

Forced landing

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1 Sat at the peak of a mountain

The enclosed, humid space created the perfect conditions for echo. Morgiah knelt on the overgrown moss, listening to her own steady heartbeat. She'd come a long way to find herself praying in that deep cave. Still, she knew it would work; sitting there, she could even feel the interdimensional pull of the rift. A flurry of feathers surged, the echo making it sound like a thousand birds settling down. The image shimmered for a moment and soon condensed; a translucent woman walked up to Morgiah, inspecting her closely. She stood up and bowed ever so slightly.

The goddess smiled. "Oh, the likes of you... I'm sure you'll make do," she said, touching two fingers to Mor's forehead and pausing with a pleased look on her face, "Am I to understand you're here to negotiate?" Mor nodded, unbothered by the spectral touch. "I seek some knowledge you may possess," she replied. "I heard your prayer. You're on your quest to immortality," the goddess nodded, "My knowledge is vast. But it comes with a price." Morgiah grinned, tilting her head. "I have skills to pay for it with, mistress."

Before she could react, the goddess had a finger under her chin, propping her face up; she'd bent her ghostly form closer to Mor's. "I'm sure you do. Your energy feels delicious, you know," she said, "Isn't a tasty mortal thing like you scared of coming to a rift?" Morgiah scoffed. "You've felt my energy. Rest assured that I know how to use it," she said. "Alright. You see, as an exiled deity, I don't possess interdimensional reign," the goddess said, pulling back, "Thus, if you can take care of some earthly affairs for me, I'll share my knowledge with you."

"I'm capable of anything you ask of me," Mor grinned. "I hope you're sure. I'm asking you to make those ancient mountain sons extinct. I believe there are three left," she said, joining her hands, "Call it a personal vendetta against their maker." Mor took her hand to her

heart, splaying it against her chest. "Consider it done, mistress." The ghostly face looked delighted. "I'll know it if you try to trick me."

Morgiah offered her a reassuring smile. "I don't have to resort to such lowly actions," she said. "Lovely," the goddess said, her cold hands cupping Mor's face and bringing her closer, "Will you be my mortal champion?" Her cold breath against Mor's cheeks made them heat up. "You couldn't have picked a better one," she said.

As Morgiah started the hike back to civilization, she paused in the shadows of the mountain pass and crouched, grabbing a handful of plants by the side of the trail and stuffing them in her mouth. *Have to remember to eat. Eat, eat. Puny mortal body.* After swallowing, she got up and punched the air in celebration for a moment. Everything was going as planned. Contacting a deity through the rift between worlds was a walk in the park. *And so will be slaying some demigods. They've lived long enough. Now it's my turn.*

Fortunately, she already knew exactly where to find the first one. People tended to regard this particular mountain son as some form of harvest god. *It's nothing of the sort. They're comatose rocks on whom immortality is wasted.* So, she geared up and made the trip. No time to waste. Besides the contract, slaying a demigod could also serve to satisfy a curiosity of hers; she carried an empty soul gem she'd made months ago but had never had the chance to use. Perhaps a bit of an ambitious project.

After weeks of travel, she arrived at a bustling little town located at the base of a mountain. Scouring her magically weightless bags for change, she managed to find enough to settle down at an inn and eat a real meal. She found the chairs at the hall far too hard and the other patrons, too loud; still, she lingered there, eating as much as she could stomach. "Hey, poor little thing," a waitress approached her. Mor looked up, choking on some of her food. *Poor... little... thing?* "Have you come visit us for the Harvest Festival?"

After choking some more and blinking tears away, Morgiah managed to speak: "Is that this week?" The waitress smiled, looking at her as if she was a stray dog that had just wandered in. "Yes. We'll come together and celebrate the kindness of the mountain god. You really should come! There'll be free food," she said, refilling Mor's mug without her asking for it, "It's not good for a traveler to be scrawny." The woman walked away, her hips swaying. Mor bit down on her lip and hid her face in her hands. *Scrawny. Scrawny!*

In any case, that was bad news. It would be best for her to get to the slaying business before that; she wouldn't want to be stuck at such a place for another week — fighting something so big while pesky mortals crowded around it would do no good, after all. Later, she crawled into bed, ignoring her own stench of sweat. She couldn't sleep. *A pretty girl called me scrawny and I said nothing in return. Whatever. A powerful mage doesn't need appearances.* She tossed and turned. *Yeah.* Ultimately, she wound up dragging the sheets down to the hardwood floor and sleeping there.

The next day, she found herself walking through the town, heading towards the mountain. All around her, people waved and smiled at each other, making small talk in passing. It all seemed so foreign to Mor. Someone stopped her along her tracks; they were setting up a wooden booth. "Hello, traveler!" they said, an unnatural smile, "Would you like to help us set up for the festival?" She shook her head vehemently and nearly ran away.

She had to hike a long way to get far enough from the town so no one would bother her — and hopefully the awakened mountain son wouldn't squish anyone. For her first step, she cast the Soul Trap; apparently the demigod sensed the effect. It was enough to wake it up, making the ground tremble. Ever so slowly, the mountain moved, raising itself by fists of rock. Earth crumbled and dropped to the ground. Morgiah hardly waited, propelling herself

forwards. Every force was welcome for an offensive spell — even the kinetic force of the ground that shoved her.

A distorted face carved out of rock obscured the sun, dispelling low clouds. It bellowed out a moan. *Oh, how awful, to be woken up once in who knows how many centuries.* She dodged a fist of rock swiftly, the many augmentations she'd cast upon herself working hard. The creature's fist hit the ground and Mor took to the air before impact, boosting herself up through gusts of wind. She found herself at the mountain's shoulder level; as it reached for her at a snail's pace, she raised her own hand, generating and grasping energy out of thin air.

That was the second step of the plan: temperature shock. She threw the condensed energy as a spear, satisfied to see it puncture the thing's outer crust. Effectively, that should freeze it right up. The mountain son let out yet another moan and swiped at her. She used both hands to boost herself away from the contact, kicking air that turned solid under her boot. *Can't take the brunt of a hit like that. Don't strain yourself.* Another spear, aimed at the same spot. This one would be rock-melting hot. *Haha.*

The impact of her hit fractured that spot further. *Nice and easy.* Indeed, it turned out to be a boring battle — hard, but mostly a matter of patience. Quite a handful. The movements were repetitive; Morgiah dodged, temperature-shocked the crust, dodged, speared. *Do it again.* She did have the energy reserves to keep it up, zipping across the sky like a mosquito and dishing out spells. At last, when the crust had been pierced through and through, she joined both her hands above her head and concentrated as much energy as she could; she launched herself again, this time in the demigod's direction. She dropped her own levitation so that the force of gravity could work in her favor.

As her feet hit the creature's back softly, hardly producing a sound, she speared its shattered shell with cataclysmic energy. It bellowed out like a dying whale, the sound piercing Morgiah's brain; under her heels, the mountain trembled, seismic waves running

across it. Mor held steady to her own conjured spear until every quake died out. Then, she reached into her satchel and took out the empty soul gem. *Who knows what I'll do with this baby*, she thought, holding it up and savoring it as the Soul Trap held its promise, sucking the demigod's soul into the gem. It felt so heavy on her hands; warm, too.

She hadn't even finished admiring her work when she realized a crowd was staring at her. They'd probably been watching the fight for a long time, holding on for their dear lives as the mountain shook the ground with each step. Coming from far away, Morgiah faintly heard something like "What have you done?!" She hurried off the mountain, hopping off as if in antigravity. *Just going about my business. In fact, I probably did you a favor! In style.* As soon as she touched the ground, she made a run for the cover of the woods. The image of the toppled mountain grew smaller behind her; the furious crowd, forgotten.

Though the two remaining mountain sons were more conspicuous, Morgiah got around to them eventually. Their cries of pain and outrage didn't sway her; she showed no mercy. In fact, spending her energy in thunderous spears made her brain unleash waves of dopamine which only propelled her further forward. As she found herself standing tall on top of the toppled mountains, heels firmly planted on the mossy rock and eyes on the horizon, she smiled triumphantly. *It's okay that these idiotic humans don't appreciate what I do. I'm sure this is beyond their comprehension.*

Victorious and carrying the soul of a demigod as personal spoils, Mor made the trip back to the rift beyond the northern mountain pass. The ominous ambience of the heavy, humid cave didn't bother her. A mage powerful enough to slay demigods didn't cower even at places where the fabric of reality could bend. As soon as she got to the bottom of the cave and began her prayer, that very fabric contracted and expanded; the goddess flickered into

existence again. When she saw Mor, her eyes widened and lit up; a wide smile grew on her face. It made Mor blush, cowering under her cloak a little.

"You actually did it!" she exclaimed, pacing around Morgiah with amazement, "That was unexpected." Mor tilted her head. "Um... Thanks?" she said, smiling too, "Time for our discussion, then." The goddess straightened her spine out and her face seemed distorted for a moment. "Oh, honey... Indeed. May I ask you something?" she asked, the smile coming back with warmth. Mor nodded. "You seem like the type who is only loyal to yourself. Am I wrong?" The question made the mage avert her eyes. "No. I go wherever my interests tell me to," she answered.

"Well, since you've done what I so desperately needed..." the goddess said, stepping closer, "What use do I have for an unfaithful, unruly mortal who can wipe out a demigod?" Her voice went low enough to chill Mor's blood. "What?" she mumbled, her feet freezing together. "That might even prove dangerous to have running around, don't you think?" The goddess raised a translucent hand and there was a flash of light. It was like something was getting sucked out of Mor's body; she was experienced enough to know what being drained felt like, but that was much worse. She tried to hold on, but couldn't get a good enough grasp on herself. There might as well have been a blackhole in the center of that room.

"Did you really think I'd let something so delicious pass me by?" the goddess said, her image shimmering as her mouth twisted in delight, "I'm not sure whether you're plagued by mortal naivety or egocentrism." She sighed in satisfaction and Morgiah dropped to her knees, finding a sudden hollow deep inside herself.

She grasped at her own guts. "You... fed on my flame," she realized, chuckling in disbelief. The chuckle ended up turning to a cackle. She flicked her hand and tried to conjure up some fire. All that answered was a pitiful spark. She laughed some more.

"Now that you're defenseless, I'd recommend that you leave before something else feeds on what's left of it," the goddess said. As soon as the last phoneme came out of her mouth, she blinked back to her plane of existence, leaving Morgiah behind with a broken smile and intermittent laughter.

Though she suddenly found herself less able to feel the rift's pull, the place still had that eerie air to it; thus, she turned tail, hiking out of the cave in steady steps. *This is not running away. Just strategically retreating.* Her stomach hurt, probably from all the angry acid it was spewing. She rubbed her satchel's pocket, feeling the edges of the charged soul gem. *I still have something. Hadn't expected to use it like this, but it should be possible.* A demigod's power was more than enough to match the amount she'd lost. *And then I'll make her pay.*

However, such grand plans had to be shelved for later. During the hike through the mountain pass, gravity pulled her down seemingly at random and she hit her chin on the hard ground; her teeth dug on her tongue and coppery blood slithered down her throat. She spat some out, cursing the Earth and all its inhabitants. When she tried to prop herself up, she found that she couldn't. Her bags. Her bags and pockets. The weight attenuating spells had worn off — and she couldn't recast them.

She laughed some more and started opening them up, rifling through their contents. Years of hoarded bullshit. *But it's mine. They have nowhere else to be but my pockets. How can I leave them behind?* Still, she chunked the assorted objects to the rocky shadows, saying goodbye to things like wilted flowers, perfect crystals of salt and mugs. At last she got up, physically lighter but much crankier.

Without magic, it took her several days of eating dry plants and bugs until she got back to civilization. It was a little town on the edge of the country, nestled right at the foot of the mountain pass. The few coins left from doing odd jobs along her trips could only buy her one

hot meal. *It's okay. We've never needed a place to stay. We've always lived by magic.*

Unaccustomed to eating such heavy meals, she felt her stomach curling up. *I'll get it back.*

2 Knocked down a peg

Though she had no walled-off place to sleep, she found nooks and crannies to hide away from public sight and inhabit the town in. Still, it was like tiny little eyes were on her wherever she went. Pennyless and flameless, traveling was hardly an option. However, the little town had a public library. The collection was shit. *We can work with this. We've worked with less. I'm good enough.*

She spent every daylight hour abusing the public nature of the library, rifling through pages. The collection was *so* shit. Its only redeemer was probably the nearby temple; they must have contributed to it some. Among the pile of shit, she managed to find a book on some pretentious Umbral Star scholar's use of sigils. *Can't believe I've sunk this low.* But the weight of the soul gem in her pocket propelled her forward and, without her own energy, she knew that she needed every aid she could channel.

Though she treated the corner she sat on as her private little nest, other people kept invading the library. Fuck. She'd just about had enough when the librarian welcomed in a group of children, sat them down and started trying to tutor them in reading. *How sweet, what a nice little gesture,* her bitter inner voice chimed as their screeches made her head pound. *A! B! C! D! E! Fuck you! You'll never amount to anything!*

She pushed herself off her chair and dropped the book on the table with a thud. After clearing her throat, she raised her voice: "Excuse me!" The librarian leered at her. "Yes?" Morgiah furrowed her brow and pointed at her own chest. "Can you quiet down? There are people actually doing serious business over here!" she shouted. "This is a *public* library. We host *public* events," they said, "You're invited to come back another time... Though I suppose you've got nowhere to go, vagrant."

"I do! I'll be back when those snotty kids leave," she shouted again, kicking the chair back into place, "*Don't* mess up my pile. I *will* be back." She narrowed her eyes at the

children. Ever since she could remember, looking at kids made her feel repulsed; she could hardly discern their features. *"Soon."* Mor stomped out. *Food break. Eat, eat.*

She crouched along the dirt road, scaring chickens and weirding people out as she looked for anything that might be edible. As she crouched down on her second grasshopper, someone's boots came into her field of vision and stopped. Mor raised her head, her eyes widening when she felt one of the insect's legs jiggle between her lips; she pushed it back into her mouth and swallowed.

"Are you the vagrant woman everyone's avoiding these days?" the stranger asked, his long hair falling like a veil when he tilted his head. *Woman? Someone finally reads me as an adult?* "Maybe."

He smiled lightly, slinging his bag over his shoulder and shifting the weight from one foot to the other. "Do you want to eat an actual meal?" he smiled wider; his eyes didn't accompany his mouth, eyelids drooping lazily.

"Are you offering to feed me?" she asked, blinking. He nodded. Mor jumped up and took her fists to the air in celebration. "Free food!" she yelled.

"I didn't say it was free," he said. "Money's fake, so I don't have it," she countered. *Can't slay things for money if I can't slay things anymore...* "Pay with your name," he grinned. It seemed like a threat.

"Morgiah. But everyone calls me Mor." He tilted his head again. "Oh, really? Because I have a hard time believing anyone calls you that," he said. *"I do!"* she protested.

"Okay, Mor. I'm Ellis," he said, looking at her through the corner of his eye as they walked, "I live close by. What do you feel like eating right now?" Mor hopped along, her cloak's tail bobbing up and down as she thought. "I want that pasta with the red sauce and ground beef." Ellis raised his brow. "No beef. Most I can do is chicken," he said. "I guess that's *fine*," she sighed.

They got to a small house and entered through the back door, which was lined by neatly trimmed bushes. "A kitchen!" Mor celebrated when she saw the stove. It certainly had been years since she'd been in a kitchen. Ellis hastily tied on a checkered apron with an embroidered hen on it; then, he took his index finger close to her lips. No touching, though. "No shouting," he said, "You'll wake the grandma I live with. Okay?"

It's the middle of the afternoon! Still, Mor nodded. She watched as Ellis took to the stove, putting pans on top of it with a soft clang. It was already lit and the house was warm. Maybe too warm in the kitchen; she untied her cloak and threw it on the table. He looked over his shoulder. "Yes, little imp, throw your dirty travel cloak on the dinner table."

Sitting down and resting her head on her hands, Mor raised her eyebrows. "Just did," she said, a little confused. *Isn't it obvious?* He sighed and smiled.

When the food was done, he placed a plate in front of her and sat across from her; he seemed interested in just observing. "Oh, yeah," she mumbled, loading the fork as much as possible and stuffing her face. *Hot food!*

"So, what are you doing here in the middle of nowhere?" he asked. This time, his hair didn't obscure his vision when he tilted his head; he'd tied it up before cooking. "I'm stranded," she said, immediately choking afterwards.

As she coughed violently, punching her own chest, Ellis sighed again. "Eat slower. You need to chew properly," he said. She took a deep breath and swatted the tears away. "What?! No. I'm not letting this flesh prison dictate my actions," she said, beating on her chest again, "I'm not chewing if I don't want to."

Frowning, Ellis reached out with a damp cloth and rubbed her face with it. She almost growled. "Hold still. You've got food on you," he sighed yet again. When he took the cloth back and looked at it, his face dropped. "Oh, you're *grimy*," he murmured.

After rubbing his forehead for a moment, he held his eyes shut and took a deep breath. "Look, treat your body well. At least don't choke and die," he said.

Then, he turned his attention to her dirty cloak. He held the hem between his index finger and his thumb and rubbed it; the result made him frown harder. "Since you're stranded here, do you want me to wash this for you?" he asked. "Why? It's perfectly wearable!" she protested.

He rolled his eyes and smiled. "You're right, it might come right apart if I wash it." When her face dropped, he clarified: "I'm joking. It'll look... better. And it's free. Okay?" She narrowed her eyes. "I like free stuff. Okay. But I need to empty my pockets," she said, reaching over the table; he gently swatted her hand away. "*Eat.*"

She ate under Ellis' piercing gaze, unsure of what he could be thinking. She stared back at him, narrowing her eyes. He narrowed his too, smiling wide. *Weirdo*. After gulping down the remainder of her food, she cleaned her mouth with the back of her hand; she stared at her smudgy fingers. "Is grimy bad?" she asked, a bit peeved. "Just means you need a bath," he replied.

"I have more important things to get to," she said. Then, she got up and started to empty the cloak's pockets. "More important than proper meals, too? Because your flesh prison can't tell you what to do?" he asked, seemingly entertained. "See, you get it if you put your mind to it," she said, giving him a thumbs up.

When she took the soul gem out of one of the pockets, Ellis raised his brow. "Oh, shiny," he murmured, unphased, "You could sell that for some good cash." She held it tightly against her heart, feeling its warmth irradiating. "What?! You're stupid," she said, "This is all I have left." She stashed it carefully inside her satchel.

"Didn't pin you down for the material type after the 'flesh prison' talk," he pointed out. "This is *not* a material possession, stupid. It's a soul gem," she said, raising her index finger. "Oh, yeah?" he tilted his head, a lazy smile on his face, "Whose soul is it?"

She frowned. "That's private information," she said, shaking the cloak to make sure all of her trash was in her possession. "Oh, you're spreading crumbs of dirt on the whole kitchen. How nice," he said, still unphased, "Since you're a wandering mage, what leaves you stranded here?"

She made her face as serious as she could. "For your information, I'm a big deal. I just got cheated on and robbed of my flame," she said, banging on her chest again, "It is but a temporary drawback."

He raised his brow. "Your flame?" he asked, holding back a chuckle. A tiny hand of anger squeezed Mor's stomach. "Yes, flame, you puny mortal." This time, Ellis actually laughed. His cheeks went higher and he hid his mouth with a delicate hand. *He's mocking me! I keep letting pretty people get away with it! Why?!*

"You should try coming down to Earth sometime, *Mor*. You're fun," he said, folding her dirty cloak under his arm, "I'm sure I'll see you around some more, yeah?"

As it turned out, he was right. Morgiah kept spending her days at the library, napping on her designated chair when she thought the librarian was looking away; she'd cradle her head between her arms and go out like a light, always to be woken up by chastisement. "I've already told you you can stay here as long as we're open, but you *can't* sleep here!" the librarian would say. "Why?" Mor would ask, stretching her arms out. Most of the time, they didn't seem to have the patience to answer.

On a particularly rainy day, napping seemed unavoidable and the library was the only place where it was possible. However, the ceiling was also super leaky. *Crappy place*. Well,

at least Mor's spot was dry, even if she felt a little cold without her cloak. A soggy library and Morgiah's presence made for a grumpy librarian. The doorbell chimed and they jumped up from their desk, as if expecting someone's arrival. "Oh, Ellis, thank you! We really needed someone to stop this hellish dripping," they said. *Ellis?* Mor lifted her head from her numb arms, her face swollen from sleep.

It was true. There he was, trying to get the excess water off his long hair before walking in. Though he was also soggy, his face seemed as calm as when she'd last seen him. "You know I can't do anything permanent while it's all wet, right?" he said, closing the door and dampening the loud sounds of rain. "I know. Just do what you can," they sighed.

"Ellis!" Mor called, propping herself up. His head shot to her and he smiled warmly; it was enough to heat her cheeks up. "I want my cloak back. My flesh is weak and feels cold," she said, forcing a frown. "Well, I don't lug it around," he said after chuckling, "When I come back to fully fix the ceiling, sure."

As he started getting things out of his bag, the librarian raised their voice. "Ellis, do you know this... creature?" they asked, lips curling. "Indeed," he said. "Then can you *please* do something about her? It's driving me insane. She keeps earmarking the books and ripping pages out!" they raised their voice even more, looking straight at Mor.

"Well, how else am I supposed to keep the important bits?!" she shouted back. "Other people need to read them! Are you this self-important?" Mor crossed her arms. "Who's going to read this crap?" she said, picking one of the books up and peeking at the cover, "Are any of you simpletons reading 'An amalgamation of theories on energy transfusion'? Didn't think so!"

The librarian seemed ready to tear their own face out. "That's *not* the point!" they shouted, "*Ellis!* Please. You do see what I'm dealing with here, don't you?" Ellis sighed and

opened a door behind the librarian's desk, producing a wooden ladder. "Look, she's really stubborn. Hold on. One thing at a time," he said as he set the ladder up.

He looked back at Mor. "Since you look like you just woke up anyway, won't you come over here and hold this ladder still for me?" he asked, adding in a smile to sweeten it. She felt her cheeks heat up again. "Will you feed me again?" she narrowed her eyes. He blinked hard. "Sure."

Thus, Mor held the ladder in place for him as he climbed and clogged up each hole. When he finished, he cleaned his hands as thoroughly as possible with a soon dirty rag. Then, he pointed at the floor. "Sit," he said. Begrudgingly, Mor obeyed, narrowing her eyes at him as if expecting a sudden attack. He sat on the floor across from her and his expression softened.

"You should be more respectful of public things," he said, lowering his tone. "Things are meant to serve a purpose. They're serving my purpose," she huffed. "But they can't serve anyone else's purposes if you rip the pages out."

She furrowed her brow. "As I said, those are the important bits. I need it. I'm dealing with really important stuff," she said.

Ellis tilted his head and joined his hands. "More important than anyone else's?" he asked, eyeing her with his ever-neutral expression. That gave Mor pause; she shifted, covering herself with her crossed arms. "I can't think of anything more important than this."

"Because it's important to you. Just like you have something that matters to you, others have things that matter to them just as much. Different things," he said and, as Mor didn't reply, added: "Who knows, maybe a little kid here dreams of becoming a mage. Wouldn't those books be useful?"

"As much as it matters to me?" she asked, doubtful. "Everyone is just as capable of wanting as you are," he said, "And this space matters to Helena here. Okay?" He pointed at

the librarian, who just grunted something and leered at Morgiah again. His words were so simple that they must have logical reasoning to them, so Mor found her thoughts a little jumbled. *But I don't get why anyone would care about this dump.*

She pushed herself up. "Okay... I'm hungry." As Ellis walked by the librarian's desk to put the ladder away, they looked at him in an odd manner. He sighed. "Okay. But I have some gutters to unclog first," he said, lifting his hood up.

"I'll watch," she said. He looked back at her. "You'll get cold and wet without your cloak." Mor just blinked, which prompted him to shrug it off; he held the door open and she walked out.

There were more gutters to unclog than Mor had expected. She followed Ellis around as he climbed on roofs and threw clumps of decomposing leaves to the ground. Whenever he got back down, there was someone there to thank him and make small talk. *Is it normal for someone to know this many people? He can't be enjoying this.*

As someone hogged his attention, Mor pulled the elbow of his shirt until Ellis got back on track. "Is something bothering you?" he asked, turning wide eyes to her. "I was just saving you from that random person," she said, "You're welcome." His eyes went wider and his eyebrows arched a little. "People are not random once you get to know them. I don't mind talking," he said.

"But how do you know what to answer when someone says irrelevant things like 'Oh, the weather's so good today, but yesterday it was dry?' And then you think it's okay not to answer, because someone can't possibly care about it, but they just keep looking at you and waiting," she ranted, following him down the road. She raised her eyes to find that his were glued to her and it made her shrink. *I can't tell what he's thinking!*

"So you prefer talking about things that mean something to you? That's perfectly acceptable," he said. She gave him the side-eye, doubtful. "It is?" He nodded. "What is it that you care enough about to rip pages out of public books for?" he asked.

People don't care about what others care about, so I don't think they'd say it's 'perfectly acceptable'. Still, she indulged in it. "Something ate most of my flame. I need to get back to where I was before and I'll find out how," she said simply, "It's just... a temporary setback."

Ellis spared her a look that seemed sympathetic. "You know those words don't mean anything to me, right?" She frowned and crossed her arms. "I knew it," she said. "No, I mean... You'll have to explain them to me." He stopped walking. They were already at his place; Mor hadn't really noticed where they'd been walking to. "Ah. Yeah, you're just a simpleton."

"Take your shoes off, please," he said, chuckling a little. She did give him a dirty look, but obliged and walked in. She sat down at the table and watched as he tied the apron on again. Lilac. Her face felt hot; she cupped her cheeks and averted her eyes. "It's soup today," he announced. Mor nodded. "Soup is good."

"You have a flame too, you know. It's the part of your soul that feeds the energy you can convert into magic," she started, fixating her gaze on the tabletop. "Everyone has a natural threshold reachable through practice. It's... the quality and intensity of your flame. Mine was great."

He didn't say anything. During the pause in her rant, all she could hear was Ellis chopping vegetables. Seemed like a sign to keep going. "Now I can hardly cast a dim light. Just a couple weeks ago I was slaying demigods, you know," she said, a bitter taste in her mouth.

"I'm sure," he chuckled. She turned even more bitter. "You don't believe me. I'd prove you wrong, but I can't." He tilted his head, his tied hair swaying. "Which is quite convenient."

I'm sorry, this is all just asinine to me," he said. "Whatever. I should have known you wouldn't get it," she replied.

"What? Because I'm a puny mortal and a simpleton?" he asked, drying his hands off. He turned to her, leaning on the counter. All it did was accentuate his waist and make his bangs fall on his eyes. *Why is this hot to me? I'm so pathetic.* "Yeah," she mumbled. "Look, I'll give you credit and keep my suspension of disbelief going," he said, smiling.

She didn't really know what to say. *I don't need your pity.* It peeved her, but she just remained quiet. "Well, if you can't do whatever it is mages do anymore, what's next?" he asked, sitting across from her with his ever blank smile. "It's very simple, actually," she said, scratching under her damp hair, "I'll go on borrowed energy and then get my revenge. Temporary setback."

Ellis just watched her for a moment, his eyes focusing on hers so much it made her avert her gaze. *I really can't tell what he's thinking. Silent judgement.* "Isn't there anything else to your life?" he asked at last. "What?" she spat, furrowing her brow, "No. I'm good at this. It's *mine*."

After sighing, Ellis got up. "Even when you had your... flame, all you did was magic?" he asked, turning to check the pot. "It's my thing. No one is as good at it as I am," she said. She couldn't see his face, so she stared at his back. "It's okay to do things you aren't good at," he said, "So when you need a break from one, you can rely on something else. You'll recover."

"What are you getting at? Life lessons? That's dumb. I don't need it," she groaned. "Alright," he chuckled and came back to the table, setting a steaming bowl down in front of her, "Drink your soup." His hand rested on the back of her head for a moment, patting her hair down lightly. He retracted it quickly and rubbed his palm against his apron. "Oh, *greasy*."

"The state of my flesh prison doesn't matter as long as I can do what I need to," she said, getting to work on her soup. "You must be a bit of a loner," he murmured, getting a bowl for himself. She leered at him. *That's not a fault.* "Well, if you ever want a bath, you can ask me. I've heard you don't have a place to stay," he said. "I just want my cloak back." He nodded. "Eat."

Of course she'd eat. When they finished, he disappeared beyond a door and returned with the cloak. She took it from his hands eagerly; it'd been carefully folded, but she ignored that care and just put it on. "Who would have guessed it was green under all that grime," he commented. "It is," she agreed, starting to fill the pockets again. During the pause, Ellis shifted. "Did you like it?" he asked. She blinked. *Isn't it obvious?* "Yes. This is my one favorite thing. Look, lots of pockets," she said, holding it open, "You were right. It does look better now."

When she looked up at him, his smile seemed warmer. "I'm glad. So you do enjoy some material things after all, hmm?" he asked, tilting his head. She held the cloak shut, enjoying its hug as her cheeks heated up. *This is stupid. I feel like he's poking and prodding at me.* "Soft things that stay with me long enough are comforting. That's all," she said.

"There's no need to be embarrassed," he said, reaching out and adjusting the cloak's clasp for her. The gesture only made her face hotter. "Embarrassment is beneath me," she said. "Oh, I'm sorry. What's the equivalent term for a mighty being like you, then?" he smirked.

"I get the feeling you're mocking me and I'm *not* appreciative of it," she said. His face sobered up. "Sorry. I won't do it anymore, then," he said, untying his hair with one hand as if it was second nature. Watching him made her throat clench. "That easy?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at him. "Why not?" he said.

Isn't the normal response mocking me even more? "Okay. Good soup," she said, thinking that was a time as good as any to run away. "I'll know where to find you," he said as she left. *Is he threatening me? Do I owe him money now?* As she walked back to the library, a returning thought made her guts go cold: *I'm not greasy!*

As time went on, she made progress in her studies. It seemed like sigils were her best option; that really narrowed it down. So, she started practicing some simple ones to see if that spark she could ignite was enough to fuel them. The answer was yes — too slow, though. Not enough. Still, there were ways to circumvent that.

When it got dry enough out, Ellis turned up to properly fix the ceiling. He cordially greeted both Mor and the librarian, which peeved her off a little. *Is it silly that I thought he'd single me out?* As he plugged the holes up, Helena spoke up: "I should thank you, Ellis. Ever since you had that chat with her, she's stopped tearing pages out." They smirked at Morgiah.

"Oh? I'm glad," he said, smiling at Mor with a knowing glint. "Don't assume it was because of you. I just realized my memory is so good that I don't need that," she said.

A while went by and she got back to reading; however, she was interrupted when Ellis paused on his way to another crack behind her. "I know you're the logical type," he whispered close to her ear, close enough that she felt his breath in her skin; "You stopped because you saw reason in what I said."

She lifted a hand to cover her ear, trying to shoo the goosebumps away. "You're not so stubborn after all," he said before withdrawing, only leaving the chills behind.

"Ellis!" she called out. He stopped, holding the ladder awkwardly. "May I ask you a favor?" His smile widened. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"That wasn't it. You know a lot of the townspeople, right?" she asked, lowering her voice. He nodded. "I need rats. Anything alive, really. If you can meddle in local pest control, bring me live rats," she said.

"I think I could do that," he said after blanking out for a moment, "But... Can I ask what you intend on doing? Are you lonely?"

"Loneliness is beneath me," she said, "Get me the rats. You don't need to know their purpose." He sighed. "Well, I suppose no one will miss them," he turned and paused, "Dinner at mine tonight?" She took her hand to her pocket, feeling the comfortable edges of the soul gem. So close. "I'm hungry for meat," she said. He laughed a little.

When Morgiah knocked on the door, Ellis answered with his apron tied on tightly and his hair done up. Her knees felt a bit like jelly. *This isn't fair.* The rich smell of cooked chicken enveloped her, warm air coming from the kitchen. "You're just in time," he said, "Can you serve yourself while I call Edith?"

She walked in and furrowed her brow at him. "Of course. You think I'm not capable of throwing food on a plate?" He smiled. "Sorry, then," he said, going through another door and leaving her alone in the kitchen.

Determined, Mor turned to the counter, faced with a sea of drawers. It froze her. The vapors coming out of the pot taunted her as she stared at the multitude of choices. Before she could convince herself to just start pulling everything open, Ellis was back with an old woman in tow. When they made eye contact, his smile turned into pure smugness; Mor gave him a leer.

After he helped the grandma to a chair, he walked over to Mor and quickly served her a plate. "I can always do it for you," he said in a low tone. "I'm just not familiar with the insides

of kitchens!" she complained, taking the plate. Then, she retreated to the table, hearing him snicker behind her.

"Ellis, you haven't introduced me to today's little guest," the old woman said, squinting at Mor. She squinted back. "That's Morgiah. She's from out of town," he said, placing a plate in front of the woman. "Boy, what have we talked about? You have to stop messing around with random girls and settle down," Edith chastised him.

Morgiah saw his usual smile break, though it was just for a second. "Please don't make it sound like that," he said, as politely as ever. "But it's true. You can't be stuck taking care of an old lady like me," Edith replied. Mor stuffed her face in silence. Well, not silence. She was a bit of a loud eater.

Throughout the meal, she dodged all of Edith's attempts at small talk. When the old woman finally got up and returned to her room, Mor turned her eyes to Ellis. His smile was lacking as he cleaned up the table. "So you like, fuck around a lot?" she raised her voice, trying to break the ice a little. He almost dropped the plates, recovering in time to get a good grip at the edges. His face did drop, though.

"Where did you get that idea?" he asked, his eyes wide and mouth agape. "You're good-looking and you bring a lot of people over," she pointed out, "Plus, you're not denying it." Ellis immediately turned his back on her, busying his hands with cleanup. He went quiet for a while, so she just stared at his back while she waited for an answer.

"Talking to a lot of people doesn't mean you ever connect with any of them," he said at last. "So that's why you fuck them?" she asked. "No. That's the opposite of what I mean," he said. She had to think that one over.

"Do you even have personal boundaries?" she asked. "What?" he looked over his shoulder, brow furrowed. "I mean, you clean other people's gutters. You let them small talk to

you. You let them fuck you. You feed me. And you don't get anything meaningful out of any of it," she said.

He stopped washing. Actually, he stopped altogether. When he finally overcame his stun, Ellis calmly dried his hands off and turned to her. His face had never looked so serious; well, the smile wasn't there. As he walked over, a chill went down her spine and she shrunk, feeling a level of threat even the traitorous goddess hadn't made her feel. He splayed his hands on the table and bent down to her eye level.

"I clean gutters for money. I let people small talk because I might just care too much. And I don't *let* anyone fuck me," he said, his voice turning to a near whisper at the end; he lifted one hand to touch Mor's chin and force eye contact. Her thoughts condensed into one big mess devoid of words and she wanted to throw herself off the chair. "I fuck because I like to. And I feed you because you're an interesting little imp and you're good to have around," he murmured.

His breath was warm on her face and she felt hot too, her thoughts going even hazier. When his hand finally left her skin and he got out of her field of vision, she could think again. As her legs got back to working, she relaxed them and her feet touched the ground at last. "But you're still lonely," she pointed out, still sounding out of breath. "I'm still lonely," he agreed after a while, his voice shrouded by the sound of water and scrubbing.

The next few times she saw Ellis and ate with him, he gave her progress reports on the rats endeavor. While he didn't collect enough for her, she kept trying to pin the sigils down. She found some critters to experiment on and was pleased to see that her flame was still sufficient to convert their energy for her own use. So she diligently prepared an area by the edge of town, carving and charging as many sigils as she could beforehand.

Mor and Ellis were standing in his backyard when he handed her a heavy, squeaky cage. He kept staring at her as if expecting something. "So... Are you really not telling me what they're for?" he asked after the pause. "It would be a lot of words that you wouldn't get or care for," she said, "But it means I'll be out of your hair."

She gave him a confident smile while his faltered. "Oh... Of course," he said, his voice going lower, "How nice." Mor nodded enthusiastically. "People won't look at you weird when you talk to me anymore," she said.

He took a deep breath. It sounded chopped. She couldn't read his expression. Slowly, he raised his hand and laid it on top of her head, patting her hair gently. His eyes focused on hers. "Come say goodbye before you leave," he said, "I'll feed you properly."

Mor threw her hands up. "I want that sauce you made the other night!" she shouted. His hand suddenly pulled her head against his chest; hearing his heartbeat made hers beat faster. Before she knew it, she was caught in a warm embrace. As he lowered his head to touch it to hers, his hair surrounded her. She could smell him, touch him and see him — all around her. When was the last time another person had hugged her? Ellis was overwhelming her senses. "I'll make it for you. So be sure to come by," he said.

A few more long seconds of listening to her own blood rushing through her head later, Ellis released her. She wobbled a little, still lost in space. "Alright?" he asked. "Yeah. You spooked me," she said, feeling her cheeks redden. *This is low.* "Oh. Sorry. I should have asked," he said, his eyebrows lowering.

"Human touch spooks me. It's unexpected," she mumbled, turning her back on him. The rats screeched inside their cage, also spooked by the sudden movement. "I'll come by," she said.

So she walked away with the whiny rats, heading for the clearing where she'd prepared the sigils. She put her hand in her pocket, immediately comforted and excited by the sharp edges of the charged soul gem. Everything was falling into shape.

3 A road out of the way

It was another morning in Ellis' life and more things needed fixing. After breakfast, he gathered his things and headed out. It wasn't long before a neighbor stopped him with an expression that made his gut sink. "Hey, Ellis," they said, "Thought I should tell you we found that stray you were feeding down by the side of the road."

After the gears in his brain turned enough to realize that they'd just called Mor a stray, his easy smile froze. Not just because of the disdain of the word. "Down?" he asked. "Out like a light. Not sleeping. Looked like she'd been dragging herself somewhere. Bloody hands and everything."

He gripped his bag's strap tightly, his knuckles cracking from the tension. It felt like his own ribs were constricting his lungs. "Where is she now?" he asked, the question coming out so harsh that the neighbor's eyes widened. They shrugged, a shadow of shame running through their face. "Don't know. Probably the same spot."

"How long has she been lying there for?!" he yelled. His first instinct was lunging forward and grabbing their shoulders, so he balled up his fists and went as still as possible instead. They just shrugged again. Ellis didn't have time to lose chastising them. "Where exactly is that?"

As soon as he got the directions, he made a run for it. The pressure of time rendered him breathless and his chest burned with each step. He was almost out of town when he saw the green cloak spread out on the ground; he came to a halt, the soles of his boots grinding against the ground. Then, Ellis dropped to his knees beside her and reached his hand out to push her hair out of her face. Though he'd already known it was her, seeing her still form made him shudder. Still breathing.

How many people had seen her like that and walked away? There was no one around to scream at right then. All he saw were the tracks behind her. He looked back at her hands;

bloody fingers and broken nails. She'd definitely dragged herself, desperately trying to get to someone who'd help her.

After coming to terms with the fact she wouldn't just wake up, he wrapped her arm around his shoulders and grabbed her waist, lifting her up with all his might. He could carry some weight, sure. Perhaps not all the way home. Still, he'd walk into someone along the way. Anyone would do. Something squeezed his heart. Mor's head hung from her shoulders, no consciousness to hold it up. Her face looked pale and lifeless; Ellis had to remind himself that she was still breathing.

Each step was a matter of strength and endurance. As he walked, Mor's feet dragged on the ground, lifting dust. When he finally came across another of his neighbors, he flagged them down. Their eyes immediately widened and their step quickened. "I really need help carrying her home," he said to no avail. The same happened a couple more times. Seriously? People he'd talk to and do odd jobs for everyday — people he thought he knew — weren't even willing to lend him their literal shoulder? Someone went as far as saying "I'd help you, Ellis, but having her linger around is just an issue."

It all took his blood to a boil, but he didn't have time to argue. He didn't even know if he had it in him. He just soldiered through, dragging himself and Mor back home. Halfway there, he had to pause to switch shoulders; he almost dropped her, wincing at the prospect as if the pain would be his own. How could someone that looked so scrawny weigh so much?

The final steps to his own bedroom set fire to his whole body. His muscles strained as he dropped her in his bed. When he looked down at her, there was no relief. Nothing had changed. Her limp body just laid there, looking nearly lifeless. Aside from her battered hands, she didn't seem wounded. There was nothing he could do to help an unconscious person and there was no one in town he could call.

So he lingered around. When he got tired of looking at her still shape, he paced around the house, hoping that she'd at least have her eyes open the next time he checked. But it never happened. At some point, Edith's voice came from the other bedroom. "Ellis? Is that you stomping around?"

He stopped. "It is. Sorry," he said. She opened her door, sticking her tired face out. "Didn't expect to see you home so early. You don't look so good," she said, stepping out in her pajamas.

"I'm not. Look, I'll have to head out. You'll be alone for today. Maybe I can get someone else to bring you lunch," he said. A sudden dizziness hit him and made him pause, covering his eyes with one hand and taking a deep breath. "I can cook for a day, you know, kid. Slow down," she said, touching his shoulder gently, "Where are you going?"

"Something happened to Morgiah. I'm taking her to the temple out of town," he sighed, realizing his hands were shaky. "Ah, of course you're running a favor," Edith said, gripping his wrists to steady him, "You should think more of yourself sometimes."

Ellis stepped away and turned his back on her. "Oh, no," he said as if she was mistaken, "I think she's dying." The word echoed in his head. He pushed his bedroom door open again and walked in, bending down to get Mor out of bed. It strained his body to the point he thought his back would lock in place. When he dragged her out, Edith actually seemed to get it by the look on her face. "Ah, this one. She's always been such a pitiful little thing," she said. Oh, maybe she *didn't* get it. Ellis tried to smile and found out he couldn't.

After pulling in some favors and money, Ellis got a neighbor with a wagon to make the trip with them. As he looked at Mor's peaceful face — she didn't seem so impish while asleep — a couple hours crawled by. Though he knew the trip was short, it felt like the whole morning had gone by, hills covered with dead grass passing them on both sides.

As soon as they got to the temple and stopped, two clerics were taking Mor off Ellis' lap. It was hard to miss when their eyes widened. "What? You already know what's wrong with her?" he asked, wincing at how loud it came out. The clerics exchanged glances. "When you're a trained mage, it's easy to sense someone else's flame," one of them said, not making eye contact with him.

Mor had talked a lot about that when he'd asked. The image of her saying she'd be out of his life came to his mind and he got chills. She must have messed something up. Definitely. "Hers has been... tampered with. There's nothing we can do," the cleric said. "Say that in a way that means something to me," he begged.

"There's something foreign merging with her soul," they said simply, "She's withstanding it for now, but we can only wait." Ellis gently pried Mor's upper half out of the cleric's hands, holding her head to his chest. Anxiety had a steady grip on him. Those concepts were all out of his grasp; too alien.

"There's very little that could do something like this," one of the clerics said, "You should tell us where she's been. This is concerning." Ellis went quiet for a moment. "I think she did this to herself," he mumbled.

Though it seemed like his body physically couldn't handle it, Ellis managed to haul Mor's limp body back to bed. The trip had only brought more hopelessness. There was nothing to do. Nothing significant, at least. So he focused on dumb things — would it be too hot if he covered her with the blanket? Were her boots uncomfortable? Ultimately, he tried to make her as cozy as possible.

He slept on the couch that night. Dinner with Edith had been quiet; perhaps his mood was evident. In the morning, Mor was still much the same. He didn't know why, but it crushed his faint spark. Maybe he really cared. Maybe it was just projection. Staying home

and checking on her constantly made the day seem oddly long. Dread sneaked into his mind. What do people do when someone dies in their bed?

The next day, her eyes fluttered open while he adjusted her blanket. "Ellis?" she murmured in a raspy voice. "Mor," he said, his eyes stinging from relief. He immediately poured a glass of water from the nightstand. "You need water," he said, helping her drink.

A few more glasses went down before she pressed her mouth shut, refusing to drink anymore. "I'll reheat the soup from lunch," he said, running to the kitchen before she could disagree.

When he got back, he adjusted her pillow and made her sit up a little; then, he spoonfed her. Her eyelids kept fluttering open and shut; just staying awake looked like too much effort on her part. "You've been out for two or three days," he said. She hardly reacted. As soon as she was done eating, she turned her face away and fell back to sleep.

That moment was repeated throughout the next couple days. During that time, what Mor did the most was sleep. Ellis stayed home; how could he go out and work? Finally, she started staying awake for longer periods of time and seemed conscious, though she'd stare at the wall in a manner that was uncharacteristic of her.

"You could have died," he said, kneeling beside the bed, "Why did you do it?" She turned her face to him; she looked exhausted. "If I die, it just means I failed, so there's no point in living," she said. She'd always say everything so matter-of-factly, as if these were completely normal thoughts.

He tried not to make a pained face. "Failed in what?" he asked. "If this works, it means I can go back to what I was," she said, "If I can't use magic, there's no point." Ellis bit his lip, feeling his muscles tense up. "There's other things to life," he said.

"There aren't," she frowned at him, "This is my thing. It's the one thing I'm good at." He took her hand carefully, looking down at her fingers. There was some inflammation going on

in her wounds. "You're allowed to not be good at things," he said, trying to ignore that sting in his chest. "What's the point." She said it like that. It didn't sound like a question.

He let his head drop to the mattress and closed his eyes, taking deep breaths. It was probably best not to argue with someone in that state. She looked tired enough just staying alive. There was something more pressing that he'd been waiting to get her consent on. "We need to wash you," he said softly. She grumbled. "Why?"

"You really need it. No offense, but it's not good for sick people to lay in so much filth," he said, lifting his head. She was looking at the wall again. "Only if it's warm," she said. "No sponge bath?" he asked, to which she shook her head weakly. "I'm cold, Ellis. Really cold. I'm made of flesh." He took his hand to her forehead; she didn't seem feverish. "I'll get a hot bath ready, then," he said, getting up.

Afterwards, he came back and helped her up. Most of her weight fell on him, though she tried to walk some. At some point, she turned to the side and got support from the wall, covering her mouth. Ellis felt her recoil. "Do you feel sick?" he asked. She nodded. "I can still clean you up with a sponge. You can stay in bed," he said. "Warm bath," she repeated, throwing herself against him again to nudge him forward.

In the bathroom, he sat her down on a stool. She seemed to have trouble holding herself up. He unclasped her cloak and folded it, putting it aside. "Can I undress you?" he asked. She just nodded, not looking at him. Her shirt came off easily, but pants were much harder to deal with, since they demanded cooperation.

"There we go," he said, grabbing a towel and dampening it in the warm water, "Let's get off the excess grime so you don't just stew in dirt soup, alright?" She leered at him, recoiling again when he rubbed the moist towel on her torso. "I'm not grimy," she said, her voice coming out weak. He smiled. "Oh, you are."

As he tried to get some of it off, Mor wiggled around like a worm. She seemed somewhat ticklish. "Up," he asked, lifting her so she could get into the bathtub. Her expression turned much softer when she settled down in the warm water; it was almost as if she was melting. A pleased little moan came out of her mouth. He let her enjoy it for a while before getting to scrubbing.

Getting a clear and close look at her skin revealed what seemed to be years worth of scars. He traced a big one on her ribs with his thumb. It looked like something had burned the top of her skin right off. She squirmed under his touch again; her face seemed hot. "Sorry," he said, realizing his mistake. After all, she'd already told him human touch spooked her; with so many scars, maybe there was a reason for it.

"Why are you doing this?" she raised her rough voice out of the blue, "Feeding me was already too much. Now *this*... This is bizarre." The observation hit him like a slap. Instead of facing her, he focused on rubbing soap under her arms. Finally some muscle. Not as scrawny as she looked.

"You were dying," he said, "And no one around cared. People walked right past your limp body. You were going to die and the people who actually care about you would never be able to know what happened."

"But, Ellis," she called, making him look up at her, "No one cares at all." Again, that matter-of-fact manner she had of stating things; her face was blank.

"That can't be true."

She smiled, spreading her shaky fingers so he could clean between them. "It is. It's okay. I live and die by my hand," she said.

"Apparently not," he said, gesturing to her naked shape and then back at himself. "Yeah. I..." she started, but cut herself short. He waited to hear what she'd say, but she didn't continue. So he just kept going down her body, scrubbing and then running his fingers along

her to make sure he'd done a proper job. When he got to her hips, her voice came back, as faint as before: "You don't have to go that far."

"Can you do it yourself?" he asked, taking his hands off her. She tried to sit up, but ended up slipping back down. A wince of pain distorted her features. He bent towards her, that hand of anxiety gripping his heart again. "Will you let me do it?" he asked. Looking up at him, she frowned and pursed her lips. Then, she lifted a trembling arm and covered her eyes. "Yeah. But don't look at me," she mumbled, "This is too weird."

When he was done, he helped her out of the bathtub and sat her down on the stool again so he could dry her off. He patted her down with the towel gently and then enveloped her in it, making sure she was comfy. Her face was red; when he touched her cheek, it felt hot. "We should get you back to bed," he said, "Do you have a change of clothes?" She shook her head. "Thought so. You can wear one of my pajamas. Is that fine?"

"I like oversized clothes. Are they silky smooth?" she asked. "Afraid not," he said. "Figures," she mumbled. After more stumbling, they were back to the bedroom. He changed the bedding and then sat her down on the bed again, helping her into the pajama top.

"Do you have any spare underwear?" he asked, lowering his voice. She looked at him, nonchalant as ever. "I can just go without," she said. "Oh, of course," he said, playing along and smiling, "You're so pragmatic." She lifted her shaky legs so he could slide the pants up them. When his thumbs brushed against her thighs, he lifted his eyes and briefly met hers. Now both of their faces were red.

His only got hotter when she visibly grabbed the shirt and brought it up to her face, sniffing it. He lifted his eyebrows, looking at her inquisitively. They exchanged glances; she lifted hers back, as if challenging him. "What?" she said upon his persisting gaze.

"Does it smell bad?" he asked, pouring some sarcasm into his smile. She didn't seem to get it. "The shirt?" she asked, shrugging, "I just wanted to know if it smelled like you."

Somehow, her straightforward retorts still surprised him. They really shouldn't. He forced his smile to remain neutral and slowly took his hand to her hair so she could see the touch coming. "You're really impossible," he said, caressing her hair. "I've gotten that impression," she said, averting her eyes. "It's entertaining," he added.

4 Sat in a rain puddle on a sunny day

She'd nearly told him that being taken care of like that was degrading, but by the middle of the sentence she'd found out she couldn't. It wouldn't be fully true. Though Mor felt a burning type of shame for relying on someone else to survive, his careful touch and the way he'd adjust her blanket and make it snug made her feel a warmth she was not used to. *I'm being disgusting. Disgusting and weak.*

"Don't you have anything better to do?" Mor asked him during an afternoon. He was sitting by the window with a book on his lap. His reading pace was irritating her — too leisurely. *I don't have anything to do but watch him either.* "You're half dead, reckless and stubborn," he said, smiling, "A power hungry little imp. I can't quite leave you alone."

"I'm not power hungry. I'm taking back what's mine," she said. "And you won't stop. Who knows what you'll try next," he replied, lifting his eyes from the book and focusing on her. Combining the soft smile with his gaze was enough to make her turn to the wall. "Why do you care?"

"I think someone should," he said. *Of course.* "That's empty. It just means you're forcing yourself to care because you think I'm a scrawny little thing," she said, mimicking the words a waitress had told her months before. Why did such things linger in her mind?

There was a pause. "You're right. Maybe I should just admit I like you and your presence," he said, taking a deep breath. *Should I take this at face value?* She heard his chair creak as he got up and took a few steps closer. "You say concerning things. I worry that you'll just give up on life if you don't recover," he said softly, sitting by her side on the mattress.

"I will," she said, "There's no reason not to." She heard him sigh. "And you don't even see a problem with that," he said. Mor buried her nose under the pajama top. *It smells more like me than him now...* "I spent all of my life chasing something that's now out of my reach. I was so close," she said.

"What was it?" he asked. "I was working on becoming a lich eventually," she said. His hand touched her shoulder lightly. It irradiated warmth. *That's infuriating.* "That's an actual thing?" he asked. "You'd be surprised."

After a while of just his hand on her shoulder, he said: "Alright. So say, if you did achieve immortality, what would you do with it?" She furrowed her brow, finally turning to face him. "I'd be rid of the needs of my flesh prison, of course. Just that is already enough."

His thumb dug on her skin, pressing a little. "Right. But what would you *do*? Eternity is a long time," he insisted. "I'd eventually be the strongest mage in existence," she said. *He's making me sound stupid.*

Though he smiled, he didn't seem too happy about it. "Why do you measure your happiness in comparison to others? That is, why do you have to be better than other people?" he asked, "Aren't you socially isolated anyway? Whose approval are you looking for?"

She freed her shoulder from him forcefully, her body complaining about the sudden movement. His smile dropped. "Mine. My approval. Other people wouldn't even get it," she said, getting an acidic taste in her mouth. His change in expression made her feel a pinch to the gut. *Why does he look at me like I'm stupid?*

"I think you're perfectly deserving of existing just the way you are right now," he said. She just gave him the leer. "And your body is not a prison. There are pleasant things you can do with it," he added, smiling. "Like what? So far, it's mostly an inconvenience," she said.

"It's different for everyone. You should try different things," he said, taking his hand to her hair again. He seemed to like petting her like that. "Don't you like eating what I cook for you?" he asked, brushing her bangs out of her face. The gesture made her eyes sting and she didn't know why. *No fair.* "I do, but it doesn't count. We're chemically geared to like food."

He laughed. "So what? Indulge in the things a *puny mortal* would," he said. Then, Ellis paused for a moment, smiling down at her. "Can I take you for a stroll in the backyard?" he

asked. "What for?" He lifted her blanket so he could put slippers on her feet. "You haven't been getting sun at all," he said. She grumbled something. *What's the point?*

Still, she cooperated as much as she could when he helped her up. That ambivalent feeling of impotence and warmth came back as he shouldered most of her weight during their walk; it felt like her knees would give out at any moment. Ellis helped her through the backdoor and the sun immediately blinded her. She hardly had the strength to lift her hand to protect her eyes.

He sat her down on the overgrown grass under the shade of some trees, turned to the chicken coop. *Dumb little birds*. Mor watched mindlessly as they walked about, twisting their necks in that odd way birds did. They looked at her as if they could see through her soul. *Feels judgy*.

"Wait a moment," Ellis said before walking towards the chickens. Though his steps were gentle, most of them scattered away. He picked up the one hen that didn't seem to mind his presence. When he lifted it up, it seemed to lose its bird shape and become an amorphous blob. Ellis brought it back to Mor and sat down beside her; he held the chicken out in her direction. Again, its vacant eyes pierced right through her. She frowned.

"You don't like chickens?" he asked. "As food, they're great. As for magic potential, they're a step above rats," she said. "That's not what I mean," he said, smiling, "Look, this one likes people. Want to hold it?"

Mor furrowed her brows, but ended up obliging when Ellis smiled wider. As soon as she touched the chicken, it moved its wings, seemingly spooked. In turn, the sudden movement spooked Mor. "Don't hold it so tightly," Ellis said, touching Mor's wrists with caution, "Let it be comfortable."

She let her faint strength go and the hen settled down on her lap. Mor took a deep breath and Ellis chuckled beside her. "What do I do with this?" she asked. "Be nice to it," he

said. "How can one be nice to a *bird*?" she asked, frowning again. "Gentle touches," he said, guiding her hand along the thing's feathers. His touch was soft and his hand enveloped hers like a warm blanket.

"Like you do to me?" she asked, lifting her eyes to him. His smile dropped for a moment; it looked like surprise. Then, his face softened. "Yes. Do you like it?" he asked, raising one hand to caress her hair. *Will I disgust him if I say I do?* She pursed her lips and leaned into his hand. "I do."

He took a deep breath beside her. "I'm glad. I was worried I might have made you uncomfortable," he said, brushing her hair with his fingers. *Is this what people do to each other?* She felt her face heat up. *Stop blushing, idiot.* "Why?"

His smile dropped again. "Well, you said touch spooks you. I noticed your scars and I thought..." he paused, looking a little lost in his words. It took Mor a moment to get where he was going. Then, she laughed a little. "You really have no idea what I deal with," she said, "Those are all combat scars. And even at my most inexperienced, I'd never let a human get that close to me."

The fluff of the chicken disappeared from under her hands as it hopped off her lap. When she looked down, she sighed. "It shat on me," she said, "Animals are inconvenient."

Her attention was called back when Ellis turned her head gently. "Then tell me more," he said, holding the hair above her nape in a clump to keep her facing him. Though the gesture was demanding, there was no strength to it at all; it transmitted a wave of heat down her spine.

"Ellis," she said, averting her eyes anyways, "Would you be this nice to anyone? Would you touch just about anyone like this? And bathe anyone that needed it?" She shamed herself as the questions streamed out. The wave of heat irradiated across her body and made her chest hurt.

His grasp on her hair faltered. "I try. And if I had to touch anyone, I'd be as gentle as possible," he paused, running his thumb on her nape. It made her shiver and she hoped it hadn't been noticeable. *I'm pathetic.* "But what are you actually asking?" he lowered his voice.

"You're the first person that does... things for me," she mumbled, looking down at her lap. She focused on the stain on her pants to distract herself. "I wonder if it's just because you're nice or if I'm particularly deserving of anything."

"You want me to care about you?" he asked. Her throat went dry. *We can still curl up and die.* "I don't want anything," she said, intensifying her stare at the bird crap. "I thought you were the independent type," he said. She was sure he had that shit-eating grin on his face.

Mor remained quiet, hoping the conversation would end. "You can do it. Use your words," he said, his voice turning soft again. She opened her mouth and her throat clenched; she choked up and felt her eyes sting. Before the tears welled up, she turned her head away from his touch and lifted her hands with all her might to rub her eyes. Her arms trembled from the effort.

"Mor?" he asked, touching her shoulder lightly. There was a hint of panic in his voice. "I *can't* do it!" she ended up crying out, "You understood it. Just... Don't make it hard." Before she knew it, her head was buried in his chest again; he wrapped his arms around her, hiding her from view. She bawled her eyes out on his shirt. "Take a deep breath. It's okay. I just wanted to make sure I understood," he said, caressing her hair, "I do care about you."

"This is pathetic," she said, "Now you're just saying it out of pity." Her words came in unstable bursts, timed with her sobbing. "I don't want that," she mumbled.

He hugged her tighter. "I wouldn't do that," he said, "I just don't know how far I can go and where your boundaries are." She cried some more, clinging to him. He just held her close.

"I think this is enough outside for today. Let's get you back to bed, yeah?" he said, giving her scratches behind the ear. She nodded, utterly defeated.

When she was back in bed, face all swollen, he grabbed another pair of pants. "Let's get you into some clean pants, how about it?" he asked, seemingly as calm as ever. *He's probably disgusted with me.* She nodded.

He waited for her to nod again before touching her. When his hands touched her hips, the heat came back; she went stiff, trying not to squirm from the overwhelming sensation of it. As he slid the dirty pants off, the tips of his fingers rubbed on her thighs and she shivered. *What the fuck is my problem.* She was suddenly cold and exposed, a feeling that only grew as Ellis' eyes focused on hers.

"In what way do you want me to care about you?" he whispered as he helped her into the clean pants. His hands lingered on her waist and he bent down, focusing his attention on her face. She staggered again, her brain struggling to find words she wouldn't die of embarrassment from saying.

"I don't know. I want you to believe me," she said, shrinking under his gaze. "I'm sorry for doubting you," he said, tangling his fingers in her hair again, "I know it's very real. It's hurting you." She bit her lip and took a chopped deep breath. *Please don't say it. Mercy, please.* "I want another hug," she forced the words out anyway.

He bent down further and enveloped her shoulders in his arms, gluing her chest to his. She could feel his heartbeat over hers. "Don't be afraid to ask," he whispered. As his fingertips applied pressure on her body, she burned in shame at her own thoughts. The attack on her senses made her dizzy.

"I'll go back to work tomorrow," he said after a good while. "Will you be fine with Edith for a couple hours?" She frowned. "I'd rather be alone," she said.

"Oh, I guess you're all good, huh?" he laughed, holding her tighter. "You're recovering. You'll be fine soon. I promise," he whispered, his lips brushing against her hair.

"I'm not sure I'd say *fine*," she said, "But if it had been total rejection, I'd already be dead." He kissed the top of her head and she had full body tremors. "No matter what happens, you'll have to learn to live with it," he said, letting her go and taking a step back. *It's cold.*

"My flesh prison can't force me to put up with it," she repeated. "Of course. Do you want some tea?" he asked, sighing. "Yeah."

They drank tea together, Ellis favoring guiding Mor's cup to her lips instead of drinking from his own. "I feel like dead weight," she said, "Can't even drink water on my own." He watched her over the rim of his cup, his sip taking too long. Maybe he was thinking.

"You're deserving even if you can't do it yourself," he said. "I'm going to hunt that bitch into the next astral plane and make her pay," she murmured, turning on her side. The warm tea made her feel nice and fuzzy.

"So you'll risk your life some more for vengeance that won't give you back what you lost?" he asked. "It's a matter of principle," she said, "She took a piece of my soul and made it her own. It won't stand."

"It sounded to me like you did the same," he said, "With that soul gem." Mor turned to him slightly so he could see her smile. "That was utilitarianism!" she said, "They would die anyway. Best put that soul to work."

"That's at least hypocritical." She heard Ellis cautiously place his cup on the nightstand. "Though I suppose you think I'm too dumb to discuss it," he said.

Mor furrowed her brow. "You're not dumb for having different priorities. Why would you know about things that don't concern a lowly mortal?" she asked, already straining her raspy voice. The crying hadn't helped much.

"Your use of words like 'puny' and 'lowly' has this air of superiority, that's all," he said. He sounded calm. "But I *am* superior. I am superior to other mages in terms of skill and potential," she raised her voice, "That's just fact. But that's all I'm good at."

"Then you care about words someone like me might say?" he asked. "Not if you're *wrong*," she said, "Factually. But I don't know about things you do." She hid her nose under the shirt again. It had grown into a comforting gesture lately. "You look like you have everything under control," she said. It came out muffled.

"Oh. I don't," he said. She heard as he got up from his chair; suddenly, his hand weighed down on her hair. "It's just a life skill. One you should have is... asking for things if you want them. And taking the initiative. You don't have to wait for me to hug you."

"I can't move much right now," she mumbled, willfully ignoring most of the meaning of it. "I meant in general," Ellis said. She took a deep breath, her face still half obscured by his shirt. "I don't want to sink that low," she said.

"That low?" his voice lowered. "Low enough to ask for things that people didn't offer to give me in the first place. That's pathetic," she said. Her throat hurt; the pain made her realize she'd spoken more than usual that day. *Even a word is more than usual.*

"What if I also like being touched? Then you'll be the person that gives," he said simply, "Besides, who told you that having emotional needs is pathetic?"

She paused, lifting her face from the shirt to stare at him with her brows furrowed. "*Needs?* No one has a right over another's affection or attention," she said, turning away again, "Not even children over their own parents."

There was no response for a solid moment. She thought she'd just have some golden silence to carry her back to sleep. These past days, she always felt exhausted. "Damn, Morgiah, whenever I'm ready to walk away you throw a whole packed suitcase in front of me," Ellis' voice came back.

Mor just grunted in response. "You see, I'd agree with you, but then you threw in the parents thing," he said, his tone too light, "Thinking you aren't some self-raised imp just threw me for a loop."

"But I *am* self-raised. There comes a time in a child's life when the parents are no longer needed," she said, forcing the words out in spite of her throat, "A horse drops from the uterus ready to walk. Nudge-nudge, walking."

"You're not a horse," he said. "I'm hardly human, either," she said. Ellis sighed and sat next to her on the mattress. His hand brushed her hair away gently, forcing eye contact. "You need people to relate to," he said, "So you don't feel so other. Right?"

She didn't reply. His fingers were warm on her face and she wished she could fall asleep like that. "I do, too," he whispered, "Rest. Your voice is hoarse." ...*Horse*.

When his hand left her cheek and his weight left the mattress, her gut sank. She found the strength to force herself to ask for something. "Stay. I'll fall asleep soon," she said, looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

His smile made her gut flutter back up. He obliged, sitting beside her again. Having his hand on her hair was even more comforting than hiding her face under the shirt.

5 Give and take

The next morning, Mor shifted and rolled to her side as she woke up. In Ellis' chair, she found Edith instead. *He did say this would happen.* Still, it made her face drop. The noise made the old woman look up from whatever yarn project she had on her lap. Mor could never tell if she was frowning or if that was just her normal face.

"Good, you're awake, girl," she said, setting the yarn and needles aside, "Ellis told me to make you drink this." Edith grabbed a cup and forced the rim to Mor's lips. She only found out what the contents were when they were already down her throat: room temperature milk. *Ellis would have heated it up for me. Just because he knows I like warm things.*

"Did Ellis have a gutter to unclog or something?" Mor asked, somewhat bitter. "Something," Edith said, "He's finally back to his life after being at your beck and call for days."

"I didn't make him take care of me," Mor said, turning to face the wall as her stomach churned in anger, "He does whatever he pleases." *Go away.*

"Truly," the old woman said, apparently in agreement. "What he pleases is losing time. When I was his age, I had this house, a husband and children already," she continued, raising her voice. *Old people are fucking obnoxious. Why did you leave me here with her?*

"I see that's gotten you far," Mor said, her words muffled by Ellis' shirt, "Living with a stranger with none of your children in sight."

"I didn't raise my children to be tied down to me. It's a give and take relationship," Edith said. Mor could hear her crocheting needles going at it again. "I'd much rather share a house with a willing stranger than force them into something they're not interested in."

That's more sane than I expected. Mor didn't answer. Maybe she'd get rid of her guard by pretending to sleep. "Unlike you, who only takes from Ellis and doesn't have anything to

give," Edith added. The comment was pure bile and not being able to run away from the conversation left Mor powerless.

"I'm not the materialistic type," she said, shrugging weakly. "That's not what I meant," Edith replied. *Fuck off.* Time slithered on by as Mor turned stiff in bed, her mind reeling with the countless things she could say in reply. Still, she didn't say anything. *I have nothing to prove. I'm a worthwhile individual. Aren't I?*

As happens when one's sick, a feverish nap took hours away from her. She woke to Ellis' voice. "I'm home," he said, resting his shoulder against the door frame. Before she could hog his attention, Edith got up from her chair. "Good, good. So I get a break from her," she said. Ellis took a step to the side to allow her to go through the door.

"She didn't heat up my milk," Mor mumbled, frowning at Ellis. "I've seen you eating grasshoppers," he said, smiling, "Have I been pampering you too much?"

She raised a shaky hand, grabbing the air towards him so he'd come closer. "No!" she said. *Don't change.* He obliged with the usual smile, sitting beside her and holding her trembling hand.

"Do you think you can stomach a little more food today?" She nodded. "Then I'll make chicken with that sauce you like," he said, kissing her forehead. It gave her the tingles. "Good temperature," he said. *Of course that's why.*

When he got up to head towards the kitchen, her heart jumped. She reached out again, grabbing his wrist without any force. "You just got here," she said, her voice dropping as she realized how pathetic it sounded.

"I have to get lunch started," his voice dropped too, though it sounded like it was out of pity. He turned his wrist to hold her hand, entwining their fingers. The pressure gave her warmth. "Sorry for leaving you alone."

She frowned. "Don't make it sound like I'm needy," she said, "Take me to the kitchen with you. I want to go. You only wear the apron there." He furrowed his brow. "What about it?" he asked as he bent down to lift her out of bed.

He'll only be disgusted with me. It must feel terrible when you're nice to someone repulsive and it turns out they're attracted to you. "I feel faint," she lied, averting her eyes as her cheeks turned red. There. He'd drop his line of thought to make sure she was okay.

Come on. Instead, he held her steady and stared at her for a long second. "Do you, now?" he asked, his smile growing. Then, he chuckled and her cheeks outright burned. "You'll be okay. Lean on me."

In the kitchen, he helped her sit at the table. Unable to hold her own weight very well, she dropped her upper body on the tabletop, cradling her head with her arms. She watched intently as he tied the apron on, back turned to her.

Then, making her freeze in place, he turned his head slightly and made eye contact with her — just out of the corner of his eye. She thought she'd seen him grin before he turned his face away again.

It spooked her enough that she didn't dare strike conversation. She just heard as he did meal prep, her frantic heartbeat obscuring a good portion of the sound. A good while in, though, there was a knock at the door. Ellis cleaned his hands and opened it.

From her spot, Mor couldn't see the visitor, but she could hear the conversation. It was someone she didn't know; they exchanged pleasantries and the visitor got into it. "One of my doors is stuck. I think it's the hinges. Would you mind swinging by?" they asked in a cheerful tone, "I'll bake pastries."

"Sure, that's an easy fix. Sometime later today," Ellis said, mindlessly tying his hair up as they talked. There was a pause. "We could do more. You haven't been over in a while," they said, voice turning graver.

Ellis' hands paused on his hair for a moment, almost as if he was stunned. He recovered. "Oh. I'm afraid I'm only in the mood for pastries today," he said, as nonchalant as ever. They exchanged yet more pleasantries and Ellis shut the door.

When he turned to Mor, he didn't smile, just got back to the counter and cleaned his hands again. "So you *do* fuck around," she said, raising her head a little. Her throat burned.

His hair swayed as he tilted his head slightly. She could hear him sigh. "Will you shame me?" he asked plainly. "No!" she shouted back immediately. She couldn't take even a slight pause that would make him think otherwise. Then, she took a deep breath and hid her face in her arms.

He'll be disgusted with me. "It's just... You're on good terms with so many people. But you're the only one I talk to," she said, trying to ignore the burning shame, "This is stupid. These feelings are pathetic."

"It's not pathetic, Mor. Help me understand you. Talk," he said softly. Thankfully, she didn't hear footsteps. She didn't want to look at him.

"To you, there's nothing *about* me. You're just good-natured. I keep tricking myself into thinking there is, but you're so much more intimate with many other people." When she started talking, the words streamed out and she couldn't hold them in anymore. Her throat felt tight and the air itself was smothering her.

"So you think I'm not interested in you because I haven't fucked you?" he asked after a while. "As if fucking was like a handshake to me?" Since Mor didn't answer, he walked over to her and sat beside her. She felt the warmth of his hand on her shoulder.

"I've told you before that I don't have any genuine connections with any of these people," he whispered, probably realizing how scary the conversation was for her, "Everything's just convenient." His hand moved to her hair, brushing strands of it gently.

"And you have a genuine connection with me?" she asked, turning her face just enough to see his cautious smile. "Yeah. Though you act the opposite, you're very open and direct with conversation," he said.

His face got closer and his hand moved to her cheek, making it even warmer. "And you have the hots for me, don't you?" he said, grinning as she choked on her own spit and coughed. "Shut... up."

"See, if we fucked, it wouldn't be casually or out of convenience, just for the sake of it," he said, brushing her bangs away from her eyes. "At least not for me," he whispered.

Mor's body was hot all over. It felt like a fever dream. In fact, the whole sequence of events was too odd to be real. She bit down on her lip, hoping the pain would clear her mind of the fireworks that were going off in it. *Make sure!* She raised her head to face him properly, determined. "So you *would* fuck me?" she asked, speaking clearly to avoid confusion.

His hand cupped her cheek. "Would you want me to?" he asked back. "That's not the fucking question. I'm asking you if you find me fuckable," she said, frowning.

"Oh, you're so eloquent," he teased. The corner of his mouth twisted upwards. "I'd worship you from top to bottom," he said, his hand now outlining her jaw.

"It was a yes or no question!" she demanded, trying not to shiver as his fingers brushed against her neck.

He chuckled. "That was a yes, Morgiah." His thumb ended up on her chin and he held it, lifting her face a little. His smile burned all the way through her mind and she suddenly realized the nature of all they'd just said.

With chills running through her body to combat the warmth of that smile, she dropped her head back to her arms, as if he'd stop seeing her if she stopped seeing him. She felt her

legs tense up and pressed her thighs close together. Her gut felt hot and she could only think of abstractions.

"Well, I have to go back to cooking," he said, abandoning the spot beside her, "Lest I don't have enough time to feed you." So silence settled in, only cut by the sounds of the kitchen. She held her eyes tightly shut, unable to even conceive looking at Ellis after the abstract feelings that had just surfaced. *My flesh is so weak. My body betrays me. But he is not disgusted with me.*

Because her hands were still too unstable and weak, he helped her eat again. That meant facing each other, which in turn meant his gaze was inescapable. It seemed the same — the ever present patient, calm gaze —, but his smile was taunting. He seemed intent on accidentally brushing his fingers against her face and each slight touch felt like electric shock.

From across the table, Edith made small talk with Ellis, oblivious to Mor's internal battle and Ellis' mocking smile. *Shut up!* Mor focused her eyes on Ellis, overcoming her shame to frown at him. *You're doing it on purpose. Go fuck yourself.* She couldn't say it out loud, but from his slight chuckle she knew he'd gotten the message.

After the meal, Ellis put Mor back to bed, covering her with the blanket carefully. As he ran one hand across her face, his thumb lingered on her lower lip and her cheeks lit on fire. Her mouth was slightly agape and she hadn't even noticed it. He smiled.

"I have to go again," he said, "Is there anything you might want before I leave?"

"I don't know!" she grumbled, turning on her side and away from his touch. It was conflicting. She longed to be touched some more, but it made her body feel too many things she wasn't familiar with.

"Alright. I'll be back for dinner," he said, walking away with seeming ease, "Be a nice little imp and rest."

But she couldn't. Though her sick body craved sleep, she felt too warm and fuzzy to give in; her mind kept replaying the kitchen conversation and it made her restless. *What does worshipping someone from top to bottom even mean?! I hate you for this.*

After a whole afternoon of Mor spiraling and having to listen to Edith's idle blabbering, Ellis was finally back. As soon as Mor heard his footsteps, her heart quickened its beat in anticipation. She wasn't sure if it was because she wanted to see him or if his presence had triggered her fight or flight response.

As in the morning, the old woman left the room as soon as Ellis walked in. "Finally," she mumbled. Ellis turned his attention to Mor, widening his smile immediately.

"I brought pastries," he announced, jiggling the bag. He sat beside her on the mattress and produced one out of the bag, arching his eyebrows.

"Smells good," she said. So, he fed it to her, smiling all the while. He seemed happier than usual, but she was bad at telling.

"Ellis," she called in between bites, ignoring the fact there was sugar all over her mouth. "Mm?"

"If a relationship is about give and take, do you think I even give you anything?" she asked, lowering her voice. She'd stewed in her thoughts all afternoon.

His smile wavered a little. He paused and ate what was left of the pastry, looking away for a moment. The wait made her belly go cold. "You really think about what my words mean and you consider everything I say. You try to understand yourself better individually and also in relation to me. So, yes," he said at last.

"That's a thing that counts?" Mor asked, furrowing her brow. "To me, it's the first thing that counts," he said.

His smile wasn't there. She couldn't tell what his expression meant. "Were you worried about it?"

"I don't know," she said, "I guess." He sighed. "See, you care. You're mindful. But I wish you wouldn't worry," he said. Absent-mindedly, he rubbed the corner of her mouth with his thumb. "You're all sugary."

She made a weird sound and licked it away. It made him chuckle. "Ellis. One more thing," she said after waiting for his faint laughter to die out. "Of course," he replied.

"This is your bed, isn't it?" she asked. "It is." She frowned some more. "Then where are you sleeping?" she asked.

"On the couch," he said. She took a deep breath, fully aware that her cheeks were already stained. "Then sleep with me. There's room and it would be... comfortable," she said, her voice cracking a little.

He smiled and bent down, bringing his face closer to hers. As usual, he brushed her bangs away with his fingers. His touch was tender and she closed her eyes a little. "I'd like that," he said.

When it came time to sleep, everything seemed normal up to the point when Ellis stayed in the room. With measured movements, almost as if trying not to startle her, he lifted the blanket and got into bed with her. He laid down on his side, turned towards her with an easy smile. "How would you be most comfortable?" he asked.

She shrugged, suddenly too aware of his proximity. His smell always overwhelmed her when they hugged, but laying down together was too much. "You pick," she frowned. "Alright. Want to be the little spoon?" he asked, extending his arms out. "What?"

"Oh, it's okay if you don't want to. We could sleep back to back," he said, retracting his arms. "No, what does 'little spoon' mean?!" she asked, raising her voice and making it crack. His eyes widened and he laughed, covering his mouth.

"Say we're two spoons in a drawer. You'd be the smaller one, so you'd fit into me. I'd be hugging you from behind," he said, traces of laughter still present. The mental image was enough to make her insides molten. She staggered. "That's *lewd*," she said.

"Not necessarily. So, want to try it?" he asked. With her thoughts scrambled, she just nodded. "Turn your back to me," he whispered. She did and he enveloped her with his arms, pulling her in and joining their hips. The contact immediately turned her into stone, though she kept that molten core. Shivers ran across her body. When he touched his nose to her nape, she spasmed into him.

"Will you be able to sleep like this?" he asked, the laughter still somewhere in his tone. She nodded. "If you can't, I can go back to the couch," he said.

She held his hand over her torso as tightly as she could, which wasn't much. "I want you here," she said. "Sick people need their rest," he replied.

"I may be mortal, but I'm not *that* frail," she said, "Stay." He pulled her further in, which she hadn't thought to be possible. *Does wearing clothes even make a difference at this point?* The great advantage of that position was that Ellis couldn't see her face.

"I'll stay, then. Good night, Mor," he whispered. He pressed a kiss to her nape, making her spasm again. She thought she'd felt him smile against her skin.

6 Just ask

Stuck in bed. During another afternoon while Ellis was out, Mor found herself at that very same spot again, her head resting on two pillows so she'd be slightly propped up. *Is this supposed to make me feel like I'm in a different position?* Her throat had been dry for hours, but Edith had fallen asleep on the chair beside the nightstand, head thrown back and mouth ajar.

I shouldn't need some hag to hand me a glass of water. She raised her trembling arm towards the jar on the nightstand; the shakiness only increased the further she tried to reach. Mor dropped back to the pillows, frustration welling up inside her like hot anger. *Fuck it. I don't have to accept this.*

With a flick of her wrist and a slight movement of her fingers, she channeled the familiarity of telekinesis. Just when she thought it might work, the prickle of energy within her turned into a jolt. She spasmed, her muscles contracting; her stretched fingers folded in. Her body refused to obey her and soon her consciousness gave out.

When she came to, her head was in Ellis' lap. The first thing she saw was his worried face. She looked off to the side; her neck was sore. The candle was lit and it was dark out. "Mor," he mumbled, holding her head closer to him and taking a deep breath. "Ellis," she replied, a pinch of remorse bugging her.

"You were out cold," he said, his fingers entangling themselves in her hair. "What happened?" his voice lowered.

That pinch grew bigger. *My body betrays me. If I hadn't fainted, he wouldn't be worried.* "I tried to use magic," she admitted. "Why? You should give yourself time," he said.

Just then, Edith walked into the room carrying a bowl of what smelled like soup. "Here you go," she said, placing it on the nightstand.

"I wanted water," Mor said. She turned her head a little, hiding her face in Ellis' shirt. "Where was Edith?" he asked. "Asleep." There was a pause. Mor closed her eyes.

"Don't look at me like that," Edith's voice came from behind her, "You're the one who took her in. I don't have any responsibility here. If you want to take care of her, stay home, Ellis."

She felt Ellis tense up under his shirt and heard him take a deep breath. Ultimately, he didn't say anything. He just let that breath go in a sigh. "Alright," he mumbled. He adjusted Mor over the two pillows and got the bowl from the nightstand. "You should eat," he said.

They were alone again as he spoonfed her. *I shouldn't need this.* "When you need help, you need to ask," he said. He wasn't smiling like usual. "I shouldn't need it. My body *has* to be able to do these things," she said, frowning as he made her swallow another spoonful.

"You should be kinder to it. Your body is the anchor that allows you to exist in this physical plane," he said. She turned her head, refusing the incoming spoon. "Oh, you're so eloquent," she mimicked something he'd said days prior.

He sighed again and smiled faintly. "Just trying to say something that might resonate with you," he said. Then, he put the spoon back in the bowl. "Are you full already?" he asked. She grunted. "No, just being difficult," she admitted.

"Alright. I was worried," he said. He guided the spoon back to her. "Will you be a good little imp, then?" he asked softly. *Since you'll ask like that.* With her cheeks a little hot, she acquiesced.

"Staying in bed is insufferable," she said after she was done, "I want to do things." He smiled. "So you do have things you enjoy?" he asked. She shrugged, her sore neck cramping up. "Not intentionally," she said.

"When you're able to walk on your own, we can do things together," he said. He bent down and kissed her forehead. *His hair smells good.* "Besides sitting in the backyard."

She shifted and swallowed hard. *He'd tell you to just ask.* "But I want to do things now," she said. Ellis seemed to be distracted by adjusting her blanket and pillows. "What things?" he asked.

Mor turned on her side, ruining his efforts of making the blanket snug around her. There was a pause. *This is low.* "...Things," she said. "Things," he repeated, giving it the same tone and chuckling afterwards.

His hand brushed her bangs away and she knew that he was looking directly at her. Still, she stared at the wall. "I'm waiting for you to ask," he said, his hand lingering on her face. She tried to contain a shiver. "Just do it," she said, adding: *"Please."* The word made her feel small and she frowned.

"I can't read your mind, Mor. I don't want to push your boundaries," he said, running his thumb on her cheek, "Tell me what you want." She choked, unable to look at him.

As his fingers traced her face, they stopped at her lips, touching her gently. He leaned down, his other hand on the pillow for support. She was cornered and her heartbeat quickened. "I could kiss you," he whispered, "Would that be a *thing* that you'd like?"

Is he tricking me? Would he laugh if I accepted? Her throat tightened and her pulse picked up even harder. Breathing felt like too much. *He wouldn't.* "Yes," she said. He kept caressing her face a while longer; her breathing steadied a little.

"Would you like to be hugged, too?" he asked. She nodded. He lifted the blanket and got into bed with her, embracing her without hesitation. *Little spoon.* "Turn around?" he whispered close to her ear. She obliged, melting and freezing at the same time after turning and being immediately faced with him. He had an easy smile.

"Is this alright?" he asked, holding her closer. She was far too conscious of the weight of his hand on her waist. All she did was nod, a knot in her throat rendering her speechless. His other hand got to her neck, his fingertips reaching the hair above her nape and pulling her

closer. She shivered and his smile widened. As he touched his lips to hers, their chests met, his warmth spreading to her. A slight tingling made her lose notion of her body's limits as she melted under his arms.

When she felt the tip of his tongue brush against her lips, she froze up again. He stopped, pulling away slightly; it made her sink her fingertips on him. *Come back.* "I'm sorry," he whispered, "We don't have to do tongue if you don't want to."

His face looked serious, his eyes focused on hers with full attention. It only made her face burn more. "I do!" she hissed, averting her eyes, "I just don't know how to." He laughed and she hated it. She looked back at him, surprised to find that his expression was... soft. "Don't worry so much. Just relax and go along with me," he said. There was a glint in his eyes as he paused, caressing her hair. "Okay?" he asked.

She nodded again. He closed the distance, kissing her tenderly. The reassurance made it easier to relax and she gave into the warmth of the embrace. This time, she went along with it when she felt his tongue; it sent a chill down her spine and made her tighten up. The chill turned to heat that pushed her forward and she couldn't help but put her leg over Ellis' hip; it was as if she was trying to get even closer despite it seeming impossible. A soft moan escaped her throat when he pulled her closer by the waist.

She pulled her face away, widening her eyes and shutting her mouth. "Are you alright?" Ellis asked. Mor averted her eyes, feeling her legs tense up. "You must be disgusted with me," she said. *Don't be pathetic out loud.* However, Ellis just laughed again faintly. "What, because you're turned on?" he asked.

The straightforwardness of it made her stagger and she choked up. He pulled her back in; his hand brushed against a naked patch of skin above her pants and it made her feel hot all over. "I think it's hot," he whispered, his thumb pressing down on her exposed waist, "In fact, I'm turned on too."

"You're messing with me," she said. Before he could answer, she lifted her face towards him, mostly attacking him as she continued the kiss. He seemed pleasantly surprised, smiling for a moment before responding.

At some point, Ellis put an end to it, holding her face tenderly between his hands to keep some distance between them. "You should rest," he said, "And I have a kitchen to clean." She pouted. "But I want more," she said, "I want to open you up and crawl under your skin." *It would be less weird to just say you want to fuck him!*

"Alright, *sure*," he chuckled, "But you're sick. You need to sleep." She gripped his shirt, hiding her face in the space between his neck and shoulder. *Smells good*. Smelling him like that only made her tighten up again. "Only if you hug me until I sleep," she demanded. He obliged, hugging her. "Just a little bit," he said. *Maybe if I snug up to him really good, he won't have the courage to move me to get up*. She got comfortable, one leg and one arm still over him; she could melt right there. *Yeah*.

As she got strong enough to walk, she started going along with Ellis when he headed out of the house. The mundane nature of his tasks was mind numbingly boring, but chatting with him didn't bother her like it did with other people. He kept her entertained easily, asking her questions at the right time and laughing out of nowhere. Sometimes, he seemed to find humor in serious things she said.

They were at the library one afternoon as Ellis fixed whatever it was that had fallen apart. *This place is decrepit*. Mor lazed about, cocooned in her cloak. There was a group of children on the opposite corner, producing the hellish sounds she'd expected them to. The librarian was once again trying to tutor them. *Out of all days, it had to be today*.

Someone opened the door with full force, frantically begging for help. Sounded like an old person had fallen or something. The librarian's mother? Mor made herself even smaller as

the librarian and Ellis ran up to the door. "I have to go," Helena said, suddenly as frantic as the messenger, "But I don't think I can lift her."

"I'll come with," Ellis said. *Of course you'd offer yourself up! Fuck you!* "Someone has to watch the kids," they said. It sounded like they might cry. Then, Ellis looked straight at Mor with his brow raised and, just like that, they were all staring at her. *You betrayed me.*

"Even you could do this, right?" the librarian said, raising her shaky voice, "All you have to do is watch them." Mor grunted. "I'm terrible with kids. I might bite their little heads off," she said, narrowing her eyes.

Helena glared at her. "It wouldn't be long, Mor," Ellis said in his soft voice, tilting his head and smiling. *You're pulling my strings!* Mor huffed and looked away. "Just... go." After lingering a while longer, Ellis did follow Helena out; Mor was left with a horde of kids.

Kids were faceless to her. She couldn't stare at them for more than a few seconds each time, so their features didn't stick out. It made her uneasy to the point of queasiness. *Keep the little brats occupied.* Before they could start pulling at her sleeves — Helena had been kind enough to direct their attention to her before leaving —, she tried to make sense of whatever activity they'd been doing earlier.

Wooden letters. *Fuck no. That's just too engaging.* One of the high pitched voices made a direct request: "Tell us a story!" Mor kept her head up, her line of sight too high to make eye contact with them. "What story?" she asked, her impatience bleeding through. They babbled amongst themselves, unable to come to an agreement. *If they'd just quiet down for a second.*

Eventually, one request did overwhelm the others. They wanted something they hadn't heard yet; someone asked her to make one up. Mor took a deep breath and sighed, feeling chills at the prospect of looking down and seeing them standing too close. She grabbed a

chair and knelt on it, her body still too unstable to stand up on it — otherwise, she would have.

"Then shut up. Quiet!" she said, waving her arms and shushing them. She held until they were mostly quiet. Mostly. "Right. So..." she started, pausing to sigh again, "The story is about a great mage." *I can't tell stories. I don't read or listen to stories. Don't know any. Can't spare the time... They won't remember.*

She focused her eyes on the opposite wall. "She was born in the Lunar Bay to terrible parents." A child piped up; "Moms can't be bad! Stepmoms can!" Mor lowered her eyes to glare at them. "They can, plus I didn't ask. This is not an interactive story. Pipe down."

"She grew up isolated," she continued.

"Like, in the mountains?"

"No. There were plenty of people around," she said, cocooning herself in her cloak again, "But any other kid who looked at her immediately thought she was weird. They'd make up cruel jokes about her and she wouldn't even notice until they were really, really laughing."

"But why? There had to be a reason."

"It was just a thing. They all just knew to mock her," she shrugged. "And her parents didn't love her."

"Parents have to love you!"

"They don't," her voice lowered, her eyelids dropping slightly. "They'd tell her that they loved her, but didn't have to like her. That just means they liked the fact she was theirs."

"This story is lame."

Mor tried not to leer at the child. She covered her eyes and let out a heavy sigh. "Quiet," she repeated. "All of this was fine and tolerable, because she didn't need anyone. As it turns out, she proved to be quite talented with magic. Really talented. And people only

liked her when she was good at things. So her parents got her into the Umbral Star Academy." There were some *oohs* and *aahs*, as if that was exciting in any manner. Her audience was quite annoying.

"But that's good, isn't it?"

"They had ulterior motives. An investment, they'd say. Also, they wanted to claim her accomplishments as their own. But you wouldn't get that, because your brains are still mushy."

"Miss, use smaller words, please?"

Mor hugged her knees to her chest. Her back hurt. "Right. Though the girl was a genius, of course, the Academy wasn't a good place for her. The professors would stifle her—sorry, suppress... Smother? Ugh. Her classmates would see her as a rival for no reason at all. Just because she was objectively better."

"It's wrong to say you're better than other people!"

"Not when it's a fact," Mor said.

"Mom says it is."

"Your mother's a lowly mortal," she said. That didn't seem to vibe with the audience much. *Whatever*. "Anyway, the academic environment is terrible and only teaches one to follow authority. She dropped out, ran away and became a great mage all on her own. You see, kids, the moral of the story is you can define your own value. The approval of others is meaningless when they hardly know what they're talking about." A pause.

"Is that the end of the story?" the voices joined, revolting against her. "No adventure?!"

Mor hissed. "No, it's not the end of the story. She always felt uncomfortable with her own mortality, things like eating and sleeping. She hated it and thought it was a waste of time."

"But eating and sleeping is great."

"If you're a lowly mortal," Mor said, pausing to yawn. She'd been getting tired out easily. Might ask for Ellis to help her walk home later. "Anyway. Great mages shouldn't be bound by mortality. So she aimed to become a lich."

"A lich?"

In small words, miss. "An immortal mage. The kind of undead that can still think and use magic." She moved on to telling them of the battles with the demigods; that seemed to interest them more than her free rambling — freer rambling than she'd ever had the opportunity to unleash. Just when the story was picking up speed, the doorbell jingled.

Mor turned her face to the door, meeting Ellis' eyes. He seemed relieved. *Did he think he'd come back to dead kids?!* However, Helena had the opposite look. "What are you poisoning their minds with?" they asked. Their tone wasn't too acidic, but Mor still didn't bother maintaining eye contact.

She was fine until Helena straight up asked the kids: "What did you guys do while I was out?" To Mor's utmost terror, the kids spilled all of it out, remembering details that Mor didn't think they would. *Couldn't I have thought up another story?! This is pathetic.* As her face burnt up, she risked a look at Ellis. As expected, he was staring at her, his head tilted.

"Ellis," Helena called, frowning, "Could you please?" Ellis sighed. "I'll see you," he said. He walked up to Mor and offered her his hand. Her hot shame turned into anger. It was like being a kid again; everyone around her had their own conversations she wasn't in on. Still, she took his hand and soon they were out of the library.

He walked slowly to match her pace, his hand warm on hers. "That wasn't very appropriate to tell kids," he said. "What? You were the one who left me alone with them! You know what I'm like!" she bursted, gripping his hand harder.

"That means I can't expect you to handle yourself appropriately?" he asked. There was no smile. *Are you turning against me because of... this? Low.* She let his hand go, wobbling a

little as she stabilized herself. "I don't even know what I did wrong," she said, feeling her eyes sting.

There was a pause. She heard Ellis take a deep breath beside her. "I'm sorry. You're right. I could have opened with that," he said, "Look, the only stable thing in a child's life is the parental figure. You shouldn't have cast so much doubt on that."

"*Someone* should," she said, crossing her arms and looking away, "So they know what to expect when their parents invariably turn against them."

"It's not about the future, it's about now," Ellis said. He sighed again. "Anyway, I should have validated your feelings first. That was wrong of me."

There was a pause. *Please don't.* "I didn't know you were from the Lunar Bay," he said simply. *Fuck, he got it. Fuck you, kids.* "It doesn't matter. I'm not the patriotic type," she murmured. *Not a conversation I'd really like to have.*

"Attending Umbral Star's impressive," he said, his voice too calm. Was he trying to loosen her up with these meaningless questions? "Scholarship?" he asked. "Full tuition," she mumbled.

He staggered, but soon recovered. With a smile that seemed forced, he asked: "You're a noble?" She grunted. "I don't care for this. In fact, I'd erase my Umbral Star years if I could," she said, "They make it seem like I owe any of my prowess to them."

"You don't?" he asked. Though she didn't look at him, she thought she could hear his taunting smile. "I was completely capable of all of it. I just..." she huffed, stopping mid sentence. "Don't want to talk right now."

He didn't say anything for a while. *I'm mad, aren't I? So why do I wish he'd talk back?* "Was I hurtful?" he asked at last. The mere question made her eyes sting. "I don't know," she said, "I'm hurt."

"I'm sorry. I realize that was a vulnerable moment for you," he said, lowering his voice.

"I'm not vulnerable." She kept her eyes on the ground as she walked. It made her feel a bit queasy.

"I could give you some space," he said. She gave him a puzzled look. "Some alone time," he clarified. *That's not what I want.*

"I'm just miffed you reprimanded me specifically because someone else asked you to," she said, averting her eyes again.

"So me reprimanding you in general is fine?" he asked.

"Yes. I... care about what you have to say."

"But not other people," he sighed, opening the door to the kitchen. Mor had become mindful enough to take her shoes off. *Is he losing his patience with me?*

"It felt like you put someone else above me," she said, turning her back to him as soon as she could. *I've sunk so fucking low.* Her throat felt tight. "Especially when you just *assumed* I'd be okay watching kids."

"It was an emergency," he said. In her mind, his words didn't have the soft edge they'd always had. "Do I always have to put you above everyone else?"

She froze where she was, too ashamed to take another step or, well, continue existing. Hopefully her cloak would make her seem smaller than she really was.

"Mor?" he called, raising his voice a little. At least he stayed where he was. "You can't talk right now?"

After drawing in a shaky breath, she found the will to answer. "I just wanted to be someone's priority," she mumbled, "I wish I was special to you, but you'd do the same you do for me for everybody else."

"I am capable of caring about multiple people," he said, still somewhere behind her, "Isn't that healthy? That doesn't mean I'll treat you any worse or that you aren't special to me."

"Yeah, that's... healthy. I must sound pretty desperate," she said, hiding her face under her hands. "Is it so bad that I want you to feel about me the same way I do about you?"

"How do you feel about me?" he asked. She let out a wry laugh. "I'm serious," he said.

He'll nudge the answer out of you and then rub your face in it. How dare someone disgusting feel these things, after all. "Nothing," she shrugged, dropping her hands, "I'm going back to bed."

Before she could take her second step, though, he embraced her from behind, stopping her in her tracks. "Please," he whispered close to her ear, "tell me."

She paused, giving into the hug. Though she wanted to push him away to make a point, his warmth was comforting. "You won't be mean to me?" she mumbled, letting her head fall back onto him.

"I wouldn't," he said.

"I'm..." she paused to grunt, almost pained by having to say it. *Isn't it obvious?* "I have romantic feelings for you."

"Oh," he said. Her blood ran cold. Then, he pulled her in closer. "You do?" She expected a rebuttal; instead, he sounded confused. "Yes, stupid," she said.

"That's interesting, because it just so happens I do, too," he whispered, his hands going up to her chest as he pulled her even closer. He pressed a kiss to the back of her head. "Come on, I'll take you to bed."

"You do?" she asked as they made their way to the bedroom. She laid down and he tucked her in, the usual smile back. "I do," he said. Then, he straightened his spine, creating distance between them. "I should give you space," he said, glancing at the door.

"I don't want you to," she frowned. He looked back down. "Oh. Alright," he said. He just stood there, curling his hair around his finger and trying to find something in the room to focus his eyes on. She watched him for a while, trying to pin the behavior down. *No way.*

"Are you... Nervous?" she asked, narrowing her eyes. He chuckled. "Yeah, Mor."

She reached out to him, waiting for him to join their hands. He obliged and sat beside her. "But you're usually so nonchalant about this stuff," she said. He laughed and averted his eyes again. "No, I'm not used to romance," he said.

"Just do what we normally do," she said, tightening her hold on his hands, "Come lay with me."

Slowly, with his eyes wide, he got under the blanket with her. She'd never seen him hesitate that much before. *He likes me*. The realization made her insides goopy. As soon as he was in bed with her, she felt much warmer. "Can we kiss?" she asked, stammering a little. He was normally the one who'd ask.

"Please," he whispered. Then, he hugged her, one of his hands meeting the back of her head and holding her hair gently; he brought her face closer to his and kissed her. It was slow and steady; his tongue felt warm against hers and she found herself gripping his clothes to pull him closer. *He likes me too*. The thought, combined with the pressure of his body against hers, was enough to make her melt further.

He pulled away and she dug her fingers on his shirt, feeling sudden cold. "I'm sorry for neglecting your feelings. I'll make sure you're comfortable with something before relegating it to you next time," he said.

"So I can be your priority?" she asked, snuggling up to him. His breathing was heavy. "Is that all you want?" he whispered, caressing her hair.

Her face burned up. "I don't know how to say it. I want you to be mine," she said. Upon hearing it, his face looked as hot as hers. He touched his forehead to hers and exhaled. "We can be together for as long as you stay here. I don't know what your plans are," he replied.

"Me neither. I just..." she paused, closing her eyes, "Feel too strongly about you." She felt him shudder under her hands. "Can I kiss you more?" he asked.

She immediately pulled him back in and the kiss deepened; he gripped her hair, pulling it back slightly so her mouth would open a little further. The shivers didn't fail to make her moan and she was all too aware of his other hand on her waist. She wished he'd do something with it. Anything.

At some point, he'd gotten on top of her, smothering her with his smell. Each breath made her hotter and she was running short. She was able to convince herself to pull away long enough to speak. "Your hands," she said, having to catch her breath, "*Please*."

"You want me to touch you?" he asked. His face was redder than she'd ever imagined it could be. "Touch me," she whispered. As they made out, his hand slid under her shirt, making its way up and inducing shivers with each brush of his fingers. By the time it got to her boob, her brain had been shut off. Wherever he touched felt tender and hot and she moaned again, the sound muffled by his mouth. Before she realized it, her nipple was between his fingers and he teased it, making her spasm into him. She threw her head back. "What are you *doing* to me?" she asked, breathless. He stopped. "Don't stop!"

Soon both his hands were on her breasts and he looked down on her. His hair had been messed up, strands of it obscuring his face. "Do you want more?" he asked. Then, he bent down to whisper close to her ear: "Because I've been dying to eat you out." Seeing her confused face, he gave her a simple definition of the phrase. If all else hadn't been enough to make her burst, the mere mental image of that would do it.

"You'd do *that* to me? You wouldn't... mind?" she asked, melting even more as he stared at her, touching her all the while. "I'd more than *mind*," he said, "I *want* to see how beautiful you look while you cum." Her eyes widened and there was a wave of heat in her lower abdomen. Because her throat felt dry, she just nodded. His gaze was taking her to a boil. *Beautiful?*

He lifted her face, pulling her hair back gently again so her neck would be exposed. Then, he kissed it, making her tremble again. His hands traveled down and lifted her shirt, making way for him to lay a trail of kisses down her body. It was all too much. Every corner was too sensitive. She squirmed under his touch. When he got to the bottom of her belly, she spasmed towards him, only making him kiss her with more dedication. His fingers found the hem of her pants and brought them down; soon his head was between her thighs and she had to look at the ceiling in fear of combusting at the vision.

After outlining her inner thigh in a warning, his hand reached her pussy and his fingers touched her softly. He brought them up and she looked down, mortified at discovering that he was analyzing them. "Don't stare," she said. "Sorry. You're just really wet," he replied, joining his fingers and then separating them to showcase the viscous strings. Her eyes stung. "Is that bad?" she asked. "No. It's really, really hot," he said, his voice turning rougher.

Before she could answer, he gripped her thighs and lowered his head. His mouth was warm and the first touch of his tongue startled her enough to make her let out a sound that only embarrassed her further. That seemed to motivate him. The intensity of it built up so much tension inside her that she just had to move and do something; otherwise, she might implode. No matter how much she squirmed, he stayed on her. Even when her thighs pressed together and tried to suffocate him, he didn't let up.

She hardly knew what he was doing. All she knew was that her whole body was made of contrasting, clashing waves of temperature. His hands had a firm hold on her, his thumbs digging on her inner thighs and spreading her. She gripped the bedsheets under them with all her strength. Without her permission, her back arched and her thighs tried to suffocate Ellis again. When all he did was go at her harder, she found herself calling out his name and vaguely realized she'd been moaning all along. She couldn't spare the brain cells to care; they were all getting fried.

At some point, she was mostly screaming. Her back arched again, but wouldn't relax; her whole body shuddered and she went dizzy, her vision spotting. Her limbs tingled as currents of raw pleasure passed through all of her. Ellis caressed her as she came, slowing down to match her moans and shivers. However, as soon as she relaxed, he got back at it fully.

Completely fried inside, she had to control herself not to kick him out of reflex. *If he keeps doing it, I'll die. I'll seriously die.* She moaned his name out, pleading. "Ellis! I came!" she clarified. He lifted his face, panting. After taking a deep breath, he said: "I noticed. You want to stop at one?"

Somehow, her face got hotter. *More than one is an option?!* "You're killing me," she said. He licked his lips and smiled; still, the lower half of his face was a mess. "You won't die. But I can stop if you want me to," he said, "Or..." His fingers found her already sensitive clit and teased it.

"I love your moaning," he said. "It's embarrassing," she mumbled. "You sound great. Especially when you say my name," he whispered, getting closer to her face to kiss her. He tasted like... her, she supposed. His hand rested on her breast and she melted under him.

"What about you?" she asked. He drew back, tilting his head. "What about me?" he said. Mor averted her eyes and took a deep breath. "I want to see you cum, too," she said. There was a moment of silence and she looked back at him; he seemed stunned. "You do?" he asked, his face red again. She nodded, her own cheeks turning hot.

"What do you want to do, then?" he smiled. "I really..." she paused, having to look away and swallow hard. "I want you inside me," she said. Her chest felt tight as she waited for his answer, almost as if there was a weight on her lungs.

"You're sure?" he asked, dragging the words out. "I *need* you inside me," she said, biting her lower lip. He let himself drop on top of her, hugging her tightly. It surprised her a

little. "Fuck, Mor," he whispered, "You're doing a number on me." One of his hands brushed against her thigh on its way back to her pussy; she shivered. "You're even wetter. You really *do* want me inside you, don't you?"

She didn't want to plead. There was so much bubbling inside her and his hand was only elevating it all. A sudden impulse — perhaps frustration — made her bite his shoulder muscle lightly; he let out a tiny and unexpected moan. "Fuck me," she whispered. He sat over her hips and took his shirt off in one fluid gesture. "I will," he said. The look he gave her as his hair fell over his shoulders made her think she'd outright faint. *Can't be real.*

Then, he laid down on his side beside her, his hand going up to her breasts and fondling them again. It seemed light-hearted. He got a little closer and gave her a deep kiss. She was too aware of how wet she was after his comment; it was getting worse. "This is your first time, right?" he asked. She nodded slightly. "Let's get you really comfortable. Stay on your back," he said.

He grabbed her thigh with care and pulled her in, placing her leg over his legs. As soon as their bodies touched, she realized she could feel his hard-on under his pants; it was poking directly at her wet pussy. She was too sensitive to handle it. He hugged her as she shuddered, kissing her cheek. "How's this?" he whispered. "I'm fine," she said, stammering a little.

"Are you nervous?" he asked. "I don't know what to expect," she said. He kissed her for a solid moment, managing to ground her a little. She took a deep breath. "The only goal here is to feel good, okay? So tell me if you feel any discomfort," he said, bringing her closer. It made her rub against his bulge and she shivered again.

"You still have your pants on," she mumbled. "Sorry," he said. He got rid of them and she felt the head of his cock poke her pussy. She jumped a little. "Are you fine with this?" he whispered. "Please," she said, trying not to sound short of breath. She wanted it so much that her abdomen felt like it was cramping. Still, all he did for a while was rub it against her,

teasing her mercilessly. "I'll put it in," he whispered, his breath warm against her ear. That made her gut go cold, but realizing he'd be guiding her through it was reassuring.

He did it. He pushed into her, meeting little resistance. A long moan left her mouth. As soon as she started shutting her legs out of reflex, he held her leg over his and held still. She felt herself clench down on him, tightening up enough to discern the shape of his cock inside her perfectly. "Does it hurt?" he asked. "No. It's... a lot," she said. Somehow, she felt as tingly as she'd felt right after cumming. "You really tightened up there," he said, his hand making its way up her leg. "Does it hurt you?"

"Oh, no. You feel amazing," he said, "I just worried a little." His fingers found her clit again. She trembled, sudden anxiety rising inside her. *Is he planning on doing both at the same time? I'll die.* "Can I move?" he asked. "I think so," she said. Slowly, he went further in; it felt like he was opening up space inside her. She couldn't help but tighten up around him again. The movement sent up currents of heat through her body and his soft moan against her ear might as well have marked her demise.

As the tip touched her cervix, she spasmed in his embrace and onto his dick, making him moan again. "It's all in," he whispered. He drew back and started thrusting into her slowly, hitting deep each time. Her thoughts were washed away again as she focused on the way he felt inside her; before she knew it, her hips were slightly moving to meet his. She moaned freely. As he fucked her, he rubbed her clit in matching intensity. It caused another temperature shock in her and she was pleading again, calling out his name.

He answered by kissing her, his tongue muffling her moans and yells. Still, he couldn't contain her body; jolts passed through her and, much like when he was eating her out, she had to move. It meant bouncing on his dick, her back arched and her feet planted on the mattress to get the best angle. The build up was quick and blindsided her: before she knew it,

white heat was washing over her as she spasmed on him over and over, tightening around him. Her moans were more like shouts and he held her close.

There was no letting up, though. He kept fucking her as she came, making her move against him more viciously. As soon as the trembling stopped, his fingers went back to torturing her clit and her mind was blank; she could hear no thoughts, only their joined moans. She lost track of time as he made her cum yet again; as she screamed his name, he grabbed her leg by the thigh, using it as a handle as he fucked her deeper and faster. She couldn't stop tightening up around him, just as much as she couldn't stop gripping the bedsheet.

"You do look gorgeous when you cum," he whispered in her ear as he sank his dick in her all the way to the balls. She couldn't think in words for a reply and all that came out was a whimper. Everything was so intense that it blurred together. Eventually, he slowed the pace down considerably. It felt hot and sweet. "I'm really close," he said. She collected what was left of her brainpower to say: "Cum." He gripped her thigh harder. "Not inside," he said.

"My mouth," she said, moved only by mental imagery. "Are you sure?" he asked, the embarrassment in his voice obvious, though dotted by a moan. She nodded hard. He got out of her, leaving her cold. When she felt air against her pussy, she realized how soaking wet she really was. He called her. She turned, seeing him laying on his back and reaching out to her, his hard cock pointing up. His eyes were wide and his lips, slightly parted. "Come here?" he asked. The vision made her pussy clench and she wished he was still inside her. Still, she obliged, sitting beside him.

"I don't really know how to," she said. "That's okay. I'm really close," he said. "Guide me," she murmured. He acquiesced. After hesitating a little, she put his dick in her mouth, feeling his shape with her lips. He trembled slightly under her hands and soon both of his were on her head. "Use your tongue around the head," he asked. She did, feeling the edges

and moving up to his shaft. Hearing him moan somehow made her even wetter. It almost hurt. No, it did hurt. She realized she still had the phantom feeling of him going in and out of her.

She went up and down his dick, his hands on her head guiding her; he made a few comments along the way, but mostly moaned. All of it was just turning her on further. The way he sounded, smelled and tasted was too much. She found herself eager to suck him. "I'm going to..." he started, shivers interrupting him, "I'm going to cum in your mouth if you don't stop, so..."

She didn't stop. In fact, she went at it harder, almost as if out of vengeance. He thrust his hip forward, making his dick hit the ceiling of her mouth and slide to her throat. "Sorry," he tried saying, the word butchered by moaning. She ignored it. "I'm cumming," he said, as if in a last warning. *I made him cum.* Indeed, he came in her mouth, bursts of cum coating her tongue; it was somewhat bitter and she swallowed it readily, licking the tip of his dick until there was no more.

Panting, she raised her head, licking her lips to make sure she'd caught it all. His face was shockingly red again. He stretched his arms out to her and she collapsed onto him. They snuggled up to each other and she could hardly tell where her skin ended — they were both so warm and sticky. It still felt like there were waves crashing over her, so all she did was close her eyes and enjoy the cuddle, letting them come and go. Her breathing steadied and her consciousness waned. His hand on her boob made her turn to mush, even if it felt purely affectionate.

She was almost asleep when he kissed her cheek. "You're beautiful," he whispered. With some of her brainpower back, her cheeks heated up. "I had no idea I could feel that good," she mumbled. He laughed and hugged her tighter. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. Really glad."

"Did you?" she asked, vague concern plaguing the back of her mind. "A lot. Wasn't it noticeable?" he said, chuckling a little.

"I just... You've done this with people who knew what they were doing," she said, sighing. "I feel like I don't compare."

"Oh, Mor, no. It was different from the start with you," he whispered, his hands warm on her, "Because I... feel things for you." He paused. She really wouldn't mind melting away in his arms. "I'm in love with you," he said.

She thought she'd felt her heart falter. It hurt. "I'm in love with you too," she said. Her eyes stung and tears welled up and she didn't know why. She turned to hide her face in the cranny between his neck and shoulder. He hugged her close for what seemed like a long time and then kissed her forehead.

"Come on, let's go get cleaned up," he said. She grunted, sinking his fingers into him. "I want to fall asleep like this," she said. He put his hands on her shoulders, gently trying to separate her from him. "Just a little more, darling," he whispered, "I'll make it a warm bath and you can even nap if you want to." What made her cave was the sudden pet name. She choked up.

7 The dependable type

While Ellis cooked lunch the next day, Mor could hardly sit still on her chair. She tapped her hands on the table lightly. "Ellis, I'm *bored*," she complained. He laughed faintly. "Find something to do with yourself. Get a hobby," he said.

He had his usual kitchen attire and it was making her more restless. "You've ruined me," she said, "All I can think about is having you inside me." She could hear him choke. "Don't be lewd at the table. You really do need hobbies."

She grumbled something and touched her back to the chair again. *There's one other thing I can think about.* She lifted her hand and opened it in a simple motion; after so much practice, there was no such thing as making an effort to cast something. Worst case scenario, she'd faint again. Instead, a spark came out. Should be a light, but was just a spark. *I can work with this.*

So she sat at the table forcing sparks out, still mind-numbingly bored. *Work on your energy pool. We'll get there.* At some point, Ellis turned to her to say something and his face dropped. "I said 'hobby.' You shouldn't be messing around with this again," he said, his eyes wide. His grip on the wooden ladle seemed loose.

"Why? I told you I would," she replied, still lighting sparks. "What if you faint again?" he asked.

"If I've gotten to this stage, it means our flames are merging well," she replied, "I won't faint again."

He dropped the ladle on the counter and walked up to her, his brow furrowed. "Are you going back to your old ways?" he asked. She shrugged. "I'm recovering."

Tilting his head and sighing, he crossed his arms. "I wish you'd value being alive," he said, "Instead of throwing yourself in harm's way."

"I don't throw myself in harm's way. It's all very calculated. In top shape, I can slay a demigod," she said, making another spark fly off while giving him an assertive look.

Ellis didn't seem phased. Instead, he bent towards her. "What was it you told the kids? You made a pact with a god and they ate your flame?" he asked, lowering his voice, "Isn't that recklessness at its finest, Morgiah?"

His serious voice made her shiver. It was in the bad way, though. "She blindsided me!" she said. "That doesn't matter. You can lead the life you want, but you need to take care of yourself," he said. He sat next to her. "You should be able to enjoy being you without hating every motion of being alive."

"I don't! You make me like eating and bathing. Even sleeping," she said, trying to give him a reassuring smile. *This is so pathetic.* His expression changed, but she couldn't read it. "The thing is, you can't depend on someone else for that. You need to have your own time and happiness," he said.

She felt tears welling up in her eyes again. The way these talks always made her tear up humiliated her down to the core. "Ellis, just..." she choked up and turned her face away. "Let me have this for now," she said. The shame burnt a little less when he hugged her close. "I'm sorry for rushing you," he whispered.

When food was ready, both Edith and Mor sat at their usual spots. As Ellis handed the old woman her bowl, she sighed and made a face at him. "You guys really killed my peace last night," she said. Ellis froze, looking over at Mor as if he hadn't considered that. "You're usually pretty good about it, Ellis, but you must have forgotten you don't live alone this time."

"I'm sorry. It *was* quite inconsiderate," he said. *I can't have been that loud. Right?* "Honestly, boy, I already told you to stop messing around and settle down. I bet a dependable guy like you could easily find a decent girl to make a family with," Edith said.

"You really don't have to concern yourself with that," he said. He still smiled, but something about his sharp look told Mor that was his way of telling her to mind her own business. *He should.* "I do. You're like the son I never had, you know."

It was about time for Mor to mentally clock out of the conversation. *It is pretty normal for someone to imply I'm not decent to my face. That was actually an euphemism.* She ate quietly, almost feeling like she was alone in the room. *I don't care at all. I'm not undeserving of affection. I'm not.*

Weeks passed and they kept entangled in each other; they'd sleep so close that Mor's shoulders would hurt in the morning and, during their vacant hours, would stay mostly around one another. While she practiced her magic, Ellis would watch over from a distance, skeptical. He insisted on making her try different things; he introduced her to cooking, but that led to failures such as her cutting her fingers multiple times. She kept cutting corners, inducing water to boil through some magical heat transfer. So, he suggested sewing, but she'd mindlessly prickle herself with needles and drool from boredom.

"Your problem is patience," he said one day, furrowing his brow, "Everything has to be all at once with you." She examined her scarred hands. The kitchen knife incidents hadn't left permanent additions to the collection. "Waiting is yet another mortal toil," she said, "Why would I want to spend my time doing something slow and tedious?"

He held her hands, bringing them closer to his face to get her full attention. "So your mind slows down and you enjoy your time alive," he said. "That's really vague," she replied, narrowing her eyes at him. "What do you like doing?" he asked, sighing, "Aside from magic."

"Fucking," she said plainly. His eyes widened. "Oh, Mor. I mean for *yourself*. On your own," he clarified.

"I certainly hate being bound to one place," she scoffed, "Idling. Those days in bed were excruciating."

Suddenly he was caressing her face. She realized the look on his was a little melancholic. "So you enjoy your travels?" he asked.

"You could say so," she said. His thumb rubbed her cheek. "I won't hold you down. You can't turn emotionally dependent on me," he whispered.

"I'm very self-sufficient," Mor said, frowning at him. "I'm serious," he pressed further.

She averted her eyes. "You know why I'm like this with you," she said, "I can't help it."

"I know. And I love you, but you need to be able to meet your own needs before you become reliant on me," he said. He bent down to kiss her forehead.

"I do want to go back out on my own again," she mumbled, "I don't feel like I'm welcome here anyway. But I don't want to be away from you."

"I promise to always wait for you to come back. I have enough patience for the two of us." He smiled.

"If I'm not around, someone *decent* will be," she said. She was unable to look him in the eye because she knew how he'd react.

"I don't want anyone else. You're not sure about me?" he asked, encasing her face in his hands; he squished her cheeks.

"I'm not sure about *me*," she said.

"That's precisely it. There is no point in me telling you over and over again how much you mean to me if you don't see your own value," he said.

She looked back at him; he seemed concerned, his lips a little parted. She lifted her face and kissed him, mostly to reassure herself. *Once most powerful mage in the country. Come on. You don't need him to pity you. You don't need your boyfriend to survive.* "A trip might prove that I'm recovering," she said, conceding. It made him smile and he hugged her tight.

A while passed as Mor considered it. She ended up deciding on going after all; there was a latent urge to know how far she'd fallen from her past self in the field. The day of her departure, her legs were shaky and just looking Ellis in the eyes made her blush, the memories of the night before popping up in her head.

In the backyard, he straightened her cloak out for her, adjusting the clasp. "I'll wash it for you when you come back," he said. "It won't need it," she frowned. He laughed faintly. "Oh, I'm sure."

He put his hand in his pocket. "I got you something," he said, producing a simple necklace. "It's a physical reminder that you have to come back in one piece. Don't be reckless." He tied it around her neck.

"I wouldn't forget!" she said. He tangled his fingers in her hair, tilting his head. His smile was easy and she'd come to categorize the look he had on his face as 'adoring'. *It makes everything feel unreal.* "Consider it a promise, then," he whispered, "Between the two of us."

"Then you have to wear something too," she said, frowning again. "You're right," he laughed again, covering his mouth. She messed around in her cloak's pockets, looking for something that might serve for the purpose.

"Ha! Here! I was experimenting with crystallization in my down time a while back," she said, showing him a clunky little crystal. *I thought I'd thrown this out along with everything else.*

"Mor. That's a hobby," he said, his eyes widening. He paused before smiling wider than before.

"It is? It's just basic chemistry," she said, raising her brow. "You're so nonchalant about this stuff, it's cute," he said, patting her head. He took it from her hands. "I'll do something about it."

They just stood there for a good while before hugging each other. Mor found herself clawing at his clothes. "I'm going, then," she said to convince herself to walk away. Before she did, he lifted her chin to give her a deep kiss. As soon as she felt his tongue, she thought she'd lose her will. When they separated, her face was hot. "You're making it hard," she said. "I'm sorry," he said.

Epilogue

As soon as Mor was gone, life seemed so much like it was before her that it was uncanny. None of his acquaintances missed her, so the only one her departure impacted was him. Nonetheless, routine was comforting and he soon settled back into it — with a few changes.

When he'd run out of odd jobs and housekeeping to do, he'd sit at the library and read. He'd chat with Helena mindlessly, but during one of those afternoons they sat beside him, closer than usual. They smiled at him, supporting their head with a hand on their cheek. "I was thinking," they said, "I've missed you in bed, you know. Want to plan something?"

"Oh, I don't do casual sex anymore," he replied, crossing his legs and lowering the book he'd been reading. "Really?" they asked, raising their brow. They seemed a little disappointed. "That's a shame."

"It isn't. I'm promised to someone," he said as if it was the most natural choice of words. Of course, he realized it sounded cheesy. At least it seemed to amuse Helena. "To whom?"

"You know. Morgiah," he said. Their amused face turned to confusion and what seemed like disgust. Still, they didn't voice their opinion the way Edith would. "I really don't know what goes on in your head," they said.

"Oh, not much. I'm simple-minded," he replied, going back to his book to cut the conversation short.

He led his life, his mind a little easier, and Mor kept coming and going. Whenever she showed up, every day was a proper date; he cooked things she liked as she mindlessly told him about her trip. She described different places as if Ellis would be familiar with the topic. He wasn't, but he'd just smile and nod along.

"I did some thinking," Mor said one time as they laid on a towel in the backyard. Her hair seemed longer and messier than he remembered. "We've talked about this, but I... wonder if your needs are being met in this relationship."

It made him pause. He averted his eyes to the sky and thought for a long while. His first instinct was smiling it off, but she looked serious. And he wanted it to be serious. "I feel like you think I have everything figured out," he said.

"You don't?"

"But I can't expect you to just know things about me when I don't communicate them." He paused and looked back at her. Her eyes were glued to him, paying full attention. "I have a history of not saying things."

"You can tell me things. I'll do my best," she said. "I know. I'm just afraid of burdening you," he replied.

She frowned. "That's stupid. I want to be dependable too! It's unfair that only you get to... I don't know. Care for me," she said.

He held her hand, bringing it closer to him. "I'll try." After taking a deep breath, he continued: "I worry about our future. Everything's fine now, but I'd like more... commitment."

"I'm very committed," she said, expression still vacant. It made him smile.

"I know. It's because we want different things. You don't want to live here and I won't move."

"We could compromise. I'll stay for longer stretches. You could even come with me sometime," she said, a shy smile on her face, "And I'd be the one to take care of you."

Extra 1

Each step taken made her feel more like a dog clawing its way back home with its tail down. She hadn't even reached her destination before she'd started puking her guts out and decided to backtrack. After painstakingly wobbling her way back, Mor found herself home, standing at the backdoor. The sun had hardly started rising, just peeking out the horizon line; the sky was dimly lit. She had the keys, of course, but preferred to knock — the last time she'd waltzed in unannounced in the dark, Ellis had pulled a kitchen knife on her.

She let her body rest against the wall and started kicking the bottom of the door absentmindedly. The sound of the lock turning came soon enough. *He must know I'm the only one who'd make this much noise.* His instant smile confirmed it when the door opened; his relaxed figure made her throw herself against him. *Smells good.* His worn, loose clothes and the smell of his hair all felt too familiar and comfortable. *Why do I even leave?* He embraced her, his arms cradling her tired body. She could hear his steady heartbeat.

"It has hardly been two weeks," he said, pausing to kiss the top of her head, "Were you homesick?"

"You're soft," she mumbled, burying her face in his chest. "I'm sick, Ellis. My body is but a mortal shell and I require sustenance."

One of his hands rose to the back of her head, burying itself in her messy hair and scratching her. *That hits the spot.* She melted a little. "So you're home for soup and cuddles?" She grumbled against him. He pulled her inside and closed the door. "Come on. Let's get you into bed, yeah?" he said, scratching behind her ear again. Then, he led her to the bedroom. She stumbled in the dark, hardly holding herself straight. She'd been walking fine until she saw him. Leaning on him for support was somehow much better, though.

He sat her down, pulled her dirty boots off and then made her lie down. As he made the blankets snug around her, he kissed her forehead. She almost forgot about being sick. "Oh,

you're grimy again," he said, tucking her bangs away. "What are you feeling?" He was kneeling beside the bed, his hand caressing her face. "I might have eaten something bad," she said, "Because I didn't have you." She pouted.

"I'm sorry. I told you to be careful," he said, standing up, "I can get something hot started. Should make you feel better." She tugged on his shirt before he could step away. "Stay. I missed you. Cuddles," she slurred her words. It worked. He acquiesced, getting under the covers and hugging her. Slumber pulled her in and she didn't resist; it was easy to go under when she felt warm and cared for.

The sudden urge woke her. Immediately, she was folding over Ellis and herself, her gut cramping up as she puked pure acid on the floor. It burned her throat and made tears well up. Ellis' hands had gotten to her at some point, holding her tightly as her chest heaved. When she managed to stop, those hands guided her back to bed, one of them laying her head on the pillow softly. She let her body go limp under his care. Being sick and on her own that week had been far too draining. "I hate this," she mumbled, the acid still burning her mouth, "Now everything's a mess. This body's far too demanding."

He cleaned the corners of her mouth with a piece of cloth. "Messes go away," he said. He kissed her forehead for a moment. "No fever. What else do you feel?" He brushed her greasy hair with his fingers. "Dizzy. And a crappy headache," she replied, "But it comes and goes." It gave him pause. His hand settled on her hair and he let out an "Oh."

A while went by as he caressed her, his eyes pinning her down. She knew his worried look. *He cares!* "Can you stomach some food, darling? Soup?" he asked and she nodded as enthusiastically as she could. "Try to nap. I'll be back," he said as his body heat left her. She did; by the time she woke, the floor beside her was clean and the house smelled like actual

food. It didn't take long for Ellis to show up with bowls, the apron tied around his waist and his hair in an updo. *We could have him forever.*

He pulled the chair up to the bed and sat down; then, he guided a spoonful of soup to her lips. After swallowing it, she threw her arms up. "My favorite spoon!" she said. He smiled. "You're the only one who uses it," he said. He fed her with the usual patient smile. The hot food made her feel all warm inside. "Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"My stomach settled down," she conceded. *But it would be good if he still worried.* After her bowl was empty, he started eating his share. "Good," he said. He paused and turned his eyes to the ceiling, looking more awake than usual. "Look, Mor. You might think I'm being paranoid, but it occurred to me..." he held back for a moment, taking a deep breath. She held her breath in too. He held her hand; she could see him bite his lip. "Couldn't you be pregnant? Time matches up."

It was like something in her ears popped; the world deafened, making her think her heart had skipped a beat — as it did, her blood might as well have stopped its flow for a split second. Everything came rushing back. Before she opened her mouth to deny it, she closed her eyes to heighten her focus. The test would be so simple. There was no reason not to do it. A mage trained to siphon vital energy could detect it with little trial, after all. It took but an instant. Her mouth went agape. "Yeah, I am," she said, her eyes wide open. "I'm pregnant." She blinked and looked down at her hands. Scarred adult hands. But she didn't feel like an adult. Her fingers trembled. Ellis still held her hand; his seemed much softer and stable.

"It's hardly a whisper of vital force," she said, unable to look at him, "I could squish it right now." Ellis squeezed her hand, bringing her attention back to him. "Will you?" he asked, his eyes still fully focused on her. *Will he hate me for saying it?* She couldn't pick up anything on his tone, though. "What would you do?" she asked.

Something in his expression faltered. He set his bowl aside and tore the apron off to get into bed with her; soon both her hands were on his lap. "That doesn't matter," he said, pressing down on her skin gently. She frowned. "Of course it does. If... if you didn't want it, why would I keep it?" her throat felt tight, still burning from the acid, "I'd never do this alone."

He sighed and brought her closer, making her rest her head on his shoulder. Her heart rate was going off the walls. "I'm sorry. You're right. I just didn't want to influence you to go through something you might not want to," he said, pausing to kiss the top of her head. He kept her glued to him, holding her tightly. *He can hear my heartbeat, can't he?* "So you'd... keep it," she muttered. It took a while for him to answer. "Mor... Listen," he whispered somewhere close to her ear, "If you decide this is something you want, know I already love the *idea* of this kid. But I don't love *them*, because they don't exist yet. I love *you*."

"You wouldn't... resent me?" she whispered back, swallowing hard afterwards. He squeezed her. "Never. This is a decision that will change your life forever," he said, pausing for a moment. He took a deep breath. She thought she'd felt his fingers tremble against her. "You know I'm an older brother. By a lot. But I don't know if I told you my sister was an accident. An unwanted one, that is." His voice was low and soft and it had all the smoothness she was used to. "I was old enough to understand a little. Making someone exist to then resent them is... nothing but cruel. And a pregnancy in itself is a terrifying thing. It looks like one of the most painful, uncomfortable things a person can feel. You're an only child, so maybe you haven't seen it. Maybe no one told you, because they only ever talk about the good things."

Her chest felt too small to hold her heart, but Ellis was warm beside her; his touch was grounding enough to make her able to listen. "Parents are cruel to wanted children too," Mor said, gripping his shirt and trying to get even closer. He smelled like home. "I'd be a shit

mother." His hand obscured her vision as she sank her face on his chest; it was like he hid her from the world. "It would be the hardest thing we ever did. Everyday," he agreed. "It's scary," she said. She clawed at his shirt, mimicking the motion of the phantom hand that squeezed her heart.

"It is. It's okay. You don't have to decide right now. Take your time," he whispered. "I don't think I can do this. I'm not even much of a person," Mor said, the volume of her voice wavering. She choked up. "That's alright. You don't have to do this, darling. You don't have to." He hugged her tighter, making soothing noises. "But you are a person. You've been working on yourself. Don't say that," he whispered. She couldn't answer; she'd cry if she did.

Ellis brought her books from the library so she could read in bed while sick. She tried to immerse herself in them at least enough to get distracted, but her mind kept reverting back to that conversation. Her guts felt cold and she was far too aware of them. *Each hour that goes by, this thing grows closer to being a full blown person. And that's on me.* She had her head in her hands when Ellis turned up with a jug of fresh water. He set it aside and took her hands gently. "Mor?" he called, so soft she hardly heard it, "Are you okay?"

"I'm *sick*. I can't justify making a person exist just to experience the level of abandonment I did," she said, "If you can't skip past your mortal troubles, it's best to never taste them at all."

Ellis' hand lifted her face and meeting his eyes made shame sting her. "What if they don't experience that abandonment?" he asked. "Maybe they won't by your hand. But you know what I'm like. I can't be around children. Not just because of the noise. I was a kid once. I- I feel like..." she paused, letting her cheek rest on his hand. She averted her eyes and his thumb caressed her. "Come on," he whispered.

"I get jealous of them. When a kid's happy. Or trusting. I feel like kid me still exists somewhere in my head and I want to treat her well. Fuck, it's so stupid," she said, shutting her eyes and nearly hissing from how cringy it sounded. "I can't risk inflicting *this* on a whole new person."

"You're already making a conscious effort just by considering this," Ellis said, cupping both of her cheeks. "You do have a lot to sift through." She didn't open her eyes; she knew he'd have something like pity in his. "I can be as conscious as I want, I'll still fuck up," she said. Suddenly she was breathing against his shirt. Was it pie that she smelled? His hands combed through her hair. "It's okay to fuck up. All you have to do is admit you were wrong and validate their feelings. We'll- or would- fuck up a lot," he replied.

"You're so composed," she mumbled, having to spit out the fabric of his clothing, "Aren't you freaking out?" She looked up, noticing how wide his eyes seemed. He chuckled. It was his nervous laugh. "Yeah, Mor. But we'll be fine," he paused, then repeated: "We'll be fine." She buried her face in his clothes again, letting out a loud grunt. "What... what would we do if we kept them? Hypothetically," she said.

Ellis smiled. "Hypothetically, we have a nice house," he said. *You have a nice house.* Mor held her tongue back. "This could be their room... If you wanted to stay here. At this point, I wouldn't mind uprooting everything for you," he paused, his smile turning taunting, "You ever miss the Bay? Feel like cashing in on that last name of yours?"

Mor winced. It made her physically recoil. "Ew. No. Here is fine." He ruffled her hair. "I know. Mor," he held her face closer to his, peering deep into her eyes; her heart rate picked up. "Would you think me old fashioned if I wanted to marry you?" She blinked. "Well, yeah. Would that fundamentally change anything?" He chuckled again. "Ah. No. It's like the necklace. It's symbolical. We could even... pick a family name. If..." he stopped, looking away. His face had turned red. It seldom did. "If you wanted to," he finished.

"I didn't say I was going to keep them," Mor said, frowning. "I know. But... Just you and me are enough. For a family. To have a family name," he said, letting her hands go so he could hide his face with one of them; he tried to pass it off as though he was adjusting his bangs. "Sorry. I know you're overwhelmed. We can shelf that." She shrugged. "We can do it," she said, "It's symbolic after all. We determine our relationship. If you'll be happy, we can do it." He still seemed too embarrassed. "I just want to be with you," she added. Her chest felt hot.

He hugged her tight, smothering her. *I'm really fine staying here. Is that low?* "Am I really enough? To be your family?" she asked. "You have no idea how committed I am to you," he answered, gripping a chunk of the hair on the back of her neck. The familiarity of his strength made her relax against him. "Back to the question, though. Hypothetically, I'd... do things differently. No yelling. No swatting. More listening. No imposing anything," he said, his voice growing lower and heavier towards the end, "No looking after younger siblings."

"Yeah. That would have made kid me happy," Mor mumbled, clutching Ellis' clothes, "But this kid would be someone completely new." He ruffled her hair again. "Yes. We'd have to take the time to get to know them." Her eyes felt hot, like the room was filled with smoke. "No dismissing their interests. No shaming. Letting... letting them be a kid," she whispered. "That's a good start," Ellis said. The weight of his hand on her head was comfortable.

The next lunch looked more like a full-on banquet. Mor's eyes went wide at it. Why all the options? He usually served her just the one thing she wanted. He pulled a chair for her and proudly showcased the nicely arranged table. "Why... why so much food?" she asked. "You need to eat. Your body must be overworked," he said, putting his hands on his waist and smiling. "I'm not that hungry."

"I'm just giving you options so you can eat whatever strikes you," he said. "I just wanted the pasta with the red sauce," Mor said, gripping her pajamas and rocking back and forth a little. Her eyes darted from plate to plate. Ellis picked the pasta plate up and put it in front of her. "You can eat just that then. But it is a small serving, so..." he said. His tone dropped. "But I wanted *just* the pasta, a lot of pasta," Mor said. As she sized up the serving and then looked at the other plates, that gnawing cold inside her grew. She frowned. *Don't cry because of this. Don't be pathetic.* "Why would you make it different?" she asked, her voice wavering some.

"I'm sorry, Mor. I'll keep it the same next time," he said. "You must think I'm spoiled," she mumbled, picking up the fork and pushing the food around. She blinked the tears away. "No. I know you're different. You like things to be a certain way," he sat beside her, watching her as she ate. "I just got so absorbed in outdoing myself that I didn't care to think of what would best serve you," he said.

Her lip quivered. "You think it's acceptable? I'm not dramatic and exaggerated?" she asked. "You're not. Your expectations were broken," he said, slowly reaching out to touch her cheek. The cold went away a little. She managed to get through that serving of pasta. "Is that what you're comfortable with?" he asked. She nodded and he kissed her forehead. "Alright."

As he washed the dishes, she lay her head on her arms. Looking at his busy form had become usual. The domesticity of repetitive daily gestures and being tended to by someone who loved her wasn't something she'd ever thought she'd have. *This is what 'slowing down' means when he says it. This is slowing down so much I might die.* "Hey, darling," he called suddenly, making her body jump with a warm wave, "We need witnesses for our marriage, but I imagine you wouldn't want any guests."

"No. No one here welcomes me anyway," she said. He stood quiet for a moment. *You won't even try to deny it. They all think you can do better. Or better yet, be available.* "What

about a family name? What would you like to do?" he asked. His voice seemed a bit higher than normal. He looked over his shoulder, noticing her confused face. "We could pick one of our last names, join them or... just make a new one," he said. Mor thought it over, but then realized something. "What's your last name?" she asked.

"It's Clayman. You never told me yours, either," he said. *It's insignificant.* "Nightgard," she mumbled, wincing already. She winced harder when his shoulders dropped and he halted. "The Nightgards I'm thinking of?" he asked. "Yep." It took a while, but he chuckled. "I guess it is best that you don't tell anyone," he agreed. "Being a Lunarian is bad enough," she shrugged. *I'm as distant as possible from any of it now.*

"Is it weird that you knocked me up and I didn't even know your last name?" Mor asked, averting her eyes. She fiddled with the necklace. "Damn, Mor." Ellis started, stuttering. She couldn't see his face, but she heard him sigh. "It's not weird. We have our priorities. Our relationship doesn't have to mirror other peoples'." She paused, clutching the necklace. *How can someone so normal make me feel like I fit?* "You really are the only one who could make me want to slow down," she said. Ellis went quiet for another moment. "I'm glad you do," he answered. She dropped her head on her arms again. "Let's make a name up," she said.

She was the little spoon, nested under his arms. His steady breathing against her neck was soothing, even if much more would be needed to tide her thoughts over. Mor wasn't used to thinking so much. All of it welled up inside until it felt like her throat was blocked. She gripped Ellis' arms. "Ellis," she whispered, tapping him. He stirred and hugged her tighter. "Mor," he mumbled. "All of this should be really easy," she said, the stream of words slipping out as soon as she opened her mouth: "If the ineffable destiny of all living things is being

bogged down with mindless physical needs and discomforts until death, I should just end it already."

At some point, Ellis seemed to have fully woken up. His lips brushed her ear as he took a deep breath. "It's not that black and white. Of course you're having trouble. That's fine," he whispered. "But it should be," she grunted. "Aren't there good things to existence?" he asked. "Are they good enough to justify it?" she retorted, sinking her fingertips on his arm. "That would be up to them to find out."

"That's an illogical risk. I'll have condemned someone to live. Once you exist, there's no easy out," she whispered, running out of breath at the end. Ellis hugged her tighter, his warm hand over her stomach. The embrace was like a closed space where she could actually say things. "So you've decided?" he asked. "No. I obviously should. Objectively. But..." she paused, a bit shaken, "My stupid mortal body is wired to breed. That must be it."

He choked behind her. "Damn, Mor. So vulgar," he said. "It's true. My body betrays me. It's like I'm in heat around you," she whispered, "That's what I'm talking about. We're under the thumb of our bodily functions." Suddenly, his hands were running over her body, pulling her even closer to him. It made her bend her spine to fit his frame. "Doesn't giving into them feel good though?" he asked, his breath tickling her ear again. "It's not like I'll ever let you go without food, shelter or any necessities ever again. Don't worry about these things," he said.

"If it's just us two, I guess it's gotten easier," she conceded, relaxing in his arms. "You don't have to worry about the physical aspect. Just mental health," he said. She shifted, placing her chin over his arm. "You can't guarantee the future."

"I can't. But as long as I'm alive, I'll see to it that you're never in need of anything," he said, "Look, Mor. If we have a kid, I'll consider myself responsible to you two unconditionally."

"I know. You're like that." *Does that mean he wouldn't do the same if it was just me?*
No, I'm being insecure. "We still have time. You should take your mind off this for a couple days," he said, pausing to kiss her nape, "Let's do something nice together."

"I just want to be home with you," she mumbled. "Whatever you want, darling." He kissed the top of her head, "Rest up. I'll be here with you."

She woke enmeshed with him; the first thing she saw was his peaceful face. His hair was a mess, strands of it covering his face. It was a rare sight: he'd always wake up before her, greeting her with breakfast in bed and his hair pulled up. She freed her hand from their embrace to take it to his face, carefully brushing his hair away to be able to see him fully. Not satisfied just by watching him, Mor took her lips to his; they were already slightly parted, as if expecting her.

At that point, his body trembled and he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her even closer. He smiled against her mouth before kissing her back. She pulled back, watching his smile grow. "You're quite good-looking," she said. "You've told me so," he laughed a little, kissing her forehead.

"It's just shocking sometimes," she said, sliding one hand under his shirt. *Warm.*

"What?"

"I'm *still* in heat around you," she sighed.

"You talk like you're an animal." Ellis' hand came up to hold her face, caressing her cheek.

"It feels very animalistic. There's nothing logical about it," she said.

"You can still make a conscious decision," he replied, smiling. "Do you consciously want to do it right now?" His smile turned taunting.

"I can't decide if I want you to fuck me until I can't breathe or if I want to ride you until I break you," she said, considering the options in her imagination. "Or put you in a chokehold and make you cum all over yourself."

When she looked back at him, his cheeks were red. He moved his hand up her nape, grabbed a handful of her hair and, with his other arm, flipped her onto the bed and locked her down. It knocked some of her breath out of her and made tingles go down her spine. "Does this help you decide?" he whispered.

"Yes, please."

After cleaning up, puking pure acid and cleaning up again, Mor was being carried out of the house by Ellis. He kept her close to his chest, having some trouble maneuvering around doors. "How come you can carry me now?" she asked. Surprisingly, he was blushing again. "I've been training just for this," he said, not looking at her, "Whenever you travel."

He let her down when they reached the backyard. *Is that what you like?* "I could lift you," she said, "I could lift you and carry you through the sky."

He helped her sit on the grass. She could have managed on her own. "No, thank you," he said, letting out a nervous chuckle.

"What's so good about dating the greatest mage in the country and not enjoying it fully?"

"Oh? I thought you'd say greatest in the world." He smiled.

"No, there's my cousin."

The smile dropped. *He thinks it bothers me?* "Your cousin?"

Mor winced again. "Wyvern."

She shrank as his face distorted. He caught a hold of himself quickly, though; just looked a little paler. "Now the fact you ended up here of all places is even more of a wonder," he said.

"I'd rather you didn't think of me as a Nightgard. I'm completely divorced from my family." She watched the chickens waddle by, unable to look up at him.

Suddenly, his hand was on her hair. "*I am your family.*" He knelt beside her and looked her in the eyes, smiling. "Ready to pretend everything's normal and nothing's going on for a day?"

Mor grumbled. "You're already ruining my immersion."

He laughed. "Sorry. What do you want for breakfast?"

"The usual."

He ruffled her hair and kissed her forehead again before standing up. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Ellis set a towel down with their breakfast. Mor ate at her laziest pace and just watched the surroundings. "It's all so quiet here," she said. It took her some effort to vocalize her thoughts, even around him. *Too long keeping silent. But he always humors me.* "Not like the Bay?" he asked.

"I guess I never told you much," she said, mindlessly ripping a blade of grass off the ground. Tugging on it was so satisfying. *Hits the spot.* "I was one of the Portbright Nightgards. It was just as busy as the capital."

"You make it sound like your family had its dirty claws all over the country." Though he smiled, he seemed to be disturbed.

She furrowed her brow. "Yes?" she asked, not quite sure whether his question was genuine. It just disturbed him more. She ripped more grass out. "If you really squint, you'll

see the Nightgards and the Royal family are basically the same. I'm an incest baby born with a silver spoon, hands stained since birth by the blood of old money and colonization, etcetera." She stretched her hand out in a dramatization, talking as if she'd already burned the words to her mind. "I will now sit here and tout my virtues by apologizing for it and no matter what I say, it will sound empty."

She laid back on the grass, looking at the sky instead of Ellis. It was easier to let the stream of consciousness out that way. "Then I'll leave the Bay to never return, pretending this rids me of responsibility, despite the fact I am, indeed, one of the greatest mages alive, which should hold me accountable for the bloodshed waged by my country. But I'll close my eyes to it and pretend I'm oblivious to it all, like expatriating myself washes the stain of my name away." She closed her eyes, fearing she'd see his face out of their corner. "To cement my crimes, I'll let a kind and handsome guy feed me, clothe me, blow my mind out with orgasms and, worst of all, love me. And I'll never deserve any of it. And even stating this is empty because I'll still let it be this way, so why bother?"

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. His sudden touch on her shoulder made her organs jump inside her body. "Did that feel good?" he asked. There was no judgment in his tone. "Yes. I feel lighter," she said, "Sorry."

A while went by. The silence made her insides stir again. She did think there'd been no judgment in his question, but then again, she was bad at gauging tone. "You know, you did fool me. With the oblivious act, that is," he said, pulling her head to his lap. "So you don't really consider yourself divorced from your family," he pointed out. "I'll never be," she said. The words burned her throat somehow.

"As I said, I'll be your family." He caressed her hair and her eyes stung. "So you really will enable me?" she asked. *Not that I don't want you to love me.* "Maybe I'm not as kind as you think," he said, "I'm selfish enough to enable you to hell just because I'm in love with

you. I'd rather hold you down here than see you change the world just because you're supposed to be this unstoppable force. I don't care if you are. I can't stand the thought of you being in harm's way." He pulled her closer, making her sit on his lap. As he hugged her, he kept talking. "Though I try to be stern with you sometimes, I'll never cross the line that would make you hold yourself accountable for all that. Again, because I'm selfish and doting on you gives me some wicked sense of purpose. So..." He hugged her tighter. "Let's keep this between us."

She just nodded. Couldn't really find the strength to voice her hypocrisy. *Even after saying the quiet part out loud.* "Alright," he said, nudging his cheek against her hair. He sighed. "You don't feel welcome in this town at all, do you?" he asked. "No."

"Is there anywhere we could go that would make you feel welcome? Genuine question."

"No. Without the Nightgard name to me, no one is obligated to accept my weirdness," she said. Suddenly, her body felt heavier than it had in years. "Since I'm being honest, I can admit to you that I think I'm damaged. I came out of the womb damaged." *Would my kid be like this too? I don't want people to...*

"You're not damaged. You're just different," he said. She leaned into him. "You're the only one who bends to accomodate me. You shouldn't have to. I feel like... I wasn't made to fit... Eh, it doesn't matter," she said, letting her breath go. Her throat was closing up. "It matters," he whispered, kissing the top of her head, "But you don't have to say it."

More silence. She could fall asleep in his arms, even though she'd only been awake for a couple of hours. "Oh, I said we'd do something nice today. We were supposed to be emptying your mind, not busying it," he said, chuckling. *He is enabling me to hell.* She nodded again. "Okay."

"What would you like to do?" he asked. His voice was soothing. Her mind came up blank. *I've never had a friend to do things with.* "The only one on one interaction I'd had before you was dueling with my colleagues," she admitted, "I've got no idea."

"Then we can just talk like this," he said, brushing her hair with his fingers, "I could listen to you talk all day."

"Even when I'm dumping shit on you?" *I'm tired of crying in front of him.*

"Whenever." He kept her close. He was as warm as always.

Mor watched as Ellis walked back and forth, setting two chairs and an end table in the backyard. She looked at the scene as inquisitively as the chickens that wandered around. "Is this enough for your concept of a wedding?" she asked.

He paused, raising his eyes to her. "Are you underwhelmed?"

"Positively underwhelmed."

"Good." He smiled. "Are you ready?" She nodded. "I'll fetch them, then," he said.

He left and she stood alone amidst the tall grass, fidgeting. *This looks easier than I thought it'd be.* Still, there was a tiny bit of cold in her gut. Was it anticipation? She hardly ever experienced it in a good way. When Ellis came back, he had the two witnesses — people Mor didn't care to know — and Helena, who carried a shoulder bag, behind him. The witnesses took to their chairs and Helena stood behind the table, their ever grumpy face not going away even then.

"Alright. Let's keep this brief," Ellis said, grabbing Mor's hands and bringing her to stand in front of the table. His smile was somewhat shaky and his cheeks were that rare light red; it made hers warm up too. He'd gone the extra length that day, donning his best clothes and tying his hair up in a more elaborate fashion. *Damn, those are some tight pants.*

Meanwhile, Mor was wearing her favorite of Ellis' pajamas, which were oversized on her.

Suddenly, she felt small by comparison. *Does this disappoint him? Well, I don't think he expected more of me.* Even the realization stung. *Should I have done more?*

"Sure," Helena said, pulling a book out of their bag and laying it open on the table. They prepared their pen with an annoyed look on their face. "State your intentions, please."

"Mor," he called softly, focusing his full attention on her. The tint on his cheeks turned more intense. "Will you marry me?"

The cold in her guts exploded, sending frost up her body. *Why? He'd already asked before. Don't be nervous and pathetic.* She blinked. "Yeah."

"I vow to be as close to you as you want me to be. You'll never feel sick alone again. If it depends on me, you'll never go hungry again. But those are just the little things," he said, bringing her hands to his chest. She could feel his heartbeat; it was unsteady. *That's rare.* "I'll give my best to only bring you happiness and, should I do otherwise, I'll listen to your hurt." By then, he looked like he might spontaneously combust. He took a deep breath. "I'm yours."

She froze in place, though she'd become an oven on the inside. It took a moment of silence for her to realize she should be speaking. *Am I supposed to match that?* She saw the witnesses out of the corner of her eye, hardly registering their faces. *Expectations?* On her other side, Helena's expression was impatient. *Why does it feel like I have something to prove?* Mor cleared her throat. "You know I'm not very good at this," she said, slurring her words. *No, don't you dare stammer or come out unsure. You're not a teenager anymore.* As Ellis' patient eyes lingered on her, his heart rate made hers rise too. *Don't be so inept. You're not this low.*

Mor got on the tip of her toes to reach his ear and whisper, closing her eyes to pretend no one else was around. "I love you like I've never loved anybody. I know I seldom express things outwardly, but I know you don't read into that. Because you're the only one who ever gave me the time of day and cared to listen. You don't judge me by my lackluster expressions.

I know I'm lacking," she said, the words coming out so low the wind might as well take them away, "But I vow to someday be to you half the comfort you are to me. Half the peace, quiet and certainty. I'll always love everything you do. And I know..." She had to pause to swallow hard, hoping her throat would unclench. She wasn't sure if she should say what she was about to. "I know if there's anyone who'd be a good partner and father, it'd be you. So I'm not scared when it comes to that."

She pulled back, keeping her eyes shut. She only opened them when she felt his hand on her cheek. His smile was even brighter. He bent towards her. "You're not lacking," he whispered. *You look ethereal and I'm in pajamas. Not lacking.* Then, he kissed her forehead. She felt herself smile too.

"Names, please," Helena interrupted. "Put me down as just Morgiah," she said. The librarian frowned. "Really?" Mor frowned back. "Really," she repeated.

"Ellis Clayman. But we'll take on Sunfields as a last name instead," he said. "Sure," Helena mumbled, jotting everything down.

They waited as the witnesses stated their own names. After Helena put everything away, they gave Ellis a thumbs up. "That's it. You're officially on the registry now, if you could call it as much," they said. Fidgeting and unsure of what to do next, Mor decided to put the furniture back where it belonged; hopefully everyone would have dispersed by the time she finished. As she fought the doorway to get the table inside, she heard Helena's voice faintly: "I really don't get your sudden ability to commit. Big change of heart, man." If Mor were any less experienced as a mage, her interpretation of what she'd just heard would have made her set fire to the table. Ellis' response made her muscles relax some. "Not a change of heart," he said, "Though I guess you wouldn't know." *He should school people less kindly.*

They had indeed cleared off by the time she was done. Ellis stood tall where she'd last seen him. *So I really can have him forever.* He turned to her, reaching out to call her in for a

hug. "Hello, Morgiah Sunfields," he said with a radiant smile. Somehow, her heart kept beating. She walked up to him and fell into his embrace. The anxiety from before melted away. "I didn't know it would mean this much to me," she muttered. *He'd like me to say things out loud.*

"It means that much to me, too," he said, resting his chin on her head. "It was quite easy, no?" he asked.

"Not really," she said, her voice muffled by his chest. "I..." she started, but cut herself short.

"You can tell me." The hands that hugged her started caressing her.

She let out a sigh. "I wish you'd told Helena off harder."

"Oh. I'm sorry you had to hear that," he said, hugging her tighter. "Despite what people may say, I can assure you I don't have, um, commitment issues. Also, I'm done sleeping around."

"That's not it." She pressed her head against him. "I thought they were disrespecting *me*, unable to see why someone like *you* would go for *me*."

"Oh." He laughed. It felt out of place. "I thought they were just throwing shade at me. I'm sorry, darling."

"Maybe it was at both of us," she said. Hearing his laughter did make her relax a little. "But you should have been harder even if it was only at you."

"I don't mind digs at me. Isn't it only natural to act petty when the public use toy is suddenly not public use anymore?"

Though his voice was as cheery as usual, she couldn't shake the nausea she felt upon hearing his remark. "I've never heard you talk about yourself that way," she said, "Are you being serious?"

"Let's pretend I'm not." Uneasy chuckle.

She pulled away from him, trying really hard to pinpoint his expression. But all she found was his regular smile. "Ellis, you're not my toy. You're not an object."

"I'm sorry for implying you see me like that," he said after a while, "I know you don't."

"Apologize to yourself. I'm not offended." *I'm not great at communicating anyways.*

"Okay." He took a deep breath and his smile dropped. He held her face between his hands, lifting it to stare her deep in the eyes like she was a fond memory. "Low things were said. Let's put them aside for today. I want to celebrate my beautiful wife."

"I'm in pajamas," she grumbled.

"Clothes can't mask your beauty," he said easily, his smile returning. "There was no need to dress up."

"Then why are you dressed so... stunning?"

He giggled. "To fish for your compliments, of course."

"I'm always complimenting you in my mind," she admitted.

"I know," he said, smiling wider, "It's the way you stare me down, sniff me and my clothes and go wide-eyed at me." He touched his forehead to hers. "It's always made me happy."

"You're making me sound weird," she said, blushing again.

"Oh, I find it so very endearing," he teased in a low voice. "Let's go inside, yeah? We can light every candle I find in the house."

"What for?"

"It's supposed to be romantic."

After he'd gotten all the candles out in the living room, Mor held her hands out. "Let me," she said. The wicks went up in tall flames that soon settled down. Ellis nearly jumped beside her. "You didn't have to do that," he said, "I could have lit them myself."

Somehow, she'd known he'd have something to say about it. "I feel like you don't appreciate my magic at all."

"Well, I don't care whether you're all powerful or not."

"It's not about that. You know it's my thing. The thing I'm good at." She cast her gaze away from him. *Come on.* "Be supportive."

He paused. "I didn't know you felt like that. I thought always doing things the regular way would seem like a grand gesture to someone like you."

"I try to make grand gestures for you, too," she said, looking at the flames. "In the way I'm good at."

"Oh. Well, do you want to light more things on fire, then?" he asked, smiling at her.

"Not particularly." She looked around. "What do we do now that they're lit?"

He stretched his hand out. "Our wedding dance."

She took his hand, but didn't step forward. "There's no music."

"I can sing."

"I've never danced. I have zero fine motor skills," she said.

"I'd say someone who's battled for years has *some* motor skills," he said, raising his brow.

"I have scars to show for my blunders," she said, lifting her shirt to make a point.

"I won't scar you." He bent down to kiss her hand. *So exaggerated.* "But you can step on my feet as much as you want." With the frost welling up on her stomach again, she stepped closer; he embraced her with his other arm. "It's just you and me. You know you can be rough with me. One blunder or two is nothing," he said, his voice a near whisper. The words melted a little of the ice. She finished melting in his arms as he sang a wordless tune and swung her around, not missing a beat even when she did step on his feet.

Extra 2

Ellis' eyes widened as soon as they found her face. Mor stood on the doorstep, feeling rather small before him. He pressed his lips shut for a moment before speaking. "You've been gone too long," he said plainly. *He's hurt. Really hurt.*

She put her hand in one of her pockets and held onto the piece of carved wood inside tightly. Holding things tightly helped sometimes. "I know. I didn't want to. I swear," she said. His face didn't change though. She swallowed hard. "I got tangled with Lunarian forces." That did the job. His eyes widened some more; at last, he looked fully awake. Normally, his droopy eyelids gave him a lazy look. *Now he's worried.*

His lips parted, but quick footsteps from inside made him shut them again. Petra called him in her high-pitched voice, blissfully unaware. *Very blissful.* "We'll talk about it later," he said in a lower tone before turning his head away. "I'm here, Pets. Guess who's home." More footsteps. Mor's heartbeat quickened along with them and it hurt somewhat.

Ellis opened the door further to reveal Petra peeking from behind it. At last, a needle was puncturing Mor's heart. Her knees were about to give out. As relief washed over her, her eyes burned. "Mom?" Petra called, wary. She sounded unsure, as if Mor wasn't supposed to be there. *I'm a shit mom.*

Mor knelt and her cloak dragged on the floor. "Yeah, kid. I'm home," she said, smiling. It was a frail, trembling smile. "I got you something." Petra's eyes widened. *She looks so much like him. Even her mannerisms. It hurts. Why does it?* Mor fished the carved piece of wood out of her pocket and showcased it. It was a cat. Simple, but very well done.

Somehow, Petra's eyes widened even more; she lifted her hands and started shaking them, swaying from side to side. "Kitty!" she beamed, looking straight at it.

Mor's smile turned certain. "You can take it," she said. Petra's small hands stole the cat from hers. She ran her little thumb along its dented surface, eyes filled with glee. The scene

put a bandage on Mor's punctured heart. "I missed you a lot," she said. Petra didn't answer, too busy with her new toy. *Can't blame her. She really likes cats.*

"I want a cat," Petra said, still blissfully unaware. *I want to be her. How fucked is that.*

"The cat would hunt our chickens," Mor said. She didn't have the guts to look up at Ellis.

"Kitty would stay inside," Petra countered.

"I think that's very limiting. Wouldn't the cat be sad, all constricted like that?" Mor asked, supporting her head with her hand, elbow on her knee.

Petra pouted, eyebrows slanted. "No! I'd make it happy. Inside is safe."

"Think of the life of adventures a cat could have."

"No! Wolves kill cats." She frowned, clutching her wood cat. "You're wrong, mom."

I'm not wrong, you stinky brat. The word kindled an ember in Mor's chest, but she managed to put it out and chuckle. "I'll take your points into consideration," she said. Petra nodded. *So business-like.* "Can I hug you?" Petra took a moment to consider it, but ended up shaking her head. "What about a pat on the head?" Petra nodded. Mor ruffled her hair and stood, meeting Ellis' eyes again. His gaze seemed different. The hurt was definitely still there, though. *He's physically incapable of staying mad at me. Even when he should.*

As Petra ran off somewhere with her toy, Ellis sighed. He turned to Mor and raised his hand to her cheek, caressing her softly. His faint smile had disappeared. "What do you mean, tangled with Lunarian forces?" he whispered.

"Quite close to the Ashen side of the mountain pass," she said. She leaned into his hand, making it cup her cheek.

"How bad is it?"

"The Valleys have it pretty bad right now."

"Just the Valleys? We're next in line." His face was pale; even the color on his lips seemed dim.

"You don't have to worry for now," she said. She averted her eyes and swallowed hard. "They met their reckoning." Her voice dropped a tone lower than she'd like.

"Mor..." His voice was graver than hers. She couldn't face him. "Did you tangle with them on purpose?"

She felt herself go limp. The cold nested in the back of her mind came to the foreground of her body, icing her insides. She let his hands hold her. "I had to."

"You have a family to come home to," he said, his grip on her growing tighter. The words made the puncture larger.

"They were coming this way." She raised her face to meet his gaze. "I'd much prefer it if our daughter didn't become a war refugee, Ellis."

His face dropped for a moment. She could see his resolve falter. "I'd much rather us three together than without you."

"You know me. You know I prefer the same. I think that's obvious." She closed her eyes and stepped forward to lean against his chest with a sigh. "I'm just tired right now. If we're arguing, can it wait just a few more hours?"

He pulled her into a hug, one of his hands holding the back of her head. Just his smell was enough to make her relax completely. "Yes. Of course. I love you." He paused, taking in a loud breath. "I thought something had happened to you." *It did.*

"I'm home. In one piece." *Almost a lie, but not really.* She sniffed him before tiptoeing to hide her face between his neck and shoulder. "I love you too."

"I'm glad. And you really need a bath."

"I'm grimy." She smiled.

"Yeah. I'll see if Petra is entertained enough and then I can take care of you. You know how she can get immersed." He caressed her hair as he talked. *Don't cry. He'll know.* She pressed her eyes tightly shut.

"I think the cat will already be enough."

"Probably." He paused again. "Have you ever had a cat?"

"No pets ever."

"I think you'd like it. They're very good with personal space and they purr nicely."

She smiled again. *They're still here. Nothing's changed.* "Are you advocating for Pets?"

"I think it'd be good."

"How would we keep a cat indoors?"

"We can weave nets to put over the windows. I've been thinking about it."

"I don't have any objections," she said. "Let's talk to her beforehand."

"Yes. She's quite like you," he said, almost whispering. *Wish I could just fall asleep in your arms.*

After making sure Petra was busy and happy, Ellis drew a bath for Mor. Like he'd done so many times before, he sat her down and unclasped her cloak. That was the easiest. When his hands got to her shirt, she hesitated, keeping her arms pressed to the sides of her body. Ellis raised his brow. "Is something wrong?" he asked softly. *He'll see it sooner or later.* She shook her head and allowed him to take it off. His jaw dropped almost immediately. Mor didn't even have the energy to brace herself. "Honey," he called, obviously trying to tame his own urgency, "What's that?"

"What's what?" *Drop it. Come on.*

He bent at the knees to take a closer look at her belly; then, he placed a gentle hand on her skin. "This scar wasn't here before."

"I got gutted out there," she admitted, looking at the protuberant jagged marks on her abdomen. Even fully healed, they were quite evident.

The sentence seemed to break Ellis. He just stood there with his mouth agape and his thumb on the edge of a scar. "You... What?"

"I got gutted," she repeated. Even her throat felt tired. Just saying it made her remember the exact moment. "Slashed by a sword."

If he'd been pale upon learning where she'd been, he could pass off as dead right then. "How..." he mumbled, unable to finish the sentence. His eyes seemed wetter than usual.

"I had a family to come home to," she said. She looked away. Explaining it sucked the life out of her just as much as bleeding out had. "So I stuffed my own guts back in and siphoned the life off some other unfortunate sob." Silence met her words. It made them echo in her mind and ricochet like a slap in the face. "You were always right. I'm tired, Ellis. Really tired. I killed someone. That's the gist of it."

After a while, her organs jumped inside her in surprise when Ellis hugged her. "I'm glad you're home," he whispered, "Never do that again." His voice wavered and she knew he was holding tears in.

"I killed someone," she repeated. *The blood under my fingernails is my own, though.*

"Were they a Lunarian?"

"I'm a Lunarian."

"I don't care. You're home," he said. He hugged her so tight that her ribcage felt constricting. "You're my wife and the mother of our daughter. Today, my family is not the one that's mourning. I know it's cold." He gripped the hair above her nape. His strength always soothed her. "Take your bath, eat and rest. That's all I think and care about."

"Okay." She blinked back her own tears. *You're the worst. You're the worst enabler to ever exist. And I'll just let you do it.*

Sitting at the table with Petra while Ellis prepared dinner had that nostalgia of a dream. *Things only slow down this much when I'm asleep.* Petra's sharp voice pulled her out of her own head. "Mom, put it back together," she pleaded, pushing the pieces of her pull-apart puzzle towards her.

Mor obeyed. "You solve them too fast." Petra didn't answer. She just picked it up and went at it again. "Is it even fun anymore?" Mor asked, watching.

"It feels good," Petra said, "It goes clickety clack."

"I see."

In front of the stove, Ellis chuckled. Mor turned her face to him, feeling her cheeks heat up. *Will he ever stop having this effect on me?* "Darling, should we tell her the news?" he asked, the cheerfulness of his laughter still present in his voice.

Mor's brow furrowed. The question brought her to a halt. It took her a good while to remember which news he was talking about. *I need to get my head out of... that. Of course he isn't talking about my war crimes.* "Your dad and I took your points into consideration," she said. Petra raised her eyes for only a second. *She's so cautious.* "About having a cat."

That made her give Mor her full attention. "Cat!" she beamed, lowering her puzzle.

"Yes, cat. We decided we can have an indoor cat. We'll put nets over the windows."

Ellis turned to them, stirring a pot absentmindedly. He put one of his hands on his waist. *Fucker. Bet he's conscious of how good he looks.* His smile was even better. "But you have to be good with feeding and looking after it. We'll do it together, of course," he said. "A cat's a living being, like you." Petra just made happy noises and clacked her puzzle pieces together. *So very blissful.* Mor couldn't help but smile a little. "Just say you understand, Pets," Ellis added softly.

"Yes!" she beamed.

"Alright. We'll go see the next litter that's born. It might take some time," he said, turning back to his pans and pots. Petra just nodded, unbothered. He started serving the food. As he pulled a drawer open, he spoke up again: "Pets, will you let your mom eat with the nice spoon today, since she's been away so long?"

She made a noise and twisted her puzzle. Her lips were curled. "Mmm. What spoon do I get then?"

Ellis rose a small spoon that looked rounder than the rest. "This one."

"Okay." She nodded.

When Ellis put Mor's plate down in front of her and his other hand rested on her head, her eyes watered. *I get to come home to this.*

Finally snuggling up in bed made her realize how tired she really was. All those days sleeping outside crept up on her and she felt heavy in Ellis' arms. His body was warm against hers and his steady breathing made everything seem right in the world, like he'd always be there. She'd thought he'd fallen asleep until he whispered: "Never do that again." She was pretty sure he'd said that before.

She stirred. "I won't." *Though I don't think Petra really needs me. He does a better job on his own than I ever could.*

"Whenever you're out, I think of the countless things that could happen to you," he said, holding her tightly. "I think about your limp body fallen somewhere. Like that day I picked you up. I thought it was an irrational fear. Now I see it wasn't."

"It was a one in a million thing. Even I run low on mana and energy after prolonged conflict," she whispered. "If we're being purely utilitarian, I could get up again and again in a battlefield using the other dying people alongside me. A mage like me is not easily killed." She paused, trying to ignore the tingling in her nape. "As a Nightgard, I..."

"You're not a Nightgard anymore." He squeezed her.

Don't wash my hands for me. "In any case, I have the skills to put a stop to anyone that tries to breach the mountain pass. So I morally have to. Petra will never need to feel the impact of war directly," Mor said. *I'm responsible for more than one reason.*

"She'll feel it quite severely if her mother is killed." His voice was stern.

"If I'd been willing to let that happen, I wouldn't be here right now."

"You're not responsible for what the Nightgards do. You just happen to have been born as one," he whispered, coming closer to her ear.

"I sucked on their tits and slept on fluffy pillows until I was a teen," she countered. *Tax money and plundered riches.*

"So you have to personally right their wrongs?" His hands held her so close that she thought she could feel his heartbeat. "I've already told you that I don't care that you're this juggernaut or whatever. I'll never hold you up to *that*."

"I hold myself up to that," she said, shrugging.

He sighed; she could feel it on her skin. "Your problem is responsibility?"

"It is."

"Then see it this way." He pulled her even closer, joining their hips. "You stormed into my life and swept me off my feet. You made your vows. You have a daughter. You're not responsible for my feelings, but at some level you must be held responsible for all that. Especially Petra." He paused. "Fuck, that feels manipulative. You can walk away from me whenever you like, Mor. But not Petra."

"I don't *want* to walk away from anyone," she said, frowning. "Fuck you, Ellis. I love you."

"I know. I know. I love you too. Damn. We're arguing because I don't want you to *die*. You had to handle your own guts, for fuck's sake." His voice turned sharp.

"I'm sorry for scaring you," she said, turning to face him. "It scared me too." It came out like a confession. One of his hands went up to her face, caressing her cheek. "I never thought it would."

"I'm sorry. I can't even imagine what it was like," he said, lowering his voice to a whisper again. He touched his forehead to hers. "I wish you hadn't been alone."

Everything about him was comforting. His skin on hers, his breath, his smell. *So familiar.* "I kept thinking of what would happen when I got home. Seeing you two. It felt like it was years away," she said, nuzzling him. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. You have no idea." He kept rubbing her cheek with his thumb. "You're home now. Let me take care of you. *Please.*" She nodded. Then, one of them pulled the other into a kiss. She wasn't quite sure who. At first it was meek, just sweetly romantic. Then it grew hungry as Mor bit his lips and he ran his hands under her pajamas. His tongue was hot against hers and it set fire to her lower abdomen; his hands on her waist made her feel completely safe. After kissing her neck thoroughly and making a mess of her hair, he whispered in her ear: "Will you let me take care of you?"

"You mean you want to make me cum?" she asked. *Just confirming.*

His low chuckle made her sure that he was blushing. "Right now, yes. But in general, too."

"Yes. Please," she said, giving him another peck.

Relaxing under him always washed all her troubles away. He delivered on his promise, making her cum until it gave her full body tingling. Shortly after he got inside her, she felt the tears coming on. As they trickled down her face, she hoped he wouldn't notice. No such luck. He immediately stopped. "Darling? Do you want to stop?" he asked, brushing her tears away with his thumb.

"No. I just..." She took a deep breath. "Being with you feels safe."

"We can stop if you want." He kept caressing her wet face.

She held onto him, pulling him closer. "No. I'm sorry. I know it's pathetic."

"It's not pathetic," he said. He hugged her, hiding her face away from the world. She took a deep breath. His smell. *Somehow, everything's fine.* "I'm here with you. You're alright." She nodded and enveloped his hips with her legs, pulling him deeper into her. He let out the tiniest moan. "Hey. This position is a little dangerous."

"Why?" she asked, not letting go.

"You know why."

"We'll be careful, then," she said, smiling as she squeezed him tight.

"You said that before we had a kid, too."

"One is enough."

He laughed a little before giving in. His body fit hers perfectly, like being embraced by pure warmth. She fell asleep peacefully in those arms afterwards.