, I'm not a weakling like you," Gen frowned. "Of course," Gael smiled and got up, pulling her along.

They gathered their things, Gen throwing her robe over her shoulder. She guided Gael deeper into the woods, overcoming rocks and roots with ease. When they got to the top of a hill, Gael could hear water flow. "You're taking me to the creek?" she asked. "Yeah," Gen said, "Is that a good place for your rock hunting?" She held her hand out for Gael to take; when she did, Gen held it steadily and helped her downhill. Gael could only hope she wasn't

sweating profusely. "Yeah!" she said. Soon they were walking along the creek, the humidity seeping in through Gael's shoes.

"I thought you were gonna show me a secret spot," she pouted. Genevieve clicked her tongue. "Be patient." They got to a slight bend in the creek where it deepened, the depth increasing even more on odd circular formations in the streambed. "This is it," Gen said, dropping her bag, "Have you been here before?" Gael dropped her things too and swung around, her eyes widening. "Nope. Sweet," she said, "Thanks, Gen." She gave Genevieve a bright smile and saw her face redden. That made hers heat up as well.

Averting her eyes, Gen cleared her throat. "What does a paintable rock look like?" she asked, squatting and pinning her gaze to the ground. "Eh, whatever the fuck you want it to," Gael shrugged, "But the smoother, the better." After grumbling something, Gen sunk her hand underwater, reaching for the streambed. The whole thing made Gael's chest feel tight. She soon recovered and took to the ground as well, helping her search. They soon had good enough rocks to work with. "Now you wash them up nice," Gael mumbled, whistling as she rubbed the stones along the water. "Don't you have a washing song?" Gen asked, chuckling as she mimicked her movements. "Um, no," she said, "Feel free to make one up." Gen's nose wrinkled up. "No. You're the dork here."

As the stones dried up, Gael laid the materials out on top of a rock and Gen sat across from her. Soon they set to work, though Gen hesitated before loading the brush up. "What are you painting?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at Gael. "Some critter. A mouse, maybe," Gael said, tapping her nose with the paintbrush. Gen just mm'ed again and started painting something, so Gael tried not to peek. They spent some peaceful minutes painting together, the water that flowed beside them making for good white noise. Eventually, Gen set her now colorful stone down and hid her face behind her hands. She took a deep breath and Gael laughed.

"Why are you so embarrassed?" Gael asked, grateful that Gen wasn't looking at her silly smile. "I suck at this," she said. "No, you don't," Gael replied. She stretched enough to look at Gen's painted stone. "What is it?" she asked after hesitating for a moment. "Fuck you!" Gen shouted, showing her red face, "It's a cat!" Gael snorted. "Sorry! Yeah, I totally see it," she said, "Don't be sad. Look, here's mine." She showed it to Gen, who seemed even more outraged. "Yours sucks too!" she yelled, clawing at her own cheeks. "Sorry?" Gael laughed, setting it down, "I never said I was good at it." Gen wasn't having it. "I was feeling inadequate," she said, cupping her cheeks. "Awe. Don't. I like your kitty," Gael smiled, "In fact, can I keep it? You can have my mouse." Slowly, Gen nodded and gave her the stone. "Paint some more?" Gael asked.

Paint they did. Gen seemed to be having an easier time after finding out Gael also sucked. Thus, they chatted over it, Gael's heart lodging itself in her throat with each word. "You said I must be broken or something to devote myself to Sidexa," she said after some chit chat, "I'd say more aimless than broken." Gen lifted her eyes up to her warily. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry." Gael chuckled. "It's okay. What I was getting at is... This is pretty grounding, you know," she said, raising the stone she was painting and then gesturing about, "It's enough reason for me to still be alive. Do you get it?" Gen took a deep breath. "I think so. But I've never felt like I didn't have reason to keep going. Much the opposite," she said, closing one eye and focusing on a brush stroke, "Some people think we're keen on destruction. Armus is more of a transformation force. That's what I want my anger to turn into as well." She was sticking out her tongue a little in concentration. Gael couldn't help but smile.

"So you want to make something out of your life," Gael said softly, "I respect that." Though Gen's cheeks seemed somewhat red, she frowned: "I don't need your validation, freak." It made Gael laugh. They eased into light hearted conversation and eventually realized

it was time to stop. Gael sang the 'tidy up' song as they put the supplies away and Gen ended up singing along. When they got up, though, Genevieve tugged at Gael's satchel. "Gael," she called out in a low voice, "One last thing?" Gael paused, turning to her. "Yeah?" Her eyes became quite focused on Gael and she smiled with trembling lips. "Go out with me," she said in a flat tone, her cheeks burning. Gael's whole body burnt up in response; her throat choked up and her mouth went agape. "Aren't you going a little too fast?" she made herself ask. She had to. She knew that heeding Tristan's warning was a good idea. Still, her chest constrained her heart and it felt like it was going to break her ribs. "Yeah, but you said you go headfirst into everything," Gen said, taking a step closer, "So I was afraid you might fall headfirst into someone else before I got a chance."

When Gen touched her hand, she tensed up completely. Would have been wise to take a step back, but she couldn't get herself to. "You're fully aware I'm with Sidexa, right?" she asked, indulging in it a little longer. "Yeah. I just... thought we could try it," Gen said with a shy smile, "I'm happy just beating you up, but I..." Without meaning to, Gael found herself bending towards her, drawn to that open-endedness. "More," Gen said at last, her eyes wide. Her cheeks were stained red by that point. "Well put," Gael laughed, holding her hand; she shivered under her touch. "Genevieve, you're going to break my heart and so I really should say no," Gael said, sighing. Genevieve's smile dropped and Gael thought she'd heard her choke. "But you happen to be just my type," she said. With a shaky smile, Gen ran her thumb along Gael's bruised cheekbone. It had looked quite dark that morning and was still sore. "I promise not to break your heart," she whispered, "Just your face." Gael's limbs felt weak; her heart had definitely turned to jelly. She hardly felt her own weight hooked to the Earth and that was a dangerous way to feel. "Okay," she whispered back.

"Kiss on it?" Gen grinned. If Gael's heart had turned to jelly from the prior request, this one squished it. "A chaste little kiss?" she asked, chuckling. Hearing Gen chuckle in return

soothed her nerves. "Sure," Gen said. She pulled Gael down by the nape and got on the tip of her toes. Her lips were warm, smooth and just that. No tongue. A chaste little kiss. Gael's heart finished melting and she stepped back. "It's a deal," she smiled. "Good," Gen replied, squeezing her hand lightly. They started the way back to the cabins in long, content paces. "I'll be cheering you on like a proud girlfriend in the semifinals, then" Gen said, "My personal weakling." Her hand felt so hot on Gael's. "You'll have to go to the celebration if I win the tournament, you know... Since you'll be dating me." Gen mm'ed. "I don't know, Gael. In all seriousness, I don't think your little group will be happy to mix with me," she said. "Aw, no. They just think you're a little threatening," Gael waved it away. "But I *am*," Gen said, furrowing her brow.

During the evening, Gael organized the stones Gen had painted among her collection. Fine additions, all of them. While she smiled proudly, Tristan looked up from his bed on the opposite side of their cabin. "You went rock painting on your own?" he lifted his eyebrows. "Um, no. Genevieve painted these," she said, a little sad to see the information escape. It had been more fun when it was private. Immediately, Tristan sat up. "Anger-issues-Armus-girl simply went on a hike to fairy land with you?" he asked, his brow going even higher. "It's cause I beat her in a duel. She's actually nice. You should give her a chance," she said. "It's not that she's nice, she only went because you beat her into submission," Tristan said, rolling his eyes. Gael turned away, dropping her satchel on the floor. She sighed. "Nah, there's another reason," she said, even though she felt wary, "She's into me. Explicitly into me, I mean."

"Can always count on you to fill the stupidity quota for our class," Tristan murmured, laying back down. "Come on, lighten up. You've been into people before. It's fun. I'm good!" she said, "Really good." Not really looking at her, he reached under his bed and started

patting the floor in search of something. "Don't rub my affairs in," he said, "I've been into people. You know how it goes. Keep it within Sidexa or don't go after anyone at all. Especially not anger-issues-Armus-girl." His hand came back from under the bed holding a book. "You don't even know her! Trust my judgment here?" she asked, taking her dirty robe off. Pleading was really no use; Tristan had already found the page he wanted. "You're full of shit, Gael."

Yet another win graced Gael's semester. A couple of her classmates swarmed her in excitement when she left the arena and her heart throbbed enough that she thought she'd faint. "Come on, you must be hungry," Tristan said, "Let's treat you to some snacks." He rubbed his knuckles into her hair, making her scalp hurt. As the group walked, though, Genevieve intercepted them again; it was becoming routine. "Nice going for a weakling, Mayfield," she said, winking at her. Gen walked backwards so they could stare at each other, taking confident blind steps with her boots. Her smugness just made Gael melt all over again.

"Hey, um, Genevieve," she said with a tentative smile, "Wanna go eat with us?" Immediately, Tristan's knuckles sank in further; it was like he wanted to crack her skull. Genevieve's eyes darted to him and her nose wrinkled for a moment. "What? No. You guys are a social disease," she replied, speed walking away. "She's such a bitch," Tristan murmured. One of their classmates sighed. "I don't think she knows what a social disease is. What is it with Armus that attracts these types, really?" Gael swallowed an objection down and diverted everyone's attention back to eating.

Later that day, when she and Tristan were alone in their shared cabin again, she paced about, trying to string words together in her head. "Are you trying to think?" he eyed her down, looking up from a book, "Come on, you can do it. Faster. Stop distracting me." Gael

hopped for a moment. "This is frustrating! Okay. The deal is, um..." she started, almost biting her tongue when her feet hit the floor, "You're being a bad friend." At that, Tristan closed the book and gently banged it against his head. His eyes were closed as he took a deep breath. "Is this about anger-issues-Armus-girl?" Gael stopped hopping. "Her name's Genevieve. And yeah!" she said, crossing her arms. "Okay, I'll bite," Tristan said, chucking the book aside, "How am I being a bad friend?"

Actually, moving that much was distracting her as well. She sat down. "I really want this and you're just putting me down," she said. Tristan blankly stared back at her. "Yeah, cause you're gonna get fucked over," he replied, arching an eyebrow. "So what? Let me get fucked over," she threw her hands up. He stared at her for a little longer and then rolled his eyes. "Fine, whatever, go be a punching bag," he muttered, "I wonder if this is what my parents felt like." She beamed. "You're the greatest, Tris." Still, he didn't seem too pleased.

Tournaments meant considerable time off from classes, which meant more time to meet Genevieve while there was still sunlight. Thus, they found themselves in the clearing yet again. Panting, Gael lifted herself off of Genevieve, her hands planted on the grass on each side of her face; they'd been rolling about in the dirt trying to punch each other. "So, I talked to Tristan about my friends welcoming you and stuff," she started. "And?" Gen asked, her face looking somewhat frozen. "The council has spoken and the verdict is positive," she declared proudly, letting her weight fall on Gen's chest. Her heart fluttered. "You must have bribed him or something." Gael shook her head. "Nah. Anyway, this means you're contractually obligated to come get drunk with us when I win the tournament tomorrow," she said.

Gen's eyes got that distinctive glint she couldn't quite pin down. "I love your confidence," she said, "But do you actually have a game plan? Any new tricks?" Good point.

Gael rolled off her and looked at the passing clouds for a moment. "Sorta. I thought of some stuff that I haven't used before. Not in a duel, at least," she said. Somehow, Genevieve seemed to take that as a challenge. "Then what are you waiting for? You know I'd jump at an opportunity to beat you up," she said, standing up, "Come on, get up." She tied her robe's indigo band tighter and brought her fists up. Gael complied and soon they were at it again. One of Gen's lunges towards her was abruptly interrupted when Gael managed to project a copy of herself. Keeping it up while making it match her exact movements required all of her concentration, though. "Yeah, that's handy," Gen paused to admit. "I know, right?" Immediately, Gen lunged again and kicked her in the shin. She gasped. "Word of advice, though... Don't speak when you use it," Gen said, smiling.

"Got anything else?" she asked, stepping back. She actually seemed entertained. "Just some material alteration. I was thinking of something I'll call... rubberbanding," Gael said, raising her index finger as if that had been the smartest wordplay ever conceived. Gen merely raised her brow. "It's just shifting my staff's properties," Gael explained, her cheeks heating up some, "Nothing interesting. I mostly deal in confusion." Gen chuckled. "You're up against yet another Sabrael freak, right? Might be useful." She softened, closing the distance between them and lowering Gael's staff with a gentle hand. "I'll go to your little party. I know you want to show me off to your friends," she smiled. "Of course. It's rare to have a pretty girl fawn over you," Gael said, grinning. "Is it really? Because you're, um..." Gen paused, turning her gaze away, "Fairly attractive. I'm sure there's a market for lanky weirdos."

"Thank you," Gael said, listening to her own blood rushing, "But most people don't want to date someone who won't... you know." Genevieve scratched her hand wraps. "As long as we speak clearly, there shouldn't be any issues," she replied. "Yes," Gael said, sighing, "I'd rather be ditched honestly." Genevieve smiled softly and gingerly reached out to brush a strand of Gael's hair away from her face. "Of course," she said.

After an odd moment of them staring at each other, Gen asked: "Wanna go rock hunting? Not that I know what would be a good rock to hunt for." Hopping a bit, Gael grinned. "I thought you'd never ask!" she beamed, grabbing her satchel. As they walked deeper into the woods, Genevieve spoke up: "You know, I've been thinking about silly songs from my childhood. There's this one about fairies in a meadow..." Thus, they sang together and pushed each other around as they meandered through the woods.

Her chest heaving, Gael stood tall under the spotlight; she held onto her staff tightly. The sleeve of her robe was frayed and dirtied with blood, torn by the claws of a conjured otherly creature. It was long gone by then; its master lay on the sand with a wounded wrist. The announcer grabbed her staff and lifted it along with her arms, making her eyes widen. Reality had hardly caught up with her. "Sophomore Gael Mayfield takes the win for Sidexa, everyone!" he shouted, immediately followed by the audience screaming their lungs off. Even the Armus crowd was cheering; it looked like Genevieve had an influence. "This semester's interclass tournament is thus concluded!"

As soon as she stepped off, her friends were smothering her with some sort of collective hug, all singing praises at the same time. Sounded like incomprehensible blabber, but her blood rushed in the same vibration. "Now to collect our spoils," Tristan said, smiling wide. "Yeah, hold on," she said, pausing to scan the audience. Instantly, she felt someone poke her lower back and shivered. "Outstanding work, Mayfield," Genevieve's voice came up from behind her. Gael's friends opened the group up so she could get in and they went back to walking. "So, this is Genevieve," Gael said to quizzical looks from her friends, "We're going out, so..." To get the point across, she took Gen's hand. The vibe turned a little awkward, but they seemed mostly over it by the time they claimed their jugs of wine. The group giggled all

the way to the field behind the cabins, finding logs and stumps to sit on. Genevieve sat glued to Gael, a safe distance away from the others.

"Here," Tristan said, handing Gael a jug, "You serve the first round. You brought it home. We're all really, really proud." He placed his hand over his heart in an over-exaggerated manner. Gael obliged, filling each of the students' crappy cups. Soon they were drinking and looking for common ground, easily finding professors to shit on. However, Gael soon noticed Genevieve was quiet; she didn't share classes with them, after all. "What about you?" she nudged. "Armus classroom drama?" Gen asked, lifting her brows. "Should be good," Tristan mumbled, eyeing them over his cup. "After Gael nodded, she seemed to turn thoughtful. "My classmates have been losing their minds because a destruction professor says we can't just rely on fire." Tristan rolled his eyes. "That sounds like the setup for a joke," he said. "It's not, it's been a very serious feud," Gen chuckled. "But you're mostly a fire girl, aren't you?" Gael asked. "No, mostly a fists girl," she replied, "And I'll do what I want."

The conversation evolved into laughter and slurred words as they emptied the jugs; though Gael simply had an easy smile, Genevieve was wobbly beside her. Someone probed her for an answer on religion, as if mingling with someone devoted to a different god was like housing a wild animal. The interclasses rivalry was a bit strong sometimes. "Armus was just my getaway ticket," Gen said after some insistence. "You know, they're always listening," Tristan lifted his brow. Gael's gut went somewhat cold and she put a hand on Gen's shoulder. "So what? They're omni... omnishent," Gen said, wrinkling her nose, "So Armus is obviously fine with me. Don't have high expectashons of me." Her words were slurred and she seemed a little angry. No, her face was filled with snark, actually. Gael held her tighter and cowered a little, as if divine wrath would befall them. "Maybe you've had enough wine, mm?" she whispered, taking her cup out of her hands; Gen just "okay'ed" and rested her head

on Gael's shoulder. Soon, Gael realized she had her eyes closed and a peaceful expression. It was easier to enjoy the party knowing she was fine and safe within her limits.

When the night got a little too cold, Gael said her goodbyes and tucked Gen under her shoulder. She was just the right height. As they walked back to the cabins, Genevieve seemed a little more aware. "Thanks for joining us," Gael said in a low tone. "You deserved it," Gen said. They stopped in front of her door and Gael squeezed her hand. "I'll see you tomorrow?" she asked. Gen nodded, but then bit her lip and spoke up, "Do you want to sleep with me?" Gael blinked, feeling herself go stone cold; she resisted taking a step back. "Um... You know I don't do that," she said. Immediately, Gen's face turned red and her eyes widened; she laughed. "Not like that. I just meant... sleeping." After hesitating for a while, Gael let her hand go. "Let's consider that when we're both sober, okay?" she said, raising a hand to pat Genevieve's hair. Silky soft. "Of course," Gen said, turning her eyes away, "See you tomorrow, nerd."

After turning her back on her, Gael hesitated again. "Hey, Gen?" she asked. Genevieve stopped with a hand on the doorknob. "Yeah?" Gael swallowed hard. "Maybe you said something you didn't mean to," she said. Gen's eyes widened, but soon she softened. "Oh, darling, I'm an open book," she chuckled, "Go to sleep." Still, her smile faded as soon as she started to turn away.

Gael patted herself on the back as she took Gen's breakfast directly to her, knocking at her door in the morning. A red-eyed Genevieve answered after the sound of things being knocked around. "Cheer up," Gael said, handing her a slice of cake, "Last day out of classes." Gen rubbed her eyes and accepted the food, stepping aside so she could come in. Waltzing in, Gael eyed the empty walls and shelves on one side, taking in the bare mattress; the other had stacks of stuff, seemingly organized in a haphazard manner. "You room alone?" she asked.

"Yeah. I used to have a roommate, but she graduated," Gen replied, sitting back on her own bed. Slowly, she took a bite out of the cake. "Well, I thought to come see you as soon as possible, so it's almost as if I did sleep here," Gael said with a smile. Gen laughed. "You worry too much. You don't have to justify yourself or make up for anything. That's fucking absurd," she said, smiling too, "But breakfast in bed is good."

"You say 'fuck' a lot," Gael pointed out. "It's my freedom to do so," she said, shrugging. "Hey, Gen..." Gael started, feeling her face shrivel up as she made an effort to think the question up, "Are you here by choice?" Gen frowned. "What do you mean?" she asked. "It's... When you were a little drunk last night, people were badgering you for your affiliation and you said that Armus was just your... getaway ticket," Gael scratched her nape, wary of Genevieve's expression. However, instead of a reproach, Gen just nodded and licked cream off her fingers. "Yeah. It's pathetic, but to my family I was just another item in stock," she said, "Why is it shameful to admit I'm devoted out of convenience?" Gael blinked, the question making her a little ashamed. Before she could answer, though, Gen continued: "The clergy offers a lot of stability. I'm sure Armus knows my motivation and doesn't care; in turn, I'm loyal."

"Is that gratitude?" Gael asked, correcting her tone: "Honest question." Gen washed the cake down with coffee and held her eyes shut for a moment. "It is." Gael nodded, "I see." After cleaning her mouth with the back of her hand, Gen touched her back to the wall and watched Gael for a long while. "You have a complex, don't you?" she smiled. "A complex?" Gael asked, her gut going a little prickly. "It's like you were trying to stand up for Armus' feelings back there," she said, "A god doesn't need your sympathy." As Gael's mouth went agape, she scanned her mind. Was that really what she'd been doing? "No, it's more... I worry about your livelihood as a cleric," Gael said. Reaching a hand out, Genevieve caressed her cheek, her thumb gently pressing down on a bruise. She laughed a little. "What use is it to

hold my tongue back if Armus can peer into my thoughts?" she asked, "I always speak my mind."

"That's good to know," Gael said, conceding. "For instance," Gen took her face between both her hands, "You look so punchable today. I think you get hotter after every fight." Instantly, Gael's face burned up and she pulled back an inch. "Hotter?" she stammered. "Is that bad?" Gen asked, her cheeks also tinted. "I'm, um, just bad at dealing with this stuff," Gael said. It made Gen smile. "We can talk about you then. Be more straightforward this time," she said, "Why are you here?" After gaining some time with a nervous chuckle, Gael answered: "It's the only place for someone like me." To that, Gen lifted her brow. "You don't strike me as the clergy type," she said. "Neither do you," Gael pointed out. "Because I'm not," Gen smiled, "Still, you're the carefree, happy-go-lucky type, but you submit to a goddess of sacrifice."

"I wouldn't call it a sacrifice," Gael said, "And if I'm the carefree type, it's because of Sidexa." Carefully, Genevieve laid down, resting her head on Gael's lap. She felt warm and heavy. "I can't pin you down. You keep acting like you're deceptively profound," said Genevieve, prodding at her bruises again, "You're like a little beetle. I'm torn between squishing you and putting you in a jar." Pinching her cheeks, Gael grinned. "You're too small to squish me. And I'm a strong beetle," she said, sticking her chest out. "Yeah, your resistance makes it much better," Gen said. Her hand was somewhere on Gael's clavicle. "Huh?" Gael mumbled, eyes widening. Genevieve pulled her down, her fingertips sinking on top of her bone. "Means I want to kiss you," she whispered. Did sound cool, but her lips trembled.

Gael gripped her wrist, listening to her own erratic blood flow. "I guess that's totally cool with me," she said, slurring her words a little; her throat tightened. Genevieve laughed in her high-pitched voice. "Cool with it," she repeated, smiling, "I'd rather you were into it..."

Gripping tighter, Gael got closer. "I am! Sorry. Just nervous," she said. After a pause, she took her other hand to Gen's nape and lifted her closer to her face. She pressed a ginger kiss to her lips, the softness of it making her body relax. However, she immediately tensed up again when Gen went further in, aggressive enough to make it seem like she wanted to occupy the same space as Gael. When Gen's tongue brushed against hers, Gael straightened her spine completely, pulling away. Her eyes were wide and her breathing failed. Gen seemed equally surprised.

"Are you okay?" Gen asked, her voice quivering mid sentence. "Yeah, um... You spooked me," Gael said, blushing a bit. Sitting up, Gen chuckled and touched their shoulders. Her hand faintly brushed against Gael's thigh and it sent butterflies up her body; when it remained there, the butterflies froze over. "I'm sorry. Slower?" she asked, her eyes just as wide as Gael's, who nodded. "You're so cute," Gen whispered, pressing a kiss to her cheek, "We should really fight some more today." Kind of wishing she couldn't feel how hot her face was, Gael asked: "You wanna beat me up because I'm... cute?" Again, Gen laughed. "Yeah."

The tournament was over and normalcy was restored, turning their schedules into the regular mess they used to be. However, Gael kept accompanying Gen on her daily workouts, even if she struggled to keep up and her body was often sore; as compromise, Gen would go on hikes with her, stopping to observe odd fungi and rock formations that she hadn't seen before. Gen's constant exposure to Gael's friends seemed to make Tristan mellow out, too. Well, maybe mellow out wasn't the best term; they'd argue for the sake of arguing all the time. Still, by the time winter rolled around, Gael felt able — and proud — to confidently call Genevieve her girlfriend. With vacation came yet more tournaments, though of the informal type — friendly interclass face-offs where the winner of each bracket would be paired up with the winner of another bracket to fight as a duo.

Not by coincidence, Gael and Genevieve were paired up; they'd spent their evenings cooped up working on their "evil plans" and strategies to wipe out their classmates and get together. Then, it turned out that coupling destruction spells with Gael's illusion tricks was pretty obnoxious. The whole event was a good entry ticket for Gael to hang out with Gen's Armus friends. They seemed to respect her well enough and she had fun listening to their stupid anecdotes about pranking each other and such. It was common for them to find themselves sitting beyond the rusty gate after the fights.

"So, Gael, how come someone like you is a Sidexa girl?" one of Genevieve's classmates asked her at some point, "Don't you get bored with those dorks?" The bluntness of the question made Gael stagger. Though Gen made a face and looked like she'd interfere, she didn't; she only looked at Gael, as if waiting for her answer. "I'm a verifiable dork myself," Gael said, smiling wide even if her pulse quickened, "I have rock collections and all." The guy laughed it off, elbowing someone beside him as if sharing an in joke. "You know what I meant," he said, "How can you even cope with the whole celibate thing? Like some sexless bacteria."

Gael's mouth just went agape. "Shut the fuck up," Genevieve finally piped up beside her. Her whole body was tense; her elbows were propped on her knees as she sat and her fists, balled up. Gael could have sworn she saw a spark in her hand. "Sorry, Jenny," he chuckled, "Just looking out for you." At that, Gen narrowed her eyes. "I don't need anyone to *look out* for me. Enjoy your night." She got up, tying her indigo band over her robe tighter as she stared her classmate down. Then, she offered Gael a hand; still feeling a little numb from the conversation, Gael accepted and stood.

They walked back to the rusty gate, the silence growing heavy until Gen snapped it. "Hey, darling?" her voice came softly. "Yeah?" Gen stopped, squeezing her hand. "I'm sorry," she said. "You didn't do anything wrong," Gael said. "They're my... friends. I'm responsible,"

she said, sighing, "How are you feeling?" Transferring her weight from one foot to another, Gael thought it over. "Meh. Kinda don't wanna go back to Tristan. He'll see I'm off and then... Eh," she said. Gen averted her eyes. "Do you want to sleep in my cabin? I can tidy up the extra mattress for you if you want," she asked.

Gael found herself smiling. "You think of me so much," she said, squeezing her hand back. "What?" Gen blinked. "I love how you just threw the extra mattress into the equation," Gael explained, "But I'm fine sleeping with you. You're a great hugger." Though it was already dark out, she was sure that Gen was blushing. "And you're a crappy, lanky body pillow," Gen said, trying too hard to make it offensive. They walked into Gen's room and she started organizing it a little, singing the 'tidy up' song while she drew the curtains shut and removed stacks of clothes and books from the bed. "There you go," she said, presenting the unruly bed, "Do you need an extra pillow?" Gael shook her head. "We can share."

They spent the remainder of their night getting cozy together, drinking coffee and reminiscing about all the classmates they'd beaten that week. When it came time to sleep, Gael was comfortably tucked between Genevieve's arms; she could feel her rhythmic breathing behind her. Though the intimacy was comforting, a nagging idea persisted in Gael's mind. "Gen," she called. Gen stirred and mumbled something. "Are you really fine with me?" Gael asked, glad that they weren't facing each other. After the words left her mouth, the hug felt oddly constricting and the blanket, heavy.

"What?" Gen asked, sounding more alert. "It's just... I always feel you want more. Physicality, I mean," she said. Gen stirred again, getting on her elbow to lift herself enough to stare at Gael. She was frowning, but it seemed to be out of concern. "I'm not just *fine* with you," she said, "My love for you is bigger than *that*, Gael." Gael shifted, turning to her. She tried to smile. "Really?" Gen raised her brow. "Are you doubting me, bitch?" she asked. Gael managed to smile at last. "Sorry. I'm not. It just sometimes feels like a dream," she said.

Then, there was a hand covering her mouth and nose and she was suddenly suffocating. "Shut up! That's so corny," Gen said, releasing her and chuckling. Gael laughed too, trapping her in a bear hug and turning to press her to the mattress with a thud. A satisfying gasp left Gen's mouth. "Are you trying to pick a fight with me?" Gael asked, holding her tight. "What if?" Gen replied, raising an eyebrow and grinning. "I'll show you," Gael said, tickling her mercilessly. Gen's high pitched laughter made her heart race; the seeds of doubt in her mind had been squished.

Winter ended and so did the amicable duo fights and their time off from classes. Gen and Gael did end up getting some complimentary pastries for their performance, which they split with Gael's friends. By that point, Tristan had warmed up enough to Gen and Gael had never felt so validated. So, when spring rolled around and the new term began, she really felt like a cheesy depiction of a girl who'd always stop to smell the flowers — literally.

It was warm enough that the couple could go back to hiking to that secret spot in the woods. After kicking her shoes off and tying her robe up, Gael walked into the stream and bent over to drag her hands across the streambed; when she lifted them, they held multiple round rocks. "More rock painting?" Gen asked, smiling. "I thought it'd be fun to do it every few months," Gael said, smiling back. "Isn't it special how these rocks have been smoothed over for years just to be completely wrecked by our crappy paintings?" she added, laying them out to dry.

As the two sat down and painted together, she found herself happily talking about the process of erosion. Soon she caught herself, though. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm being boring," she said. Genevieve looked up, that sympathetic look on her face. "How so?" Gael shrugged. "This doesn't really interest you," she said. Gen laughed. Most of the time, her laughter was a snort. "I'm interested in *you*," she replied, "I can listen to you speak as much as you want."

Just as the words left her mouth, Gael's cheeks burned up and she looked down at the crappy moth she was painting. "Stop it," she murmured. "Why?" Gen laughed again. "You're really winning me over," Gael said. "Fuck, I sure hope so," Gen said. The warmth spread to Gael's chest and she looked up again, finding herself mirroring Gen's grin. "I hope we're just like this next spring," she said, hoping her tone was soft enough that some otherworldly force wouldn't hear it and thwart her plans.

But her plans weren't thwarted. They were in that very spot next spring, older and experienced enough as clerics that staying out past sundown in the woods didn't seem concerning anymore. Dealing with a few adjacent plane creatures was a run of the mill matter and they'd encountered plenty together. Still, after all the time and things they'd done as a duo, Gen had seemed oddly distant for a few weeks. Thus, in that sunny afternoon they sat across from each other in silence, only the sounds of nature and their brushes scraping rock. Gen's face was blank. When Gael made idle conversation, she answered like normal, but would never really contribute anything or initiate it.

So, when she opened her mouth on her own, Gael found herself almost jumping, her pulse racing. "Are you really happy where you are?" was what came out of Gen's mouth. Her face remained blank, nonchalant. "Yeah, I love it here. And I love you," Gael said, setting her rock down. "I mean with Sidexa," Gen said, not looking at her, "Weren't you a little young when she took you under her wing?" Gael blinked, somewhat stunned. Had she given any indication of a wavering faith? "I'm happy. I think it was just meant to be," she said, offering a reassuring smile.

"It's not shameful to opt out," Gen pressed on, "Or even plead for a switch. I'd be by your side, you know." She wasn't making eye contact. Gael considered getting closer to look in her eyes, but found herself stuck in place. "What are you talking about?" she asked, a

nervous chuckle escaping along the question. "I'm just worried about you. What is your idea of a future?" Gen asked. "Well, I... I'd go wherever a cleric is needed. Or even try to stay here as staff. I'm just... content with how things are," Gael said.

Her gut sunk when she noticed Gen had her lips pursed. "What I mean is... In the future, do you see yourself first and foremost as a Sidexa devotee or as my partner?" she said, still idly painting. Maybe the painting was just an excuse not to look up. At that, Gael had to let out another chuckle, more out of bewilderment. "Are those mutually exclusive?" she asked. The silence felt thick enough to stuff her throat. "Are they?" she pressed. At last, Genevieve sighed and held her eyes shut for a moment. "No. I just want to know where your priorities lie," she said. "That's not fair. It's called devotion for a reason," Gael protested, the unsteady smile still on her face. "I pay my due diligence to Armus everyday and still have space in my heart for you to be my priority," Gen said simply. She finally raised her eyes to stare at Gael. She seemed... resentful.

"Gen..." Gael said, getting closer. She raised her hand, but hesitated in reaching out. "Have I been lacking as a girlfriend? You can tell me. I'll do better," she said. Gen averted her eyes for a moment and then sighed again. "No. I'm sorry. It's not you, I'm just... We're graduating soon. I guess I'm worried that we're going to wind up in different places." Something like relief washed over Gael and she found the strength to hug Gen, kneeling on the humid ground. "I'll do what I can when it comes to that," she whispered, pressing a kiss to her hair, "I promise." Still, there was an odd chill on the depths of her gut. "Okay."

After that hiccup, their relationship seemed to slowly pick back up; they went back to their regularly scheduled beatings and hanging out in Gen's room. She seemed more open. However, as time went on, little accidents started to pile up: her sleeve would slip off her shoulder while they kissed and she wouldn't notice; her pants would hang a little too low on

her hips as they lazed about. At first, Gael thought nothing of it, even if she did take notice. She had to second-guess herself on one warm summer evening, though; they'd walked into Gen's cabin and she untied her robe, letting it slip off. Normal gesture, except for the fact she was only wearing underwear under it. "Gen?" Gael called out, standing awkwardly. "Yeah?" Gen turned, covering her chest with her hands. "What are you doing?" Gen smiled. "It was just hot out today," she said. As bewildering and inappropriate as it was, Gael would have let it go. She'd have looked past it if it weren't for Gen's sly grin and the way her fingertips sank on the soft tissue of her breasts as she covered them.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" Gael asked, planting herself firmly in her spot. "What?" Gen blinked. The possibility ran to Gael's mind and she wanted to deny it, but she felt like she'd be blinding herself. "Are you trying to... *tempt me*?" she asked, her blood rushing to her feet and weighing her down. At first, Gen looked shocked, but then her features softened. She had a sly smile. "Aren't you even a little bit tempted?" The confirmation made that blood boil. Gael felt her face drop. "I'd never test *your* faith," she said, a sour taste in her mouth, "Or ask you to give it up, for that matter."

Gen crossed her arms over her chest and averted her eyes. Her lips quivered. "I... guess I just want your attention," she said, "Sorry." Taking a deep breath, Gael covered her eyes for a moment. Though she felt stung, she pushed through it. "I can give you attention in other forms, but this is a hard line for me. You know that," she said. Gen just nodded, so Gael got closer. Stung, so stung, but still didn't want to see her make that sad face. "Gen, if you need more than this, you need to say so. I'm not going to change my mind," she said, slowly, gripping Gen's shoulders so she'd really listen. Still, she just shook her head. "No. I love you more than that, Gael," she said, lowering her tone, "I want to be with you." Gael took yet another long breath and pressed her shoulders harder. "Okay. Let's get you dressed up, yeah?"

she asked. So, she opened the wardrobe and got a set of clean pajamas for Gen, even if her hands felt heavy and she wanted to lay down in the dark.

As expected, Tristan picked up on her gloomy mood as soon as she stepped past the door. Instead of waving his concern away, she got rid of her shoes and let herself drop to bed. The event just slithered out of her mouth in a steady stream of consciousness. When Gael was done talking, she heard him sigh. He didn't seem surprised at all. "She's down bad and not being upfront about it," he said, "If she doesn't have the guts to break it off, you should. It will only get dragged out otherwise." The matter-of-fact-way in which he said it only stirred her more. "She'd tell me if she wasn't happy with me," she doubled down, "I trust her." Yeah.

Fortunately for her, nothing was amiss with Genevieve for a long while. She was just sweet — sweet as in sweetly violent — old Gen, though she seemed too busy to hang out at night; Gael chalked it up to their increasing workload. Then, she started complaining out of the blue. They were sitting at the cafeteria one day, eating together with Gael's friends. Gen seemed distant throughout the whole meal, making an odd face at her still full plate. "Gen? Are you alright? You didn't even touch your lunch," Gael said. Gen swallowed hard. "I feel sick," she said. "From what?" Gael asked, her face dropping. "My stomach. Just... queasy," Gen said. "Oh, darling," Gael mumbled, pressing the back of her hand to Gen's forehead, "Think you caught that flu?" Gen leaned into Gael's hand, not looking at her. "I don't know." Gael rubbed her forehead with her thumb, brushing some strands of wavy hair away. "You should go see if someone from Olmus can help. I can come with," she offered. Gen shook her head vehemently, enough to make her have to swallow down again. "No. It's fine. Don't worry about me."

Though she'd said not to worry, she kept presenting sudden bouts of dizziness and nausea, not to mention the headaches. These days Gen's Armus classmates snickered at Gael whenever she'd walk past to check on her. The nonsensical nature of it annoyed her. "Maybe she's pregnant," Tristan said one night, nose glued to a book. "Ha-ha," Gael mumbled. "I'm serious." Gael turned to look at him, frowning. "That's not funny."

A few weeks later, Gen sat her down and sat right next to her, taking choppy breaths. "Are you okay, sweetheart?" Gael asked. "I... have something to tell you," she said. Gen lifted her face; her pupils were contracted and her mouth, a thin line. "I'm pregnant." The words slid out with such clarity that it was like a sudden slap. Gael found herself clutching Gen's shoulders, her heart pressed between her ribs and her diaphragm pushing her lungs up. Everything inside her felt rushed. "Did someone do something to you? You can tell me," Gael asked, trying to sound calm in spite of it all. At that point, Gen swallowed hard. "No one made me do anything," she said.

As Gael processed it, she just sat there, stunned. She let her hands drop back to her lap and realized they were shaking. "Why?" was all she could think to ask. "Well, I have needs," Gen said, as if that explained it all. "You said you understood me," Gael said. Gen averted her eyes; her nose was wrinkled. "That doesn't mean you satisfied me. You didn't even *try*," she said. Gael let out a wry, choked laugh. "Are you serious?" Genevieve just eyed her down, sitting there quietly. A while went by and Gael got up, feeling her blood boil and twirl like it hadn't in a long time. "Okay. Hope it was worth it." She marched out, hearing her own footsteps come from a distant place; she shut the door behind her quietly to head back to her cabin.

When she did get there, all the heat and will to punch something had given way to a mixture of emotions that felt more like numbness. Her steps weren't her own as she walked to

bed and dropped down. Fortunately, she was all alone. So, Gael cried. Then had a bitter laugh to herself and cried some more. Much later, Tristan did turn up. As he sat down on his bed, he inspected her face from afar. "Have you been crying?" he asked. She laughed a little, feeling the curl of irony on her lips. "I've never seen you cry," he said, "Is it Genevieve?" Gael knew there was no judgment to his tone, but it stung her all the same. "Yeah. You were right from the start," she smiled stiffly. "I wish I wasn't," he said.

Then, he got up and sat on the edge of her bed, putting a hand on her hair and applying weight to it. It felt oddly comforting. "I'll destroy her life," he added in a reassuring tone. "It's better if you don't. She's pregnant," Gael said. There was a pause. "You were right about that too," she said. "That's fucked up," he said. "Yeah. I'm a stupid bitch," Gael mumbled, hiding her face in the pillow. It was damp. "Other people taking advantage of your good-hearted nature doesn't mean you're stupid," Tristan said. Then, after rethinking it: "Maybe a little bit." Gael grumbled and started sobbing again. Tristan patted her hair frantically. "I'm sorry, it was a joke!"

For a good chunk of time, Gael was hardly aware of her daily obligations. She went by everything with her autopilot on; she was present in classes, but little more than that. Her free time was spent sitting in bed with her elbows on her thighs and eyes aimed at the floor; the rest of it, Tristan would try to distract her with neat little handicrafts as usual. The worst was meals — the cafeteria was one of those interclass spaces and thus Gael would often meet Gen there. It used to be willingly, but now she was just forced to see and walk by her. Again, Gen's Armus colleagues would snicker at her like kids.

That didn't bother her. What bothered her was being able to feel Gen's smell when she moved past. There was no way she really did; it was most likely her imagination. Still, it always made her sick to the point of faint-headedness. By the time she'd get to her usual table

to sit with Tristan, her face would be completely bitter. She was caught by surprise to see herself equally bothered on a day Gen *wasn't* there. She chastised herself mentally and ate in silence. However, she wasn't there the next day either, missing every meal.

Gael pushed herself up, knuckles on the table. She took a deep breath and walked over to Gen's classmates. Her approach seemed to amuse them. "What's up with Genevieve?" she asked, eyeing the empty spot. Someone almost choked on constrained laughter; it was the same guy who'd called her 'sexless bacteria' once. "I don't know, shouldn't you? You're the girlfriend," he said. Gael hardly reacted. "Maybe ask the father," someone else added.

The small group collectively elbowed a guy at the opposite end of the table, annoying him enough that he punched someone away. "I don't have shit to do with that," he said. "At least be responsible for what you did," Gael said, not surprised to realize her blood was boiling again. "What? I was down to fuck, not down for fatherhood," he said. Gael's lips curled upwards on their own. "I hope you choke on your dick," she replied, walking away to the sounds of the group's laughter.

As Gael got some food to go, Tristan caught up with her, gripping her shoulder. "What are you doing?" he asked, alarmed. "I don't wanna hear it," she said. "But you're going to anyway. Stop letting people walk all over you. That's sick," he said, trying to make eye contact. She ignored it, assembling a sandwich. "She doesn't have anyone. Her friends suck. Her family sucks. Her little fling sucks." After a sigh, she added: "Everyone sucks." Tristan looked like he was about to rip his own hair out. "And she doesn't deserve to have you, either! Those are, like, natural consequences." The sight of the food disgusted Gael. It barely looked real. Things seemed pretty desaturated these days. "Yeah. See you later, Tris."

Having made the trek to Gen's cabin, Gael stopped and knocked at the door. There was no hesitation. Being done with everything meant not thinking things through. "Open up," she

said. "Gael?" came a hesitant shout from inside. "Who else?" Gael replied, swallowing down a bitter taste. "Go away," came the muffled reply. She rolled her eyes so hard it almost hurt. Her own action surprised her a little.

She lifted one hand and undid the lock effortlessly. When she stepped in, Gen sat up on the bed; she wobbled a bit. "How did you get in?" she demanded. "Alteration spell," Gael said flatly, "I'd have waited for your consent, but something tells me you haven't eaten this whole time." Gen laid back down, pulling her blanket up. "That's really none of your business," she said. How did she have the gall to look angry? "You have to eat," Gael replied, laying the plate down beside her pillow.

When she turned to leave, Gen raised her voice. "Wait!" she called out, her hand grasping the back of Gael's robe. "Yeah?" Gen didn't look angry anymore. Rather, scared. "Can you get help? I... bled." Gael's face also fell. "That's serious," she said. Gen bit her lip and her nose wrinkled. "You're supposed to reassure me," she whispered. Lifting her brow, Gael asked: "Am I?" As tears welled up in Gen's eyes, she sighed. "It'll be alright. I mean it," she said, grabbing her hand so she'd let go of her robe. The touch was chill inducing. "I'll make sure someone checks in on you. You'll be fine, but you have to eat." She squeezed Gen's hand and let it go. "Eat," she repeated, feeling like she'd done enough to be able to leave.

Keeping true to her word, Gael managed to get an Olmus professor to come back with her to Gen's cabin. After extensive examination, the professor sighed and smiled faintly. "I don't think it's ectopic or anything major. Maybe you are less weeks in than you thought you were and the bleeding was just implantation," she said. Somehow, that felt like a slap to Gael's face. She'd been cheated on more than once and was... hanging around? Right. "Still,

you should get some bed rest for another week or so just to be sure," the professor added; then, she turned to Gael: "Maybe your friend here could keep checking in on you?"

Gen's eyes also turned to Gael; her mouth was a thin line. Only two other people were in the room, but it felt like the expectations of a whole society had just been deposited on Gael's back. She swallowed hard. "Um, yeah. Sure," she said, shrugging. When the professor took her leave, Gen was still staring at Gael. "Thank you." Bitterness clawed its way up Gael's throat. "If you were gonna cheat on me so recklessly, you could have at least picked someone more dependable," she said.

Immediately, Genevieve's demeanor changed; her nose wrinkled like usual and she frowned. "I didn't *mean* to cheat on you! You were hardly a girlfriend anymore," she shouted, forcing herself up. "Didn't *mean* to? Did you just trip and fall on his dick?!" Gael found herself shouting back. "You drove me crazy! If you really think about it, it's more on you, really," Gen screamed back, almost snarling.

Gael clawed at her own face, pulling her eye bags down. "For fuck's sake," she said, lowering her tone, "Don't make me give up on you. I'm the only one who came to check in on you." There was no answer, but Gen's face didn't change. "I'll be back with dinner. Stay in bed," Gael said. "Don't be condescending," Gen replied. Gael paused. There was a gaping hole in her chest. It was her turn to stay quiet; she just walked away and shut the door.

Everyday Gael visited Gen and everyday Tristan badgered her about it. She felt like the very definition of an undead creature; figured she wasn't much different from one of those undead minions the Sabrael kids would rise. There was never a smile on her face, except when it came to bitter sarcasm — and even then, her facial muscles would hurt. By the end of that tormenting week, Gen seemed gloomier than ever. As Gael handed her her food, she

interrupted: "Tristan came here." Gael hardly registered what she said. "Mmm, sure," was all that came out of her mouth.

"To confront me. About taking advantage of you or whatever," Gen kept going, "I told him you do whatever the fuck you want." Gael laughed and sat down on the extra mattress. "Yeah," she said. "And he said, and I quote, 'Did you expect to convert an ace person?'" Gen said, narrowing her eyes at Gael. "Yeaah?" Gael asked, her mind still short-circuiting. The painful bitter smile made its way onto her face. "Except you never told me you were ace. So, you lied to me," Gen said, frowning.

At that point, Gael's brain caught up with the conversation. Her throat clenched. She frowned too, hands gripping her knees. "Are you seriously trying to spin this on me?" she asked. "I stayed because I thought you'd come around if you wanted me as much as I wanted you," Gen said, "But I would never have lost my time if you'd told me you were ace." Gael had to smile again. Her cheeks hurt. "If that was all that kept you around, you should have just fucking said so. You knew I'm celibate anyway," she said, "But I guess you never respected that about me, huh."

"I just don't see why religion had to be your priority!" Gen shouted, gripping her blanket. Gael got up, straightening her robe. She forced herself to drop the smile. Her own bitterness was making her stomach burn. "You seem fine. There's no need for me to come around anymore. Get food yourself," she said. As soon as she took a step, Gen called out for her: "Wait! Don't leave!" Gael paused. "Are you serious right now? You don't get to ask me for anything, Genevieve."

Awkward silence before Gen started sobbing uncontrollably. "Why are you crying?" Gael asked. The sound was making her head pound. "You never call me Genevieve," she cried, "What happened to just Gen?" Gael's lips curled. "You can't be serious right now. I'll

see you in passing," she said, turning and leaving. Still, despite the pain in her gut and how much her blood boiled, she still felt guilty.

Time went on. Somehow. Because of Tristan's constant worry and insistence, Gael forced herself to get out of bed even when she didn't have classes. She often found herself laying on the grass in the woods; she'd found spots far enough in that other wandering students wouldn't disturb her. In her dejected state, she'd often let the hours escape her and ignore the fact she should get up and go back before sundown. Too tired to care. Most of her energy had been spent being angry.

On one such night, she was doing exactly that when she felt a tingle go down her spine. She grabbed her staff, feeling the anger come back. She didn't need an adjacent plane creature to disturb her moping. Still, she got up and waited. It was just one of those disfigured wolf-like creatures. They weren't a threat on their own. As if intent on being as much of a bother as it could, it growled at her, positioning itself. She didn't have to, she really didn't have to, but she spent all she had left to her beating the shit out of it, seeking some form of catharsis. She was only done when her arms turned to jelly and her lungs started burning. After staring at its mangled body for too long, she folded in on herself and puked.

Months later, a party was being thrown for a retiring member of staff, who politely declined the invitation. Still, students didn't need much of an excuse to get together and get shitfaced. The party was on. After much convincing from Tristan, Gael budged and promised she'd tag along. All about it displeased her: not only did she prefer staying isolated these days, they'd picked a clearing in the middle of the woods to throw the party at. Someone had made the argument that such a big group of nearly graduated clerics would have no problem

dealing with a few otherly creatures — if any even showed up —, but the mere possibility made Gael's stomach churn. Fuck that. Fuck those things. She was done with them.

Still, when the day came, she found herself there. She picked a secluded enough spot at the edge of the clearing; couldn't risk being within eyeshot of just about everyone. There weren't many people there yet. Tristan came to her and offered her a cup of mysterious contents. "You'll be fine," he said, "You're a specialist at getting drunk, remember?" He smiled. She tried to. "Yep." He went back to their friends, the ones Gael didn't say much to these days. They were sitting just a couple meters away, closer to the bonfire. A nagging voice in her mind told her to join them, but she just chugged the mysterious alcoholic beverage and pushed it aside.

That began to feel like a wise decision when Genevieve showed up with that guy in tow. The guy she'd cheated on Gael with. Fuck, she didn't know his name. Whatever. Fuck him. They were talking for whatever reason; after the bleeding incident, Gael had figured Genevieve wouldn't want to have anything to do with him. Her pregnancy also seemed to be going along nicely. Well, it was really none of Gael's business. The night was crawling by at first, but it really picked up speed as she drank. The sky got darker and darker until it picked a color and settled on it; the bonfire roared and so did the general banter. Gael just listened, indulging in her late teenage angst.

Then, the tingles. Actually, they felt like full-body chills. "Am I just cold or did you guys get the tingles too?" someone said. "They're major tingles," some Sabrael guy said, eyes wide open, "We should go." No one seemed to bother much. "Eh, we can deal with a few otherlies," added Gen's little fling with a shrug. Slowly, the conversation picked back up. After hesitating a little, Gael went back to drinking. She was a little buzzed out, but she decided she didn't give a shit. Her drunken blood rushed through her body and she quickly changed her mind when something pounced on her from behind. Without a second thought,

she punched it and got it off her; she jumped up and grabbed her staff, turning to face it. Disfigured wolf, but not just that. There seemed to be more of the bizarre things amidst the trees. Everyone shuffled to their feet, but they were a world away from Gael and the creatures. As they surrounded her, she realized the Sabrael guy had been right. Major tingles. She'd never seen so many together.

Still, she could play it right. Considering the fact they were cutting her — the closest prey — off and everyone else was steps away, no one had to be hurt if she played her cards off. Sure, she was a little buzzed, but illusion spells worked wonders on irrational creatures. So, she swung her staff and created a handful of copies of herself through a trick of light. She'd gotten pretty good at that over the years. "I'll distract them so we can all just leave," she shouted. The creatures still seemed to be plotting their attack, now confused by the increase in targets. She heard Tristan shout in protest and just repeated herself. When Genevieve called out to her as well, though, she wavered. "Get Gen the fuck out of here," she said, "I'll be out in a flash."

It seemed like most people didn't need much convincing and the ones who hesitated simply got dragged away. Gael was confident — perhaps drunkenly so. As expected, the pack creatures lunged at her copies; she beat down the ones who lunged at her, compensating for her loosened reflexes with cast shields. The physical effort wasn't too great, but keeping the spells up started to wear her down in her drunken state; when she failed in casting a shield, her confidence faltered too. One of the wolves managed to sink its teeth into her arm, pulling her down.

She didn't have the strength to resist it and soon others were pulling her down, hooking onto her flesh. It didn't look real. Rather, those didn't look like her arms. Of course, *her* arms didn't have huge gashes on them. The cuts went past her muscles and she could hardly register them. It felt cold. She hadn't even realized she'd dropped her staff, or that she'd been

thrown to the ground. There was the sound of tearing, as if someone was tearing a robe. It sounded muffled, like it came from far away. When she looked down, she realized she was the one being torn.

Then she saw it. A much taller creature. An Eviscerator. Of course she remembered its name. It was a shitty name, but very descriptive. As soon as it got to her, its long claws were shredding her abdomen. She saw her guts get pulled out, but she couldn't feel anything. It was so cold out there; it hadn't been cold at all earlier. Why was it cold? She couldn't move her arms to hold her guts in place. If only she could, maybe she'd be alright. She could hold on until they got there. They? Her parents? She was so thirsty. Maybe her mom would get her a glass of water. Maybe her mom would hold her head; she couldn't hold it up herself anymore. She couldn't see what was happening.