

Summer turns to fall

Prologue

When Morgana came to, someone was holding a warm hand to her forehead as they held her face down so the blood could flow from her nose. The pain washed over her cheekbones in waves and faded away slowly as the hands healed her. "Sorry. Hits to the face aren't the cleanest," Blake's voice came from beside her. They took their hands away. "Are you feeling better?"

She nodded, looking away as she put her light blue scarf back on. Well, it was supposed to be used as more of a sash, but still. The texture of her own blood mixed with sand bothered her when she touched it.

"Thanks, Blake," she said. "Don't mention it." Slightly dizzy, she got up to join her classmates on the amphitheater's seats so she'd feel less exposed.

They watched together as the last duel of the qualifiers unfolded. It was over in a flash. As their own Lena took the win, the atmosphere among their section was lukewarm. "That's just embarrassing," someone said in front of Morgana. They turned to her. "You should have been the one to win. Now we get to be represented by *her*."

She hid her nose in the dirty scarf. "Sorry," she mumbled. Lena Gaerhart cheered herself on in the center of the arena, her glasses reflecting the bright lights cast upon her. Something bitter lodged itself in Morgana's throat. Some people just didn't have to risk taking a punch to the nose to get what they wanted.

That moment was but a speck of dust in Morgana's dune of academic disappointments. She saw it repeated far more times than she'd care for. Graduation eventually came — it had to at some point, no matter how unbelievable it was — and went. The freshly graduated clerics stated their intentions and staff held an assembly to assign them their roles based on performance.

As they waited, the former students sat in the solarium. Morgana crossed her legs over a pillow, realizing it might be the last time she ever sat under the tinted glass. Her acquaintances seemed as tense as she did.

"I really fucking hope I don't get tossed to the edges of civilization," one of the girls said.

"I'd be fine being anywhere south," someone else said, "Did any of you state intention to become a professor?"

"No one has the grades, aside from *her*," the girl said, looking over to Lena, who was laying on a nest of pillows and reading a book a good distance from them.

"Morgana does," the other one replied, looking at her, "Did you put that down?"

When their eyes met, Morgana averted hers. "No. I'm aiming for something else," she said.

Everyone found their preferred seats in the amphitheater. Light shone on their former professors in the center of the arena; the Sidexa cleric who'd announce duel outcomes was projecting their voices that day. It was odd to be there for anything other than battling. She'd grown used to it over the years.

She tuned out the announcements for other sects, trying to ignore the growing ball of elastic anxiety inside her. When professor Genevieve started announcing the Sabrael assignments, she tuned back in. Alphabetical order. She should be somewhere around the

middle. Easy to miss. It seemed silly to worry about it knowing she wouldn't, not when she caught a name she wasn't even paying attention to: Lena. L came before M. And Lena had gotten assigned to the very town Morgana had hoped with all her might to get — Muddled Waters. Of course. Lena *was* top of their class. Morgana felt a long sigh leave her body. Her own announcement hardly phased her after that.

She stewed in it for a while, considering letting it go. What was there to do, really? Keeping her mouth shut and putting her head down seemed best. After all those years in the academy, she'd certainly grown used to being one step behind Lena. This time, though, it meant toiling away in a place she didn't want to be until retirement.

That stream of thoughts led her to Lena's cabin in the morning. A voice in her head urged her to turn away, but she knocked on the door anyway. There was a flurry of noise inside before Lena swung the door open. Her eyes were wide as she stared at Morgana; when she raised her hand to adjust her glasses, Morgana noticed that her fingers were smudged with charcoal.

"Oh, hey, um, Morgana? That's quite the shock," she said, giggling a little. Her curls framed her face perfectly and Morgana felt small again; she cowered under her robe, averting her eyes. "Guess you have a reason for coming."

Morgana took a deep breath. She'd planned her lines beforehand. "Just wanted to ask you if you really intend on going to Muddled Waters," she said.

"Oh! Funny you mention it. Nah, I really don't care for it," Lena shrugged it off, "I switched my statement. I'll get back into studying and become a professor after all."

"So the spot is open?" Morgana asked, a little taken aback by how easy it'd been.

"The spot is open, yeah," she said, giggling again. The laughter pierced through Morgana's mind and she felt herself frowning slightly.

1 Graveyard shift cleric

As soon as she'd unpacked her scarce belongings in her cot, her fellow clerics gave her the rundown. "Since you're our only Sabrael cleric, we'd like you to guard the night with the keeper," an Olmus woman said, joining her hands as if asking for a favor.

"Of course," Morgana said, even though her sleep schedule wouldn't easily bend for that. Still, one of the reasons she'd been so interested in Muddled Waters was the town's keeper; so, there was really no sense in trying to refuse.

"Great!" the woman beamed. They were sitting in the main temple's yard, enjoying the trees' shade. "You should be at the northern monument by twilight, then. I'm sure the locals will always be happy to point you in the right direction."

That was far from her new home. The town was bigger than she'd expected it to be and being the only one on night duty in the outskirts sounded overwhelming — overwhelming enough to bring her inadequacy to surface again. She walked back to the cot to bide her time until twilight. Drinking tea, she arranged her robes and undershirts in the wardrobe. A keeper. She'd only read about them.

As the sun set, Morgana made her way north, keeping her mouth shut and eyes on the ground. Her oversized robe dragged on the dirt; she kept telling herself she'd get around to sewing the hems shorter, but never did. She was tall enough that the only comfortable size they had to supply her with was too big on her.

She managed to find the monument before the sun had fully set. As the purple hue set on the sky, she sat on the steps that led to the statue of Sidexa. It was a sculpture of a stern woman, her hands holding up a rock; she wore loose clothing. Her face was carved just the same as Sabrael's in his monument. Morgana found their similarities eerie, especially considering how the Sidexa kids never got along with her Sabrael colleagues in the academy.

Anytime. She waited. When the first star lit in the sky, the familiar tingles told her something was crossing the adjacent plane. The air beside her contracted and expanded, spitting a spectral form into her plane of existence. She uncrossed her arms, watching it. It seemed to be a young woman just about her age. However, when she turned to face Morgana, she could see her distorted features: a myriad of eyes found place on the right side of her face and her torso seemed nearly broken open, fractured ribs partly pulled out in an arrangement that looked intentional — as if someone had taken the time to break her apart.

The vision hardly phased Morgana. Most otherlies looked somewhat like that. But... "You're the keeper?" she asked.

"Yes. I take it you're the new cleric?" the otherly bent at the knees, getting on Morgana's eye level. Her ghostly dress clung to her misshapen figure as she moved. Morgana just nodded. "I'll patrol with you. Come on," the keeper said, getting up. She took a few steps ahead and turned to look at Morgana expectantly.

The cleric got up and followed the keeper; they walked through the town's outskirts at a leisurely pace. That cold clump came back to Morgana's gut and she realized even the presence of an otherly was enough to give her social anxiety. "What's your name?" she asked, the clump going up to her throat. Would be awkward to walk alongside her until retirement and not know.

The keeper's eyes widened when she looked at her. "You can call me Artie, if you will," she said.

The phrasing left Morgana puzzled; the clump turned to a knot. "I will," she said.

Artie smiled. Upon further inspection, she seemed to have developed jagged teeth. "Your colleagues tend to just call me keeper," she said, "So, you know... What's yours?"

Had she done something weird? Morgana shifted her gaze as she answered. "Sober name," Artie said, raising her face to look at her. "You're a fresh graduate, right?"

"Yeah." That was not the best, was it? Anyone would want someone more experienced.

"I'm sure you've heard our two planes are very close here, but don't worry. It's never so bad. I can usually deal with most alone," Artie said, her voice taking on a soft tone, albeit it still sounded deep.

"No," Morgana sighed, pausing, "I'm capable. It's fine. I can do the job."

The silence was a little awkward. Her cheeks stung and she kept her eyes on the ground. "That's not what I meant. You're human, so it's best that you don't spend yourself when I'm enough... I'm not always enough," the keeper said.

The misunderstanding made Morgana's heart race. She debated internally whether or not to stay quiet. "Sorry," she said at last.

Beside her, Artie chuckled. It was enough to startle her. "Don't be nervous," the keeper said, "Is it first day anxiety?"

Maybe because her company wasn't exactly in the human realm, Morgana felt comfortable enough to shake her head. "I can't help it."

Artie held her hands behind her back and quickened her pace so she could get a full view of Morgana; her legs were that much shorter. When she opened her mouth to speak, Morgana could see her pointy canines. "Do I make you nervous?" she smiled faintly.

"No," said Morgana, shaking her head again. "I'm just generally... uptight. I'm used to adjacent plane creatures." She paused and looked away. It was hard to know what to say and what to keep, even in passing conversation. "Besides, I wanted to know what a keeper was like," she ended up saying.

"Ah," Artie mumbled. "What do you want to know?" She didn't seem so delighted.

"I won't trouble you. It was just... idle curiosity. As a Sabrael cleric, that is," she said. Then, she paused and tightened her scarf to hide her mouth a little more. Her cheeks burnt. "I'm sorry. That must have sounded like I intended on objectifying you. I don't."

"That's reassuring. Well, at least you asked me my name. Your predecessors didn't, you know," Artie said. Morgana read her smile as sarcastic, but her eyes held melancholia at the same time.

"Why wouldn't they?"

"You stop being seen as a person at the first sign of corruption."

Morgana looked back at her, taking note of her many slanted pupils. "I might just be desensitized," she said, "Wouldn't say I'm any better."

"I'm just rambling," Artie said, smiling more, "Because you asked me my name. Don't mind me."

"I don't mind it," Morgana said.

Their patrol felt odd; Artie seemed to have a spring to her step beside her. They got to the first checkpoint after what seemed like a long time. It was a tiny roof with a bench. Looked like just a small place for prayer out northwest.

"You can take some breaks to nap if you'd like. I'll watch over you," Artie said.

"I'm good."

It didn't take long for Morgana to notice an otherworldly presence other than Artie's. When she turned to the direction it was coming from, she realized the keeper had already picked it up as well, her many pupils turned to vague shapes. It was just a couple of lowly disfigured wolves, as corrupted as Artie herself. Morgana raised her hands as soon as they growled, but the keeper made a gesture to stop her.

As promised, Artie took them on by herself, jumping them; she took little time to tear their hides with her claws and rip their flesh with her teeth. Their mangled bodies dropped to the ground, corporeal. Their very real blood stained Artie's translucent face. The two got back

to walking — cleanup was someone else's job. With some effort, Artie tried to make herself presentable.

"Thanks," Morgana said, even if it made her feel unnecessary.

"It's best if you leave small fry to me," the keeper repeated, "The dead don't get tired. You do." When she smiled, Morgana swore she could see bits of flesh on her teeth.

It was true; Morgana was quite sluggish by the time they got to the western monument — Olmus', represented by a sculpture of a smooth sphere. She sat on the steps, taking cover under the small roof. Her body swayed when she closed her eyes, almost dropping forward.

"Is it really okay if I nap?"

"Yeah. My radar is very good," Artie said, touching her own nose with pride.

"I'm sorry. Night watch was sprung on me. I'd be sleeping by now..." Morgana mumbled, laying down on the stone step. Her head touched the cool surface and she furrowed her brow.

"Girl... Relax. It's fine."

Somehow, she was able to fall asleep in that uncomfortable position. She woke to a gentle poke on the shoulder. Artie's many eyes looked down on her. Despite her overall threatening form, her smile seemed sweet. "Come on."

When they finally got to the southern monument, Morgana felt an odd sense of comfort. It was Sabrael's. Instead of a rock, his sculpture held up what seemed to be a clay person. "You feel that it doesn't have as much presence as the other two had, yeah?" Artie asked.

"Yeah." It did give off a certain aura, though not as intense as the one Olmus' and Sidexa's did.

"It hasn't been charged and cleansed yet today. That's on you. Which is why you shouldn't strain yourself."

Of course, she knew how it worked. They had these same wards on the edges of campus. At night, the space between planes was naturally thinner, but such precautions could drive a wedge between them. It didn't stop otherlies from wandering into warded spaces — such as the student cabins area back then —, but it made it so they had to spawn further away. However, she'd never been tasked with charging any wards before.

After some minutes of silence and concentration, she was glad to feel that the ward was fully reinstated. All it took was some of her own energy and concentrated prayer. It had been a little hard under Artie's stare, though.

"You crossed planes right to the Sidexa monument," she realized, looking at the keeper. "Despite the warding."

"Sabrael gives me a hand with those things," Artie said.

"You're also under Sabrael?"

"Carrying out a promise," she said, closing some of her eyes for a moment. Though she smiled, the ones that were still open seemed distressed. "Forever."

Morgana did want to press further. It was that idle curiosity again, or maybe even a distant want for conversation. But she'd gotten the general picture. Besides, she'd said she wouldn't bother her. So they got back to patrolling. The next hours were quite uneventful, aside from the fact Morgana tried napping again only to be woken by the haunting shrieks of a wraith as Artie tore it apart.

"Are you okay?" she asked Artie as she stood still a few meters away from her.

The question seemed to startle her. She turned to Morgana, looking ghostlier than before. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Maybe Artie was desensitized to it. Who knew how long she'd been in that state? Still, Morgana knew that wraith had once been the same as Artie was right then. "Ready to go?" Artie asked. Morgana looked back at the Armus sculpture; it was a sharp edged cube. "Yeah."

When the sky started brightening up, Morgana's legs had long since turned to mush. The fact that she was that tired without even having to cast anything only added insult to injury. "You can go now," Artie said, smiling softly.

Morgana sighed. "Is that really fine?"

"Yeah, it slows down around this time."

"Then I'm going. Sorry," she said, looking at her surroundings and trying to remember which monument they'd last walked by.

"You did your job. There's nothing to apologize for," Artie smiled again.

It was a long walk home. Morgana had half a mind to take her robe off before sleeping. When she let her body drop to bed, her mind instantly switched to the image of Lena laughing that last time. She felt like she finally understood why someone would laugh at her for wanting such a job.

She woke up in the middle of the afternoon, which meant she'd overslept. The hours had gone by in a blink of her eyes. As she sat in her one room cot and drank her tea, there was a knock at the door. Getting out of the chair was a herculean task; her legs were sore from the patrol. Still, she managed to do it and open the door. The Olmus colleague who'd welcomed her the day before stood in front of her.

"Hello, Morgana," she said, smiling far too much for it to be real. "I hope you've slept well."

"Yeah," Morgana mumbled. "Thanks, Janine."

"May I come inside?" she asked, still smiling. Morgana's neutral expression faltered and her hands went cold. Still, she just nodded, relenting to the request. It was best not to waste words because of mere discomfort.

They sat around the tiny table. Janine looked eagerly at the tea, so Morgana had to pour her a mug as well, even though she'd only brewed enough for one. "How was your first night?" Janine asked, taking a sip of Morgana's tea.

"Fine." She drank too, focusing her gaze on her favorite mug. If only people wouldn't drop in on her unannounced.

"Good! How was the keeper's behavior?" she pressed on, unbothered by the unwelcoming vibe that shrouded the cot.

"Fine," Morgana repeated. "Why?"

"You should always communicate anything off about it to us. I'm sure you know best when it comes to this, but corruption is volatile," she answered. Her casual smile began bugging Morgana harder after she said that.

"She was... normal," Morgana said, furrowing her brow.

"We chart her twice a year, but you have to keep an eye on her in between," Janine said. Then, she paused. She placed the mug on the table delicately. "You're free to subdue her if needed."

It made bile go up Morgana's esophagus. Artie was not a wraith. Not yet, at least. "Sure," was all she mumbled.

"Great. We're happy to have you here," Janine said. She got up and joined her hands in a silent clap. "Thanks for the tea. As a friendly tip, it could use a little more flavor." She left.

People invited themselves to her space, drank her tea and complained when it wasn't to their taste. Morgana sighed and closed her tired eyes, resting her head on her hands.

Under the moonlight that night, three otherlies stepped out of the shadows to threaten Morgana and Artie. As she'd done previously, Artie tried to jump ahead. Morgana stopped her and joined her hands, keeping her movements slow and easy so as not to startle their visitors. Two wolves paced about with caution while an eviscerator approached, its gnarly claws big enough to curl.

"Let me," she said, focusing and channeling her energy. Summoning was much easier at night, even when the creature was corporeal. She dragged an otherly that looked much like a big reptile from their neighboring plane. Its scales looked so sharp that she'd bet they could pierce her skin with a simple graze. Redirecting that focus to suppress and control it, she sent it towards the eviscerator; her lizard minion shredded its ankles, bringing the humanoid to its level.

Meanwhile, Morgana tried dealing with the wolves herself, using her spare concentration to suppress them as well. They quivered under her will, but holding the reins on her own minion and on them at the same time made her feel like her brain would split. While they were stunned, Artie pulled through, smashing skulls with supernatural force. Seeing that her own minion had subdued the eviscerator, Morgana sent it back. Her head pounded.

"You didn't have to do all that," Artie said, "You must be tired." They were walking again.

"No, I was thinking..." Morgana started, wondering if it would come out in a weird manner. "You're stripped down to your soul. If you're consumed or corrupted, all of you will be gone. I'm fine with getting tired, but pitching you alone against eviscerators and wraiths is no good."

Artie seemed stunned for a moment, her eyes wide and her mouth agape. It induced a chill in Morgana's stomach, as if she'd overstepped a line somehow. Well, something about the way Janine had talked about Artie had made her angry enough to overstep.

"Thank you, then," Artie said at last, averting her eyes and holding her hands behind her back. "Are you really a fresh graduate?"

"Yeah. Why?" Morgana asked, massaging her temple mindlessly.

"I didn't think a fresh grad could do that," she said, smiling. Her raised cheek obscured some of her eyes partly, distorting her features. Big smile. "You didn't even use any aids."

Somehow, the words made Morgana blush. She looked off to the side. "I use aids during the day."

"No, but you were really good," Artie insisted, smiling more.

At that point, Morgana's face was about to go up in flames. Did people really say these things? "That's my job," she mumbled.

"Thank you anyways."

A good while went by. Morgana could never tell whether or not the silence was organic, but Artie had an easy smile on her face, so it was probably fine.

"Can I ask you something personal?" Artie raised her voice, disrupting the silence enough to startle her. Though the very idea made Morgana queasy, she nodded. "Why did you enter a contract with Sabrael?"

The queasiness grew, even if that wasn't as personal as it could have been. While Morgana thought of an answer, too much time went by and the air between them grew restless. "I mean, you don't have to answer..." Artie said, clearly concerned.

Morgana took a deep breath. "I'll answer if you tell me why you became a keeper," she said. When she noticed Artie's wide eyes, she added: "Just vaguely."

"I asked Sabrael to do something for me and I promised to do anything he wanted in return," she said. After a pause, she chuckled. "He granted my wish."

Morgana's feet stopped before she'd even taken the conscious decision to halt. She furrowed her brow at Artie. "I wonder what was important enough for you to promise your eternal soul over." Overstepping.

"It wasn't. I didn't know what I was doing," Artie said, stopping in front of her. "I was, um, fifteen."

"Fifteen?" Morgana asked, feeling her insides stir. A civilian hardly knew what a promise like that meant, much less a teenager.

"Well, I vaguely told you. Go on, now," Artie said. She went back to walking and Morgana followed, realizing she'd gotten too distracted. "Are we this bad at making conversation?" Artie asked after the pause had become too long. She smiled at Morgana.

"You're making conversation?" Morgana said, blinking in surprise. It made her blush again. She didn't picture herself holding a conversation.

"I'm trying. I wanted to know you a little. Because you..." she paused and sighed. "I can be quiet, though. That's my default setting."

"No. You're... fine," Morgana said, turning her face away. "I entered the contract at fourteen. Vaguely, because I was an obsessed loner."

"That's really early."

"At least contracts have easy outs," Morgana said. Upon reflection, she added: "Sorry."

"But how does a pubescent teen deal with the sacrifice?" Artie tilted her head, her pupils all following Morgana. "Or are you aro?"

"You mean the pledge of devotion. I'm not aro, but steering clear of romance is easy when you're unwanted," Morgana said, swallowing down the bitterness. "Ah, that sounded

edgy. It's not like that. And this is getting out of vague territory." More shame bit her as she realized that was the most she'd said to someone else in a good while.

"Sorry. That was a selfish question, actually," Artie said, lowering her voice, "Because people that can do what I couldn't make me curious." Morgana didn't ask further; that would certainly infringe on the vagueness clause.

2 Graveyard friend

Slowly but surely, Morgana's body got used to the long nightly walks. It meant no shortage of time with Artie; in fact, that was probably the most time she'd ever spent with someone else at once — and it was every night. Talking to someone that only existed in her realm for a fraction of time was much easier than merely saying hi to any civilian on the street.

"I was wondering..." Artie started one night, her hands behind her back as usual, "What do you do when you're off work? If you guys are ever off work."

"We're always on call, but as a Sabrael cleric... This is mostly it right now," Morgana said. The rest of the question required some more mental incentive to answer. "I stay home all day. That's it."

"Well, but what do you do in your free time?" Artie pressed on, all of her eyes looking at her eagerly. Their intensity tended to subjugate Morgana.

"I'm a bit of a taxonomy nerd," she admitted. "I drink tea and bend over catalogs."

She risked looking back at Artie, though answering had embarrassed her. The keeper had her head tilted; she blinked.

"Um, it's... How all living things and creatures are classified," Morgana explained. "That's why I was somewhat interested in... your state. There's a shallow depth of knowledge on your condition."

"You can classify me?" Artie blinked again, the movement running across her many eyes in the flow of a wave.

"Of course. Using tree terms, you're under the same canopy as me. You only branch out after death, like an extraphysical metamorphosis." She paused, looking away from Artie's face. She did have that otherly look to her. "In short, by the end of your cycle, you will have switched to a completely different root."

Artie fell silent and, busied with her own thoughts, Morgana took a while to notice. When she looked back at her, Artie's light smile wasn't there. "Sorry. I spoke coldly," Morgana said, "But material reality has nothing on your spirit. You're still..." She struggled to find the words. It was the first time in a long while that she spoke so freely. "You're much like me," she said.

The pause was too long. Just when Morgana was certain she'd made a mistake, Artie spoke up: "You shouldn't say that so lightly."

"You're right. I overstepped," Morgana said, swiftly put back in her place. She couldn't face her.

"No! That's not it. The thing is, you wouldn't *want* to say that if you knew me better," Artie said, running a little to catch up to her and make eye contact.

Somehow, Morgana doubted that. "How bad can someone innocent and desperate enough to give up their soul be?"

"You don't know what I gave it up for. What if my soul is dirty?" Artie asked, her fangs all too clear as she made her plea.

Morgana forced herself to maintain eye contact. "I doubt it."

"I asked Sabrael to erase my romantic feelings for someone else," she said.

"That's not worth your soul at all," Morgana said. Her eyebrows lowered. It stung. "Why would that make you dirty?"

"It was my friend. A girl," Artie said, looking away.

Morgana furrowed her brow. "Well, Artie, I've only ever fallen for girls."

That made Artie lift her face again, blinking. With her mouth agape, her sharp teeth were on display again. "Really?"

"Why would you think that dirties your soul?" Morgana asked. "How long ago did you die?"

"A while. I always felt like I didn't deserve to be seen as a woman anymore, even if I really wanted to," Artie said, looking straight at the ground.

"If you want it to be, liking a girl can be a very girly thing."

Artie smiled. It left a buttery smooth impression on Morgana. "But you aren't allowed romance," Artie pointed out after a moment, "So what would you do when you fell for someone?"

"I'd walk away," Morgana said, shrugging, "None of them were mutual anyway. It fades if you don't feed it."

"I wish I'd done that."

"You were fifteen. You shouldn't be held to..." Morgana cut herself short, holding her tongue. "Fifteen is an apocalyptic age. It was."

She felt a tug on her sleeve. When she looked down, Artie was holding onto her gingerly. "Thank you. For talking to me," she said. All Morgana found herself able to do was blush. "I really like it," Artie reinforced. Morgana hoped her face didn't look red under the moonlight. Was it really so easy? If so, why had no one ever liked talking to her before?

Usually, Morgana would go home to sleep at the first signs of light in the sky. That night, though, she sat on the stairs of a monument and rested her head on her hands, elbows on her knees. "You can go home," Artie said.

"I could stay," Morgana said, looking at the skyline. She could also be brave enough to say it, but not to face Artie at the same time. "Until you cross over."

Though she didn't see her expression, she could hear Artie's smile in her voice. "Really? You prefer sitting with me over sleeping?" she beamed, sitting beside Morgana. She felt a little cold.

The phrasing was too intimate. Morgana didn't answer. They looked at the first faint rays of sunshine together. "Hey," Artie spoke up, "What were the girls you fell for like?"

"Pretty," Morgana said, thinking back. After a pause, she added: "And distant."

"Distant?"

"I had no friends to fall for."

Artie took a moment and then chuckled. "Maybe that's why you could walk away so easily," she said.

"Maybe." Warm light stroked Morgana's cheek, compensating for the chilly breeze of dawn.

"Do you really think I'm like you?" Artie asked, bending forward to make direct eye contact with her.

Morgana's face felt warmer. "Because you're easy to talk to," she said. "Even if I'm not a talker."

"I think you're okay," Artie said. She smiled and then sighed, even though she had no reason to be breathing. The sun shone right through her as the sky acquired a pink tint. "I have to go now," she said.

She'd barely finished talking when she blinked out of Morgana's plane of existence as if she'd never been there. The suddenness of it was startling, but soon Morgana's heart rate steadied. She let out a long sigh as well. Then, she forced her tired legs to lift her weight and walked away.

Somehow, being a night shift guardian didn't seem so bad anymore. Even having to battle meant getting showered in compliments by Artie.

"You make it look so easy," she said one night. "I know suppressing more than one is hard."

Morgana's eyes dropped to the floor as her face heated up. "It's what I was trained to do."

"Why are you so bad at accepting compliments?" Artie asked, chuckling.

"Only when they're without merit," Morgana said. She reprimanded herself internally upon realizing how dramatic that sounded.

"What? I've worked with a few other Sabrael clerics. Your concentration is really good," Artie pressed on.

"I'm rarely up to standards."

"Whose standards? They're wrong," she said, walking quickly to be able to force eye contact with Morgana, whose steps were quite wider.

Morgana glanced at her and let out a raspy breath. "Mine. I never had the academic output I thought I would. There was always... someone better."

"What? You should get real world standards."

"I told you I'm an obsessed loner," Morgana mumbled, going back to looking straight ahead.

A while went by. Artie seemed restless beside her. "Classification. You like it," she spoke up out of nowhere. "Where do you place me?"

Normally, Morgana would ask herself where the question was leading to. However, she'd been going with the flow when it came to talking to Artie. "We clerics tend to

categorize creatures from your plane by threat level. Useful, even if uninteresting. As you are, I'd put you at a solid A-, which is below an eviscerator."

"Really?" Artie asked, tilting her head. "You find me threatening?"

"No," Morgana said with ease. "But you have the potential to be. I've been watching you."

Artie let out a tiny chuckle and looked away. "Don't make me self conscious. I don't want to be threatening." In retrospect, Morgana realized it had been a sad chuckle.

"You're not threatening. You're easygoing and considerate," Morgana said, "But you do pose a threat to anything that crosses you. Rightfully."

All of Artie's eyes were wide, her pupils focused on Morgana. It took a while for her lips to seal; her mouth had been agape. As soon as the surprise waned, she furrowed her brow. "Well, you're a solid S!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You have a threatening presence, Morgana. And a mean stare," Artie said, eyebrows slanted downwards.

"Are you... angry?"

"No."

As the sky lightened, they sat down together again. It had become the unspoken norm. The light grew warmer, signifying that daytime was closer; with it came slight dread, even if Morgana was exhausted. The silence suddenly bothered her. They were on limited time, after all. Artie was right: they, especially Morgana, were bad at making conversation.

"The friend you liked," Morgana started, copying a question Artie had asked her, "what was she like?"

Artie made a face. The extra eyes easily distorted her expression. Was that the wrong thing to ask? At last, she sighed. "You know... It hurts to admit, but she wasn't as interesting or special as I thought she was," she said, her voice low. "Maybe because my feelings died in a blink, and when you fall out of love it all just looks so plain suddenly."

"People don't have to be outwardly interesting to be good partners," Morgana said. It had stung her some.

"I meant that she was only interesting to me because I liked her. That's what matters. But then I wished my feelings away," Artie said. She was looking straight at the sky. A while went by. Morgana felt comfortable just looking at the clouds and sitting with her.

"In contrast, there are people that are interesting from the start," Artie said. Her voice was smooth all around. When Morgana turned her face, meeting Artie's focused stare was unexpected enough to spook her; her face seemed so close. Then, Artie smiled. "Sleep well, Morgana," she said, her voice trailing out as her figure disappeared.

Sitting alone in her cot, Morgana found herself bored of all the books she'd already read. However, there was no point in wandering outside. She'd never been one to mingle and the only person she'd like to see only existed for her at night. Well, she'd surely be able to summon Artie herself if she wanted to. That didn't mean she should, though. What would they even do together, anyway? Morgana wasn't the outwardly interesting type of person Artie had talked about. She had no fun hobbies. All she knew was sitting in a dimly lit room and living quietly. Who would want to witness that?

She closed the book she'd been reading with a thud. Slowly, she lifted it and pressed it to her forehead; she let out a heavy sigh against its hard cover. Morgana closed her eyes. No light reached her eyelids. She slowed down her breathing, trying to derail that stream of thought. What had she even been thinking, really? She banged the book against her head. The

force died out before impact; though she wanted to let the sudden frustration out, she was unable to allow herself to explode. So, all that came out was a meek dramatic moment. She downed the rest of her tea and told herself it was time to get a grip. She already saw Artie on a daily basis. Why would Artie want to see her during the day? A self-described loner shouldn't be clingy.

"If you've been under the pledge of devotion since you were fourteen, I suppose you've never dated?" Artie asked as they walked. The wind was particularly chilly that day; was it already fall? Morgana hadn't noticed time slip by.

"No," Morgana said plainly. Artie just mumbled something. Should she have said more? She really was a conversation killer. "After the incident, did you end up dating anyone?" Morgana asked, trying to stitch it back together.

"Ah, no," Artie said. Her walking seemed less bubbly than usual. "I felt... dirty. For, you know. Liking girls."

"Predatory?"

"Yeah. Exactly," she sighed.

What could Morgana even say to that? She looked at Artie through the corner of her eye. "You're not," she said, "You're sweet and thoughtful."

Artie let out a weird sound that sounded like a broken wind chime. She averted her wide eyes. "Don't say things so lightly," she said.

"I don't say things lightly. That would be a waste of breath."

Suddenly, Artie stopped. Morgana halted and turned to her, feeling a cold chill go down her spine — Artie seemed startled. "Is something wrong?"

"Morgana," Artie said, looking at the ground and joining her hands. They seemed a little shaky. "Could I... hold your hand? I'm just curious. I haven't really touched anyone since... well."

Upon hearing that, Morgana's thoughts also halted. Her cheeks burnt up and she looked down to Artie's joined hands. What would it feel like? Maybe she was tasting some idle curiosity as well. She stretched her hand out, hardly feeling her own fingertips. "Sure."

Artie took her hand. She really was shaking. Her ghostly skin felt like a brush of wind against Morgana's, if only wind was that consistent; to Morgana, Artie's body was in a liminal state, somehow solid but also not quite there. In contrast, did she feel warm to Artie? Though she wondered, talking about it would be far too weird. So they got back to walking, their hands joined between them. The thick silence felt like static and Morgana's hand was prickly; she was far too aware of it and didn't know what to do with her fingers. Worst of all, her cheeks were still hot.

When they got to Sabrael's monument, they paused at the top of the steps. "Give me a moment to recharge it," Morgana said. When she disentangled their fingers, she felt clumsy. Somehow she cared about seeming clumsy to Artie; she averted her eyes, afraid to see if she'd noticed or not.

She took her hands to the statue and actually carried out her duties. After imbuing it with her energy, she realized she felt more tired than usual. Maybe she'd overdone it. In any case, there was a more pressing matter at hand: Artie. Their eyes met. Morgana looked at her hands again. Were they supposed to get back to it? As the seconds went by, the situation only became more awkward. In the end, Morgana ended up reaching out again. "Come on," she said. The chill of Artie's hand was back.

Artie's smile soothed her nerves, massaging the knots in her back away. Well, at least that's what it felt like. They got back to their walk. "I was wondering," Morgana spoke up, "Is Artie a nickname?"

Artie tilted her head and her eyebrows slanted. The smile was still there. "Let's not unearth my birth name," she said.

"Artie suits you. It's short and playful," Morgana said, shifting her eyes back to the trail.

"I'm not short! You're just tall."

Morgana smiled too. Smiling was becoming more effortless those days — or rather, those nights. "I never called *you* short."

Artie's hold on her hand tightened, sending a fuzzy feeling up Morgana's arm. "Thank you, Morgana," she said. It seemed out of the blue.

"What for?" Though Morgana was sure she didn't know, something cold lodged itself in her stomach. Artie just shrugged. "You're the only reason I feel like talking," Morgana said, "I didn't think I missed it. We could... get further out of vague territory."

"Yes!" Artie beamed, her sudden excitement shaking Morgana. "I want you to talk a lot."

After the heat in her cheeks had fizzled out, Morgana took a deep breath. "A while ago, I caught myself thinking about you in the middle of the afternoon," she said, "And I wished you could be there during the day."

Momentary silence weighed down on them. "I think about you too," Artie said, "When I'm alone. I haven't seen a human day in a while."

Their entwined hands felt like a lie. They didn't even dwell in the same realm. "I thought of summoning you," Morgana admitted.

"You would?" Artie's eyes were wide again. She seemed breathless — if that was even possible.

"Would, but can't. It would be inappropriate of me," she said. "Anyway, you would get bored fast. I don't do interesting things at all." She tried to smile to smooth it over, realizing that she shouldn't have touched the topic.

"I wouldn't. Knowing someone friendly gives me more reason to wish I was alive," Artie's voice lowered. "Or at least not trapped in that purgatory." She paused and looked up to Morgana, wary. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize."

"I do regret it. Promising my soul at fifteen. It was like... I really felt like I'd never recover from it. I needed a measure as drastic as my situation," she said, letting out way more than Morgana thought she would. "Because, you see, now that I'm in a much worse place, I'm actually doing better. Things weren't end all be all."

"Yeah." Surely Morgana should say more than that. Her mind came up blank and a hand squeezed her throat.

"They are now, though," Artie said, smiling at Morgana. The melancholy of it seemed out of place on her face. "My soul is not going to the same place as yours... for instance."

Morgana clutched Artie's cold hand, somehow afraid to squeeze right through it. She didn't know what to say. A heretical thought struck her and she swatted it away, shame stinging her cheeks again. "I'm sorry. If I say exactly how disparaging I find that, I might be opposing the god I'm supposed to serve." Even that felt like overstepping, but it still seemed like too little.

"Sabrael just did what I asked him to," Artie said, "You don't have to feel like that." A slight brush of her thumb on Morgana's skin made her shiver.

Though Morgana could control herself so as not to say it aloud, she struggled to suppress arguments in her mind. The conversation left a sour taste in her mouth.

3 Spill

Once again, Janine appeared at Morgana's door while she relaxed. Her mouth was a thin line and her eyebrows were low. "Good afternoon, Morgana," she said softly. She paused and looked off to the side. "I'm afraid you're required at the main temple's garden." As Morgana didn't answer, she went on: "One of our citizens needs to talk through her grief. It's about her husband's passing."

A knot lodged itself firmly in Morgana's insides. "I'm afraid I'm not the most qualified," she said. As far as she was concerned, that was an understatement.

"Even so, she specifically requested a Sabrael cleric. All you have to do is be there," Janine said. The firmness in her voice made it clear that there weren't many options. "So put on your formal robe and do your best. I'll see you there, yes?"

"Yes," Morgana mumbled. As soon as she closed the door, she let out a sigh and turned to the wardrobe. She'd stashed the formal robe away at the very top. Not a problem. She put it on over her casual clothes, trying to tie it with a neat bow. The stained mirror wasn't ideal, but it helped.

It wasn't often that she had to wear that. It was custom tailored, which meant she wouldn't be stepping on the hem accidentally; also, it integrated Sabrael's color into the design, so there was no need for the length of light blue fabric she'd usually wear as a scarf. Thinking of going out without it made her feel exposed. Would Artie think she looked good in clothes that actually fit her? The sudden thought made her look at herself in the mirror and the raw analysis that ensued rendered her self-conscious immediately; her face heated up. How did that even matter?

On a bench surrounded by colorful flowers she didn't know the names of, the woman waited for her. Her face was tinted red and her eyes had severe bags under them. When she

saw Morgana, she stood and held her hand out. Was that really necessary? Still, Morgana shook it and sat beside her on the wooden bench.

"Thanks for coming," the woman said, her voice a little rough. "I'm Martha."

"Morgana. You don't have to thank me," Morgana said, trying to keep her tone neutral lest it betrayed the queasiness in her gut. How was she supposed to console someone much older and experienced than her? "I'm here to listen." Coming out of her mouth, that sentence sounded so pretentious.

So Martha told her about her husband's passing. She talked in length about how she'd been struggling with the notion of the eternal soul since then; how it seemed impossible that they'd ever be reunited. Morgana understood why she'd been requested.

"Being a Sabrael cleric, I'm constantly exposed to the existence of other planes. I can assure you that our realm is not the only one, and that it won't be yours, or his, final dwelling," she said. If it was all just clerical knowledge, she could get through that talk.

"But the soul?"

"It's all true. Each of us has an eternal soul."

"How can you be sure?" Martha asked. Her eyes were puffy.

"I've personally seen proof twice, but there's extensive documentation among the clergy," Morgana said, unwilling to elaborate. She had no intention of putting thoughts of communing with the dead in the mind of a civilian.

"If there are lots of planes, how can I be sure we'll end up in the same one?" Martha looked at her entwined hands.

"The gods influence that outcome. They wouldn't separate you. Sabrael understands that human souls find comfort in each other," Morgana said. She averted her eyes, pointing her gaze at a rose bush. When she looked at it, she only pictured its thorns. "We're much like him when it comes to sentimentality."

There was silence for a while. She heard sniffing. Though they sat side by side, Morgana might as well be sitting in another realm. There was a reason she'd rather be home.

"Go on with the knowledge that you'll have as much time together in bliss as time itself will allow," Morgana said, trying to shrug her own discomfort off. "Don't rush things. Live life to its fullest now so you can rest easy later."

Though that meeting left behind a sour spot in Morgana's brain, she found herself unable to bring it up with Artie. She didn't know why it bothered her so, but she could tell apart the full-body burn of jealousy when she encountered it. How would she justify envying a widow out loud? She couldn't even justify it to herself.

Thus, their nights went on without mention of it. The freedom of touching Artie here and there was invigorating. Morgana had seen people casually touch each other while talking all her life and had never understood the pull of it — until then. Combining that with Artie's lightheartedness, there was an unexpected ease to it all.

However, there was a steady increase in otherlies. They were usually able to deal with the ones they'd encounter before they wandered into town, heading towards the clutches of the Armus clerics in the night shift. Still, the effort would exhaust Morgana and drain her blood sugar without fail. She'd find herself laying on the ground, Artie holding her legs up.

"Don't you think this is weird? They're crossing over too close to the warding," Artie said, furrowing her brow. The eyes in her forehead seemed in agreement.

"That shouldn't be the case. I'm sure everyone is maintaining the wards properly," Morgana answered, closing her eyes. A bout of dizziness overcame her. "Maybe they're just crossing in greater numbers."

"What causes that?"

"The main reason would be the phase of the moon, but there are other things," Morgana said. She furrowed her brow. "None of them are happening, though." They were silent for a moment. "We could double check the warding to make sure." She turned on her side and forced herself to get up. Immediately, her blood pressure sunk further down; she staggered.

Artie put an arm behind her. "You should stay down," she said, her eyebrows arched softly.

"I'm on the job," Morgana said, taking an extra step only to wobble. "There has to be a reasonable explanation for their reinforced presence." She knew all the calendars by heart. She'd been recharging the ward daily. It couldn't be that. Frustration welled up.

"Then I'll carry you. Let's make use of that A- strength, yeah?" Artie said, the arm that supported her suddenly holding her by the waist. Morgana shuddered and nearly yelped.

"I'm sure there's no need for that..." she started, her voice dying out midway.

"It's faster. We'll get to the wards in no time," Artie replied, picking her up without asking for further permission.

As Morgana's feet swiftly left the ground, she actually let that yelp out. She felt too big and clumsy in the arms of someone shorter than her. When she looked at Artie's face, though, she only found concern. She didn't seem to mind. So, Morgana relaxed in her arms, finding herself able to even close her eyes. To be honest, she wouldn't have let Artie do it; secretly, she was glad that she'd done it anyways.

"Morgana," Artie said softly a while into the walk, making her open her eyes. "I know you don't need it because you're like... this overachieving cleric and stuff. But I wish you'd let me take care of you more."

Though it made Morgana feel hot inside, she still argued against it: "We're a duo."

"Yeah. It's like... I'm already an *otherly* by now," Artie said, sighing. Her grip on Morgana seemed to tighten. "If I have to be one, I'd at least like to get something out of it."

The sentiment took Morgana back to that stained spot of jealousy, like her mind was slowly dripping acid. She couldn't answer; if she did, she might go into uncharted territory she didn't necessarily want to chart.

So they examined each monument, Morgana checking the integrity of the warding. By the time they got to the last one, Sabrael's, Morgana was disillusioned. Of course it wouldn't be so easy as a simple slip from one of her fellow clerics. Seeing that Sabrael's was the only one left just made her more frustrated — she knew she hadn't been the one to slip. As soon as they ascended the steps towards the statue, though, Artie frowned, her face wrinkling around her eyes. Morgana paused, letting go of her certainty to pay attention. Her face dropped.

"Ah. I was the one who slipped," she murmured, walking closer to the statue. "And it wasn't just once." Indeed. The ward's energy was nearly completely drained. A cold wave slid throughout her body, finding firm dwelling in the base of her spine. She didn't dare look back at Artie. Resting her hands on the statue, she focused and tried to give what was left of her own energy. Once she was done, she checked it again.

Nothing had changed.

"I don't get it," she admitted, rubbing her face with one hand. She lifted her fringe; her forehead was sweaty. "I'm not doing anything differently."

Artie's soft touch on her shoulder washed the nagging anxiety away; all that was left was exhaustion. "Maybe you should talk to the other clerics?"

"No." Morgana rubbed her face again, as if that would slap some vigor back into her. "I just need a better diet, more sleep and I'll fix this. I've been lapsing." Though Artie didn't say anything, there was doubt in her face and Morgana hated it.

Sure, she'd said it was something off about her lifestyle. But how could it be? She was sure she wasn't doing anything differently. She was the same Morgana as she'd been weeks

before, when Artie had praised her lavishly for her feats. As much as she tried, she wasn't able to replenish the ward in the next few nights; so, most of their patrol time was spent fighting off otherlies that crossed over directly into their territory in the southern edge of town.

Unwilling to quit, Morgana kept trying to pull her weight. When she summoned a minion, she had to focus so much to keep it under her control that it felt like a vein would burst in her temple. She had never needed to employ that much effort — not even in her first academy years. It was in one of such moments that her energy faltered and she lost her grip on those metaphysical reins. Suddenly, the minion that she'd called was merely another otherly to fight. She realized the severed connection immediately and, as the giant lizard turned towards her, Morgana took a step back. Its sharp scales shone under the moonlight and she could see their edges clearly. A mere brush would lead to peeling of skin.

In that split second, her eyes darted to Artie. She was just as busy, fighting off some small fry. Before Morgana could get her attention, her former minion lunged at her. It always amazed her how fast reptiles could be; those short legs were quite deceptive. She rushed back and stepped on unstable ground. Before she could even produce a sound, she fell. Her eyes widened and her blood ran cold as she realized she'd tripped on her own robe's hem.

She heard an inhuman shriek and turned her head to look for it before realizing it had come out of her own mouth. The pain registered itself in her mind with some delay as the sharp talons sank on her thighs. Listening to the moist sounds of her own flesh induced a certain numbness. It was over in a flash, Artie's figure tackling her attacker and knocking its weight off her. Morgana didn't watch it; her eyes were lost in the sky as tingles of cold washed over her body. She heard what sounded like animals fighting.

Vaguely, she noticed that the ground wasn't under her anymore. The familiar sensation of Artie's arms around her stabilized her heart rate. "Hey! You'll be *fine*," Artie said, but the

words sounded slurred to Morgana. She wasn't unfamiliar with the feeling of overexertion. Artie's voice kept coming, but it just sounded like pleasant white noise as her mind clocked out.

Warm hands running across her lower body brought her consciousness back. Her eyelids fluttered open, still feeling heavy. Candlelight lit whatever room she was in. When she looked up, she met Janine's face; she had a grave expression. "We need to talk," she said.

"Thank you," Morgana mumbled. The feeling of Olmus' restorative powers was familiar.

"The keeper is acting out of line," Janine said, shifting the topic immediately. She forced Morgana to sit up and shoved a cup of hot tea in her hands. Her fingertips burnt against the ceramic.

"What?" she mumbled again, still half-awake.

"She left her post to bring you here," Janine said, frowning, "leaving our southern line wide open. Those creatures have run into town."

Morgana sipped the tea, preferring not to reply. She was torn between guilt and anger. Surely the Armus guys could handle a few stray otherlies.

"What's happening with the southern ward anyway? How come they're crossing over right into it?" Janine asked, narrowing her eyes at Morgana. Her neat hairdo had some loose strands.

"My energy's been faltering," Morgana admitted.

"And you wouldn't happen to know why?"

"No. I'm working on it," she said, going back to drinking her tea. As much as it pained her to admit, Janine's tea was better than hers.

"Morgana," Janine started, her eyes focusing on her with the intent of a hawk. "Pardon my intrusion, but have you perhaps broken your pledge? Because to me this seems like your god is not favoring you."

Morgana froze, her cup's rim lightly touching her lips. She blinked, lowering it and looking back at Janine. "No," she said.

It made sense. But she couldn't have. Not Morgana. She'd been walking in a perfectly straight line her whole life, not even coming close to violating the pledge. And there was only one person she could be in love with. She looked back at her lap, hoping her cheeks weren't tinted red. Walking away had always been so easy; that's all she had to do. But how could she walk away from someone she had to see everyday?

Besides, she didn't want to walk away.

"Then you must sort yourself out immediately. We can't be out of a Sabrael cleric," Janine said, taking the cup from her hands. "Get your priorities in line, Hawksly. A cleric without a contract is not a cleric. I say this for your own good. It's not too late for you."

She made Morgana get up, gripping her arm tightly. Her legs didn't hurt at all, but she was still a little dizzy. "You have your whole career ahead of you," Janine said, her voice a little softer, "Don't throw it away."

Her abdominal cavity felt hollow and cold as she sat on the steps to Sidexa's monument the next day. The sun was setting and, the further it sank, the further her guts sank. She tried to prepare herself for Artie's appearance, but when it came she realized that was impossible. The sight of Artie made her turn to stone; in contrast, Artie smiled widely, throwing herself at Morgana and hugging her. Her body engulfed Morgana, drowning her in the smell of another realm.

"You're fine," Artie said, letting her breath go.

"Ah, yeah," Morgana mumbled, gently pushing her away. Artie's smile faded and knowing she'd been the one to cause that made Morgana bite her own lip. She averted her eyes. "I found out why I've been... lacking." She paused. "I broke my pledge."

The short silence made her heart skip. "You've... been romantic with someone?" Artie asked, her words getting a little jumbled. She sounded pained.

"You." Morgana spat the word out before she got too ashamed. Skirting around the matter would be useless.

"Oh, um... I wasn't aware of that," Artie said, sitting beside her.

The silliness of it made Morgana smile; she quickly wiped it off her face, trying to look neutral. "Sorry. I have feelings for you and I've been acting too familiar," she said, "I've lost my favor."

"What will you do now?"

"What I always do," Morgana said, her lips trembling a little. She took a deep breath. "Turn my back on you and let it wane."

"You're transferring?" Artie asked, raising her voice enough to make Morgana wince.

"No. I'm just... requesting that we curb our interactions," she said. She dared look back at Artie. Her mouth was agape and her many eyes looked humid. The vision punched a needle into Morgana's guts. "I don't really have an option."

For a long moment, they didn't move. Artie kept staring at her, mouth still agape, sharp fangs exposed. Still, they weren't threatening. All of her seemed soft and... deeply hurt. Morgana tried swallowing the knot in her throat, unable to shake the feeling that she was stepping on her only friend.

"I understand," Artie mumbled at last. She got up, looking ahead. "Come on."

The acceptance only made Morgana's insides icier. The venom that had been dripping since she'd met the widow had piled up enough to course through her whole body. In her

mouth, there was an acidic taste that she couldn't spit, lest she cursed the god whose favor she needed to regain. She got up and walked with Artie in silence.

Of course, the southern line remained a mess; she had to rely on Artie more than she'd like to. Watching her fight off multiple otherlies at the same time made bile come up Morgana's throat. No matter what she told herself, she was letting an exposed soul take the brunt of her mistakes. Still, she remained silent. When they got to Sabrael's monument, she just sat atop the steps for a moment. She let out a deep sigh and threw her head back.

I'm really trying here. I'll abstain. May the hurt serve as repentance. So, please. You know you're all I have. Maybe a direct plea would make her intentions clear. She couldn't find words to say more. In any case, Sabrael always seemed to know her before she knew herself. Morgana forced herself up, a hand on her knee, and walked towards the statue; she ignored Artie's lurking figure. When she was done with her attempt to replenish the ward, it seemed just a little bit revitalized. She sighed again. Maybe that was a sign that he'd conceded, even if not completely.

The hours crawled by as they walked side by side. Artie's face was blank; her characteristic smile was nowhere to be seen. She wasn't touching Morgana and chatting, asking her questions or suddenly lifting her off the ground. And the worst was that Morgana had asked for that. When their eyes met, she'd throw her gaze to the opposite direction. Finally, the sky lightened up a little bit. Morgana halted; Artie stopped a step ahead, giving her a puzzled look. "I'm heading home," Morgana said.

Artie's brow lifted and her lips parted. "Morgana..." she said, and all it sounded like was disappointment.

"I'll only do what's strictly necessary," Morgana said, lowering her head. "Bye, Artie." Artie just stood there, staring at her until she turned away; even then, Morgana thought she could feel her eyes on the back of her head.

When her head hit the pillow, a hand clutched her heart. Though she knew she'd done everything right, her thoughts still spun and made her question herself.

Gradually, her contract with Sabrael seemed to reinstate itself; she was able to return the warding to its regular state. It was all the proof Morgana needed to know that she had indeed breached contract — all that handholding hadn't been exactly platonic. Even after all that, as she walked alongside Artie, she felt the pull to hold her hand again. But she didn't.

Every night, Artie's face was stone cold. She didn't strike conversation anymore, far too respectful of Morgana's wishes. Somehow, she'd expected Artie to go against them; it was what characters did in romance stories. Of course, Artie probably didn't return her feelings. Morgana would always leave before sunrise; as she walked home, she'd look at the rising sun and pretend she was sitting with Artie like they used to. The warm rays felt the same as they did in her memories, so it was easy to pretend.

Repeating it day after day was more of a curse. The mix of excitement and pain made her queasy whenever Artie appeared. All the other times she'd had a crush, she'd been able to avoid the person and forget about it without a problem. But that didn't seem to be the case with Artie, whose face looked unmistakably sad whenever she looked directly at Morgana.

"Can't we even talk? Talking can be strictly platonic," Artie asked one time, just as Morgana was about to say goodbye.

"I can't trust myself," Morgana said, pointing her eyes to the dirt.

"You know," Artie started, pausing immediately. Morgana could hear her sigh. She sounded exhausted. "I like you too."

When Morgana lifted her eyes to her, she found a frown in Artie's face. "You're mad at me."

Her face softened and her eyelids dropped a little. "I shouldn't be. You're doing the right thing," Artie said, joining her hands.

"You really think so?" Morgana asked, unable to hold herself back.

"Yeah. Even if you weren't under Sabrael's pledge, I've been dead for a while, you know. Not to mention the whole keeper thing," Artie said, her gaze hardly focusing on Morgana; she seemed distant. "There's nothing here worth risking your career for. You hardly know me anyway. A transfer would be even better."

The mountain of reasons stunned Morgana, even though she'd already considered all of them. It made perfect logical sense. Selfishly, she didn't want to hear it coming out of Artie's mouth, though. Artie specifically. Her eyes burnt and she blinked hard.

"It's not fair," she said, clenching her fists.

"You chose this," Artie sighed again.

"Nothing about it is fair!" Morgana shouted, throwing her hands up. Artie's eyes widened and she took a step back, staggering. Above her, the sky lightened. "Even if you were alive, your soul wouldn't belong to you! We'd never be together anyway. It's not just my pledge. And it's not just about romance. Even a widow gets to be happier than you. Or me."

"What are you talking about?" Artie asked, the corner of her mouth curling.

"Because their souls give them certainty just by existing. She gets to feel a reassurance only Sabrael had ever given me," Morgana shouted, clenching her fists again. Her arms were trembling and she felt wet streaks run down her cheeks. It had been a long time since she'd thrown a tantrum. "And her husband just fucking died."

Artie didn't say anything. She only stared at Morgana, all her eyes wide. Morgana couldn't stop, though. "Now how can I feel reassured by a god that takes advantage of a sad and desperate teen girl?" When she saw Artie's lips part, she screamed: "Don't say you

wished for it! He knew better! He *knows* better! You don't deserve to pay for eternity because you were suffering and didn't know what to do! You were a *kid*."

"Morgana, *stop*," Artie said, her voice turning rough. Her hands were raised and it seemed like she'd grip Morgana's shoulders, but she didn't.

"Stop why? It's always 'Morgana, be quiet!' I'm talking for once!" she said, hardly seeing past the tears.

"You can't mean all of that."

"I do! You know I don't spend words on shit I don't mean," she shouted more, only to be interrupted by a cold index finger on her lips. She blinked the tears away. Artie stared at her with the most serious expression she'd ever seen her make.

"You're a little too old to be making the kind of life-ruining mistake I made at fifteen," she said in a grave tone. "Even if you do like me, we wouldn't amount to anything."

"But I want-" Morgana started, stopping when Artie disappeared before her eyes. The phantom feeling of Artie's touch remained on her lips and the tears welled up again; a ray of sun obfuscated her sight.

Morgana cried herself to sleep only to be punished by the damp pillow. She hadn't cried like that since way before the contract. After a few hours of distressed sleep, she woke up still in the clutches of anxiety. Her head throbbed as she paced around the cot, still in the sweaty clothes she'd worn under the robe the night before. She ended up giving in; she tossed about the herbs that would serve as aid — help was needed during the day — and lit a candle to focus. After getting comfortable at the table, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Searching for an exact dweller of their adjacent plane to pull was harder than aimless summoning. Still, the familiarity they shared made it possible. At least that's how Morgana saw it. A tingle ran down her spine and she opened her eyes, meeting Artie's wide eyed

figure; she stood across from her. The hammer that tortured Morgana's head turned vicious; still, she held on. Holding something non-corporeal on a plane it didn't belong to was like swimming against a strong current.

"You've been crying," Artie said.

"I had a moment. But it's over now," Morgana said, ignoring the trembling in her hands.

"I thought this was a dream," Artie sighed, sitting across from her. Her gaze took as much of Morgana in as it possibly could; she felt exposed. "But I can't dream and I wouldn't dream of you crying."

Deliberately, Morgana ignored the last phrase. "We need to have a... platonic discussion. Things can't go on like this." Her mind was being pulled in all directions as she tried to keep track of what she wanted to say and hold on to the spell.

"Yeah, but... Summoning me like this." Artie paused, her eyelids dropping as she stared at her. "Sabrael is a little easy on you."

"I guess," Morgana mumbled, "I can't go on like this, Artie. I won't stop liking you and it just hurts."

"I'd endure it," Artie said in a low voice, looking down, "I'd rather be uncomfortable with you than never see you again."

"It's not just that. I'd inevitably break the pledge. Sabrael *has* been too patient," Morgana said, taking a hand to her forehead. She pressed down, trying to make the headache go away. Everything hurt. "Then I'd be a civilian and never see you again anyway."

There was a long pause. Morgana risked a look at Artie's face; she looked distant, her lips slightly curled downwards. All she wanted to do was touch her lightly like she used to and see if she'd smile a little. Maybe even hold her hand.

"So you're asking for a transfer?" Artie asked.

"I don't want to," Morgana's voice broke. She swallowed hard to try to hide it. "I should. But I'm not leaving you here like this."

"What?" Artie's head tilted; her brow was furrowed, making the eyes on her forehead look wary.

With a long sigh, Morgana closed her eyes. It was best not to see Artie's reaction. "I'll wish that your soul is freed. Don't argue against it, please. I wouldn't be able to live on."

"Don't." Artie's voice came in a lower pitch than usual. "There's nothing you can offer in return that beats a soul."

"I have my own," Morgana said, eyes still closed. She was sure that Artie's expression would be extremely disapproving.

"*Morgana*," again, that exasperated tone, "You're not trading your soul for someone you've only known for a few months."

"Falling for you made me rethink lots of things. Especially about my priorities in life," Morgana said, the cold in her gut traveling up. "I took on being lonely as a personality trait and convinced myself that I liked it. Turns out I don't. Then I convinced myself being a good cleric was essential, because it's all I had."

She opened her eyes. Artie had indeed been staring at her, lips a little parted; Morgana could see her fangs and her face turned hot. "Now nothing makes sense anymore. But I do know how I feel about you."

"Even if you're sure now, certainty is also just a feeling that can change. I'm *used* to being an otherly by now. I made my peace with it way before I met you. I don't want you to suffer when there's no need for you to," Artie said, raising her voice a bit; she was slightly bent towards Morgana. "Sacrificing like that would just make *you* feel better."

It was a sobering slap. Morgana touched her back to the chair, taking a moment to stabilize herself. "You're really okay with it?"

"The only thing that hurts about it is that my soul will never go to the same place as yours."

Morgana paused. Her hand that rested on the table felt numb; she desperately wanted to touch it to Artie's. She averted her gaze and tried to think, massaging her temple.

"Then here's what I'll do. I'll transfer. I'll live the life I would have if I'd never met you," she said.

"That's the best you can do," Artie said, an obviously forced smile appearing on her face. "You'll do great. I don't want to hold you back."

"I wasn't finished. I'll still offer Sabrael a trade. When I die, I'll also become a keeper. In return, he'll slow down your corruption until then," Morgana said, crossing her arms to her chest.

"That's..." Artie paused, making a choking sound. "You shouldn't."

"Wouldn't you like it?" Something clawed at Morgana's heart.

"I'd love it," Artie whispered. "But I can't agree to it. I don't want to be selfish and ruin your afterlife because I'm... lonely. And in love with you."

"You don't have to tell me to do it. I'll do it anyway. I'm also lonely and in love," Morgana said, fully aware that her cheeks were red.

"But you'll live decades. You won't like me anymore by then."

Morgana shrugged. "Maybe it doesn't matter. I can't imagine not enjoying my time with you."

"We'll still become wraiths in the end."

"Yeah." Morgana smiled. "Together. So, will you wait for me?"

Artie let out a long sigh. Something about her gave off a terribly sickly, tired image. "Look for me near the creek right by the foot of the mountain. This will make sense when you cross over. Remember it."

The cold turned to heat crossing Morgana's body, irradiating from her gut. She wanted to jump and hug Artie, but she knew she shouldn't. She still had to uphold the pledge for the rest of her career, after all. "I will." Her smile felt silly and dislocated.

Artie smiled too. She spent a good moment just looking at Morgana. "You look... really good in regular clothes. You always look good."

Her concentrated gaze made Morgana's insides implode. She tried to answer, but stammered. That made Artie chuckle. "You're really pretty," Morgana said, "But I can't say much more."

"Me?" Artie asked; it was her turn to look surprised. "I look like a monster, Morgana."

"Well... You're..." Morgana averted her eyes and bit her lip. Her cheeks were just too hot. "I said this would be a platonic discussion."

"Oh."

"You're really alright with all of this?" Morgana asked, trying to recompose herself.

"I'm scared you'll regret it."

"Let me be the one to deal with that."

Epilogue

As always, Artie crossed back to her plane of dwelling when the sun came up. She never reemerged too far from her usual spot; for an otherly, she was good at keeping her territory. She walked along the creek that guided her home, eyes always peeled for neighbors. Small critters cleared out of her way, disappearing under foliage. The usual overwhelming mist rose from the stream. In their plane, it was never night or day; everything seemed to exist all at once.

Artie's sharp sense of smell picked up on something new close to home. Something human. She walked faster, the mist turning cold against her ghostly form. The woods gave

way to meadow at the foot of the mountain. A tall woman stood there, her arms sternly crossed. When their eyes met, Artie could swear she had a heart still, because it hurt. The woman smiled and the wrinkles on her forehead eased. Though she was much older, it was definitely her.

"Morgana!" Artie shouted, running across the meadow to meet her. Then, she held back, trying to curb her enthusiasm. The pause gave her enough time to think. "You look... awfully young."

"There are ailments that even Olmus' best clerics can't heal," she said, her smile dropping a little. "Don't look so concerned. I had time to work through death." She uncrossed her arms and looked down. "I get to wear pajamas forever."

Artie chuckled. "Have they given you trouble yet? You smell fresh. They'll come for you hard."

"Nevermind that," Morgana said, smiling and lifting a hand to her. "I never forgot anything I promised you. But not seeing you for so long, I fear my mental image of you has become too abstract."

"What do you mean?" Artie asked, realizing her fingers were shaky as she took Morgana's hand. She could tell that some streaks of her hair were lighter than the others; somehow, her face looked even more serious than before, as if her bones were sharper.

"I mean we'll have to get to know each other all over again," Morgana squeezed her hand. Her smile was shaky too. "So we have some catching up to do."

Morgana's hand had no warmth to it anymore. There were deep hollows under her eyes and her wrist seemed thinner than it should be. "How are you feeling?" Artie asked.

"It doesn't hurt anymore. For the first time in a long time, I don't feel exhaustion and pain," Morgana said, "And I get to see you. Right now, I feel good. Do you?" She smiled as she looked at Artie, expectant.

"I missed you, but I wish it had taken longer."

"That's antithetical," Morgana took a step closer, holding Artie's hand near her face.

"You know, I held my pledge until the very end. You were the only one who ever made it hard." She laughed a little.

Artie's whole body felt easier knowing she'd learned to laugh at some point.