

I Hope this Email Finds You Deep in a Subterranean Network of Phreatic Passages

When you're lost, the best thing you can do is stay still and wait for help. Of course, this may not be true in the case that:

1. No one is looking for you, because you had an emotional breakdown and drove into the Pyrenees without a word to anyone.
2. You are underground. Deeper than anyone has been in a thousand years.
3. There are monsters.

Linh Huynh had satisfied all three criteria, and was now *really* kicking herself for not planning her mental breakdown ahead of time. She was also kicking the monsters, and hitting them with sticks and rocks.

Get a fucking hold of yourself, she thought, chucking her raft into the river and diving in after it.

The giant spiders scrambled to the edge of the water in pursuit and screeched at her evilly on the muddy bank, while Linh pulled herself onto the raft, cringing at the pain in her stomach. The raft spun around in the eddies of the river, and Linh whirled away, downstream.

She lay on her backpack, sinking into her stomach. *Three days, and nothing but ruins, sentient oozes, wild dogs, clay horses, and bugs. Horrible things in the empty dark, ad nauseum. Ugh. Don't think nauseum. You're gonna be sick.* As Linh marinated in her thoughts, her little river joined other tributaries, and a window opened up in the rock and revealed what seemed to be a distant, dark meadow, far below. A vast rift, what may have been small towns, expanses of farmland, lakes, and roads. She stared at it all, inaccessibly, and wondered.

The window closed up, and she laid her head back and looked at the driftlights.

As each tributary joined, a new color of sediment mixed with the larger body. Thousands of glowing shards, each stream with its own pure bed of color. Sapphires, aquamarines, bits of broken bottles. Their tails formed long, thin triangles on the riverbed as they mixed. She reached down as the raft passed and let a handful of them amass in her palm. She scooped it out, the crystals mixed with darker silt. She let her handful disintegrate in the current.

There was larger sediment now too, thousands on thousands of ghastly white light bulbs glowing under the surface. Disconnected, scattered, jumbled-up piles of them, still somehow providing light beneath the water, who knows how many layers deep.

Now that was certainly not normal. The 5th or 6th not-normallest thing she'd seen this week, sure, but it stuck out. It was nice to have a source of bright light again. Her flashlight had finally given up the ghost yesterday, and she had tossed it for dead weight, resigned to the unlikelihood of finding fresh, undamaged batteries in the otherworldly maze. There was no chance of it, that is, unless some enterprising human adventurer had died clutching a pack of AAAs in a cool, dry place some time relatively recently. But Linh had yet to see even a single human skeleton.

She looked onward, through the incandescent haze. Ahead, the river pooled, and a broad, quiet lake formed at the edge of a mass of rock. The current brought her straight out into the middle and left her there, floating, the white underlighting from the thousands of clustered light bulbs giving everything an unwholesome, angelic look.

Linh could see the dim outline of the entire cavern-section now, a massive, closed room with only two exits. The river continued to the south, but there was something blocking the passage of everything but

the water; the light bulbs had piled in a heap at the end of the lake. It was a portcullis, maybe. It was hard to see.

She slid off her backpack, tugged off her shoes, and extracted herself from her shirt and pants, leaving them folded on the wood. With nothing on, she slipped into the water. She expected the shock of cold water to make her regret her curiosity instantly, but the lake was warm.

The momentum of the dive took her halfway to the bottom, and there she turned downward and forced herself further down, until she was within reach of the incandescent bulbs.

Her swipe stirred them up, like they were fighting to land in her palm rather than evade it. She grabbed one, like an apple. There were ten thousand of them, all identical, all glowing bright, making the true bottom of the lake impossible to see for the false topography. Holding it tight, she kicked off from the unsteady surface, making the light bulbs rattle and shift in the water like ping pong balls. She came to the surface with a slow, deliberate breath, with her hair floating on the water like oil. It was dark again. The air was colder than the water, like waking from a dream. She scraped her chest on the raft pulling herself out, and it stung terribly, but it didn't draw blood.

She sat on the raft and examined the bulb. It had an odd presence, though that feeling might have been the simple fact of its inexplicable existence in what was otherwise a place dreamt up by some sort of Tolkein fanatic. It was jarringly modern. There was a serial number running along the spiral of the cap, "H8RqSA7iCo," which she read aloud.

The light bulb gave a small, front-heavy pulse like a firefly.

I wonder if I can use this to charge my phone, she thought.

When she had put her clothes back on, she paddled forward, laying on her stomach.

Ahead, the river was bottlenecked by a dull, brass gate in the black wall. The raft bumped against the portcullis. She ground her teeth. Inside, just out of reach past the gate, about a body-length beyond the raft, there was a metal lever.

"Đit me!" she yelled.

It was impassable unless she ditched the raft and swam under the gate with her pack on, which was not an exciting prospect. Shaking the portcullis violently and yelling at it proved predictably unhelpful. Even with her inexplicably enhanced strength, the bars did little more than bend when she put her full weight to it. She could, she supposed, kneel precariously on the raft and bend a single bar again and again until it snapped, then do that twelve more times.

She slumped over, back against her backpack, holding the light bulb against her face.

"I would like. The gate to open," she said. The glare pressed against her eyelids.

She sat up quick, her hollow stomach rebelling against the sudden move like she'd been stabbed—the lever had moved. The gate was opening.

"Oh shit, for real?" she managed to say before pain forced her back down. As the river-gate rose, the raft began to be sucked through, individual light bulbs slipping along under it, bouncing away down the black tunnel. Linh stopped the raft for a second, putting her foot against the gate until it rose above her head. Then she kicked off, and she and the raft were swept down, into the dark.

For what seemed like eons, the fossil-phreatic tunnel wound and twisted in the black, making Linh cling more actively to the raft as it was battered against each meandering wall.

"Since my wishes are apparently being granted," she said, "it would be nice if I could see further down the passage." And, to her delight, the light bulb lit up again, and the light separated from the filament

and escaped the bulb, becoming a sourceless, fist-sized mote that hovered in front of her like a dandelion. It bobbed, and then flew off about ten meters in front of the raft, lighting the turbulent rapids ahead.

Eventually, Linh was able to find a dry place to pull aside, an intersecting tunnel where no water flowed. The mote beckoned her to follow it up the slanting passage.

“So, you can understand me?” Linh asked.

The mote nodded in the air.

“Move in a circle.”

It moved in a circle.

“How is it possible that you know English?”

The mote did nothing, but then after a moment moved again, and traced the outline of a body.

“Oh,” Linh said. “You were a person?”

A swift downward nod.

“Can you help me? I’m looking for a town, or somewhere where people live. I’ll die if I can’t find food, and I need something to defend myself from monsters.”

The mote nodded, and motioned, *follow me*.

It was totally dark now that they had moved away from the river, and Linh struggled to keep up as the mote fluttered forward past several fractal intersections until they reached a keyhole passage with a dead-end.

“What is it?” Linh asked the light like it was a pet dog.

It answered, advancing to cast its light over an elaborate metal treasure chest and, beside it, a long, gibbon-esque skeleton sprawled out along the length of it. The skeleton was face down, holding one arm stretched out towards a stout silver broadsword. A silver shield of similar craftsmanship lay nearby, and a gold key stuck part way out of the metal chest.

“This is amazing,” Linh said. “Is it safe to open?”

The light weaved down into the chest, and came back up again, nodding.

She went over and popped open the lid. While rationally she knew that carrying around thirty pounds of gold was unreasonable in her current state, the classic image of a chest full of gold coins still managed to drive a flicker of disappointment over her face as the box opened to reveal only a single item.

She took out the silver tiara and turned it this way and that.

“It’s got a nice weight to it, huh?” she said.

The mote nodded.

She put it on. “It fits. I would feel very regal if I wasn’t starving to death.”

The mote wavered like laughter.

Linh knelt down and met the skeleton’s gaze as she went to pick up the longsword. “This might be more effective at killing things than a sharp stick.”

She stood up and they walked a while, further down the tunnel, Linh swinging the sword like a medieval crusader.

Here, further down the tunnel, was a man-made passage, and a place where the walls opened up into a square annex, several floors tall, and empty. As Linh and the mote moved out into the center of the annex, Linh’s eye caught something moving at the edge of her vision, disappearing behind the archway on the second floor.

“Someone’s there. Did you see that?” Linh said to the mote.

Linh swung the shield off her backpack and readied her sword.

She ascended quickly, excitement turning her pain and weakness into a powerful, viscous euphoria. She pressed herself against the edge of the archway leading into the upper tunnel and listened.

Coming towards her now was the muffled sound of heavy, metal shoes.

Before she could meditate on a reasonable course of action, the shadow jumped at her and shouted “Hi there!” which was met with the measured response of Linh’s shield in its face.

The attacker fell to the floor, seemingly unfazed, though now on the floor. It was a metal child.

“Woah! Cool tiara,” the metal child said, getting up and falling over again. “I’ve never been bashed in the face with a shield by a princess before.” They wore a white tunic and brown leggings, but other than that were entirely silver—about half Linh’s height, with a wave of coily hair like steel wool. “Are you royalty?”

“Um,” Linh raised her eyebrows.

“Which kingdom?”

“Would...” she said, “would you believe that I’m the lost princess of the Land of... Dragons that Transcend Boundaries?”

“I would believe that! I’ve never heard of it! And I thought princesses weren’t allowed anymore. You must be from the north.”

“I wouldn’t know—seeing how I’m a lost princess.”

“You must be pretty lost. Cool sparksprite.”

“This?” Linh gestured to the mote. “What do you know about it?”

The kid shrugged. “Ode’imin says not to mess with ghost lights. I’m Sam.”

“I’m Linh.” She stuck out a hand to help them to their feet.

“Nice to meet you,” said Sam as Linh fell over on top of them.

“You are much heavier than you look,” she said.

“That depends who’s looking!” they said. “You can call me Sam or Amari or Samira. My full name is Samarium Sweet, but everyone calls me Sam because I’m the very first Samarium ever.”

“S—” Linh’s mouth moved around the name, but seemed unable to reproduce it. She coughed. “Samarium?”

“Yes?” Sam said, like they had been called on in class.

“Like the element?”

“It’s a family name.”

“*This* is a fever dream,” Linh declared to no one. “*This* is a product of my dying brain’s untethered whimsy.”

Samira looked around, trying to find who she was talking to.

“I assume you’re close personal friends with Yttrium and Ytterbium?” she asked.

“Are they from the Land of Dragons that Exceed Limitations too? What’s an *element*?”

“An element is a kind of atom with chemical properties based on its—wait really? Your name is *literally* Samarium, a substance I can only assume you are made entirely out of, and you don’t know what an element is?”

“Yeah, it’s a family name.”

"I got that—does your world work off different fundamental principles or do you just have different names for things? How can I understand you? What language are you speaking? What is a ghost light? Do you have any food?"

"Uh: I don't know, the Fulcrum, Scintlarian, I don't know, and yes! Hey, is he with you?" Sam pointed to the giant robotic sentry at the end of the hallway.

"Shit," Linh said. "I thought I lost this guy."

The sentry was bracing itself against the rock with six of its tubey legs while a port on its chest began to glow and shake.

"Dive!" she grabbed the kid.

They fell behind the doorway as a stream of explosives flew past them and detonated on the far wall.

Linh had just enough time to raise her shield as a long, retractable limb backhanded her down the hall. She twisted in the air, hitting the ceiling, the floor, and the wall in an order that she wasn't able to track precisely.

She flipped herself and struggled to stand, and a small silver hand grabbed her's and the two rounded the corner into an open space at the edge of the river.

"Hey, I can... see my... house from... here," Sam said, chest heaving like a cartoon character. They pointed up at the opposite bank which rose into a small, granite city, glowing gold in the gloom. A massive white bridge stretched above them, from their side of the river to the city, a hundred feet above.

"Do you breathe oxygen? How are you alive? How do you move?" Linh asked.

"What?" Sam said. "Oh, well—I'm alive because I just decided to be. No, wait, well... I can move because I decided to be *me*, but I was alive before that. Didn't you decide to be alive too?"

"Follow up: what is this thing? and how do we kill it?"

The hallway shook, rolling the steps of the sentry over the river-rush.

"It's a seedspader. You gotta hit it in: the eye." They pointed at their eye.

Linh bit her lip and readied her sword and stood stock still, just to the right of the mouth of the hallway.

A rusted, nasty claw gripped the stone on either side of the entry, and the sentry poked its head out, a single forward-facing crystalline red eye pointing towards the river like a predatory lizard.

Sam pantomimed to her. "In th' eye!" they emphasized.

On their motion, the beast twisted its neck toward Sam, bringing the mass of its body with it.

"Hyra!" Linh heaved the sword across its neck, cleaving the head, eye and all, from the body.

The head fell to the earth, the body after.

Sam stood frozen with their eyebrows and arms raised as the body of the beast settled in the dust.

"I mean yeah, man, you do you," Samira said. "Whatever works, like, you don't have to go for the eye but like, like it's whatever I guess, like, traditionally."

Linh knelt and stabbed out the dim red node with her pocket knife. It came away cleanly, two wires connecting it to the skull like the optic nerves of an animal. The eye itself was a plastic crystal, the inside jammed with circuits and chips.

"Never seen someone cut off its head before: that's some sword you got, Ms. Princess. Hey, are you gonna eat that?" They pointed at the eye.

"What? No—"

"Yeah, you're right, plastic always makes your stomach hurt. Hey you saved my life, I guess I owe you a life debt. Do you wanna see my house?"

"Is that, like, the reward for saving your life? I get to see your house?"

Sam continued to smile.

"To be honest," Linh said, "I wasn't specifically saving your life as much as taking advantage of it being distracted by your..." she gestured.

"Don't be modest! You're a hero! You're the only person I ever saw who slayed a seedspader single-handed."

"Slew a seedspader. And: single-handedly. Why is it called that?"

They heaved up their shoulders. "Follow me!"

They waved Linh over to another passage further downstream, under the wide bridge. An hidden staircase spiraled narrowly upward. They climbed, Samarium bounding up the steps two at a time. Linh felt that at any moment she might faint from lightheadedness and tumble all the way back down to the bottom, but the promise of civilization, and food, kept her moving.

"I'm so excited for my dad and grandma to meet you," Amari said as they crossed the bridge. "I bet they've never met a human either. Do you have a dad and grandma?"

"I do," said Linh, following Samarium into the quiet city. The mote of light trailed behind Linh, almost reluctantly, and they climbed the granite stairs. "It's safe to say that all humans have one dad and two grandmothers. Are yours also made of metal?"

"Well, no, they're made of rock. They're not really my dad or grandma like you've: I'm adopted, so they're my family."

"What are their names?"

"Well my dad is Stable Samarskite, he's a council member, and my grandmother is Ode'imin. She's the Magistra which means she facilitates the whole council! That's why we live in the capital."

"This is the capital?" Linh asked. "It's not very big." They passed a courtyard, orange with light from windows. Linh stumbled on nothing, fuzzing vision, mixing the blue with the orange.

"There's a lot more to it that you can't see from here, but it's nowhere near as big as the other cities."

"I'm just glad it's any kind of city," Linh said. "I thought I would die in the dark."

At last, they came to the end of a winding brick-lined path that dipped partly below the plateau over the river. Amari stopped at the dead-end, where a window box and a bright red door were set in walls of stone. "This is our house," they said. "Dad, I'm back!" they yelled as they went in, beckoning Linh to follow.

"Welcome back!" said a deep voice from downstairs.

"Tell him about me too, please," Linh whispered to Sam.

"Oh, right!" Sam said. "Dad, I brought a friend!"

"A friend, huh?" came the voice. "I'll be up in a minute. Please don't let your friend loose in the house without me. I'll get the terrarium."

"No, Dad!" they laughed. "She walks upright like us. She's a princess."

There was a crash like something had been dropped, and then a man emerged cautiously from the stairwell.

For being made of rock, presumably of some kind of samarskite, the councilman was remarkably human-shaped, with a strong jaw and chiseled features. His surface was black, with white and orange contours. He wore simple, elegant clothing, like his child.

“Oh,” he said. “Wow. Huh.”

“Hi, I’m Linh,” said Linh. “You have a lovely home.” She swayed in the air like the muscles in her legs had better things to do than hold her up. The swaying was nice, but, very quickly, the floor decided to join in too, and she lost consciousness.

Linh spent the next few days recovering, taking inventory of the city and its varied inhabitants, and being pestered incessantly by Samarium about what it was like to live on the surface. Samarskite protected her from the brunt of his child’s inquiries.

Linh developed a good read on Sam and Samarskite, but the third elemental, Samira’s grandmother, who Linh saw at the house only once, was impossible for her to read. A small, old woman with skin made of stone and compact dirt with strawberry flowers blooming on her head, Ode’imin spoke little, and seemed to regard Linh with unshakable distrust from the moment they met. The light mote, which Linh had thought of as a harmless companion, didn’t help. Ode’imin suggested it was a potential threat, citing something called “soul-fettering,” and using some other terms Linh didn’t understand, and asked Linh to give it up. Linh handed it over without hesitation, and that was the last she saw of it.

“Now that Linh’s better, can I give her a tour of the city?” Amari asked on day three.

“What do you think, Linh?” Samarskite asked. “It might be good to get some insight into the Assembly from a certified guide. And, I’ll admit,” he added, aside, “you’d be doing me and my stack of requisition requests a big favor by getting Sam out of the house.”

“Deal,” Linh said. And so, Linh’s third, fourth, and fifth days in the Demarchy was spent with Samira introducing her to an endless slew of councilmembers and merchants and ambassadors and fishermen and teachers and politicians, and presenting enthusiastically every sideroom, alleyway, bookshop, museum, mural, garden, tunnel, temple, catwalk, overlook, fountain, library, hallway, doorway, pond, and puddle that the Assembly seemed to possess. And Linh returned home every day somehow more exhausted than any of the nights she had been fighting for her life and sleeping on a hard wooden raft with her backpack as a pillow.

Then, that night, on her sixth day in the Demarchy, unable to sleep, she overheard something.

“...she’s shown no inclination?”

“Not that I’ve heard.”

“She can’t possibly be content here. Away from home.”

“Sam thinks she’s nearly adjusted already... A new home. That she wants to stay.”

“That child is a wishful thinker. They need friends their own age,” Ode’imin’s voice was cracked, harsh. It was only the third occasion Linh had actually heard her use it. “But it’s possible,” the old woman continued, “that that is what she could want. The other human—the young girl—she was *adamant* against returning to the surface. But Linh is grown. She knows what she wants, and she’s smart enough to hide her intent. She’s cunning. And her human strength would rival an angel’s, I suspect, if the Porter’s girl is any indication.”

“I suspect you’re right,” she heard Samarskite say. And Linh felt the white hot anger of being talked about.

“In any case, we can’t keep it hidden forever,” said the old woman. “Perhaps it would be best to designate the Southmaw as off-limits until the council has voted on the demolition.”

“Agreed,” Samarskite said.

“What’s the Southmaw.” Linh walked out into the living room.

“Oh! Linh,” Samarskite exclaimed.

“What are you talking about,” Linh said.

“Linh,” Samarskite continued. “I’m sorry. I wanted to find a better way to tell you.”

Samarskite and Ode’imin looked at each other. “We can’t let you leave.” Ode’imin said in her cracked and sad voice.

“Why,” she said. “And why didn’t you tell me there was another human down here?”

“We thought it unwise for the moment—there was a minor prophecy concerning the interaction of two humans—but please trust me, we’re just trying to keep you safe. With her it wasn’t a problem, but... If you were to return to the surface, even if you never told a soul what you’ve seen here, if some other human were to figure out where you went and how to get here... We are too fragile right now to be known to you on the surface. I know that sounds xenophobic or isolationist at best, but you have to trust us. When the Ophanim discovered this place there were a thousand years of bitter oppression. I would sooner die than let that happen again.”

Linh took a deep breath. “I understand,” she said. “I was curious what lay beyond the passage in the Southmaw, but I can’t honestly think of a reason I would want to go back up anyway. I’ll keep your secret”

That night, Linh packed her bag in perfect silence, logging every item as it was stowed. Lighter. Bedroll. Water bottle. Ancient gold key. Crystal shards. Painkillers. Non-perishable food. She strapped the shield to the back with the buckle clips, and the sword she held stoutly in her hand.

She moved silently, and so slowly as to be nearly motionless, one foot at a time over the stone. But when she entered the living room, there was Ode’imin, in her chair near the door.

“Linh, go back to bed,” she said.

“No,” Linh said quietly. “You can’t keep me here.”

“I cannot let you leave.”

“How do you expect to stop me?”

Linh was struck by a blast of wind and shoved backward, almost to the wall.

“Go. To your room,” said Ode’imin.

Linh hooked one of the kitchen chairs and hucked it at the old woman, following through in a lunge with her sword and an involuntary shout. Ode’imin waved a thin golden disk, and the chair stopped mid-flight and dropped to the floor. In the same motion she deflected the sword with her hand and let Linh’s momentum lead her into the wall.

Linh whirled around and struck Ode’imin with the shield, but was caught off guard again and uppercut by another blast of air, her head hitting the ceiling. She fell, vaguely aware that she had been caught on her way to the ground by Samarskite, hazy in a blur of legacy cranial trauma, and passed out.

In the dark, there was nothing but the voice. A bright dot at the bottom of an infinite shaft. So blue. Loftily blue, and it tugged at her, and she fought to escape its gravity. When she did, she noticed two things.

1. She was tied to a chair.
2. It was a very comfortable chair.

The two things, the comfortable chair and the uncomfortable situation, did not negate themselves. Linh found it warranted to struggle wildly against her bonds, which managed to make her miraculously even more comfortable, as she sunk further into the chair.

She looked around. The office must have been Samarkite's—papers on the desk in that strange script, books on the wall, a map of the region with its territories colored in by a child's hand.

She groaned.

"Please! Please? Come on," came a muffled voice from the hall.

There was a grunt, and the doors were opened by two guards. Samarium stepped in and the doors closed behind them.

"Boy, am I glad to see you're okay," they said. "I heard you got bumped. On your noggin."

"Thanks for the sympathy. My nog... my head is killing me." She motioned to the doors. "Do you know where my stuff is? I have some Ibuprofin—pain medicine. It's in my backpack."

"Oh sure, it's all in the store room next to the council."

"What's going on down there now? What happened? The Magistra was talking about a path to the surface? When I brought it up she got really mad."

"Yeah, so," Sam looked at the wall, "you're... not allowed to leave. They're in a meeting right now about closing up the Southmaw. They don't want anyone else coming in."

"Why do you think they haven't closed it already, if they're so afraid of humans?"

"I don't know. Granny did mention that she had a human friend when she was my age. But I've certainly never seen one. Other than you."

"But your parents have talked to one. A young girl?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about her to you."

"Well now you've made me *really* curious," Linh laughed, waiting for a response. "But I can respect that. So... what do you think they're going to do about the exit?"

"I don't know, but Cyrus has had the explosives ready to go for hours, so I think they're just waiting on the vote. I'm sorry you might not get to go home."

"Me too. It's alright though. That other human, was she your age or younger?"

"Well I haven't met her yet, she's been working down in the north with the Porter's Union, but she came here once with a message from the prophet about—um. Whoops. Let's talk about something else."

"Sure. So, this is your dad's office?"

"I hang out here a lot. I like watching the people in that courtyard with the ten-pointed star."

"Are you good with knots?"

"I'm great at knots!" Sam said. "My dad takes me boating sometimes."

"Do you know what this one is called?"

"That's a Steller's double overhand. I can show you how to tie one if I had some string."

"I would love to learn from you, Sam. Do you want to use this rope?"

"Sure, the overhand part is easy, but the double overhand is where it gets really—" Sam paused for a moment, squinting, then shot up. "Hey! You're trying to pull a fast one on me!"

"Sorry..." Linh laughed. "It was worth a shot."

Sam leaned back on the desk, brows knit. "I can't untie you. And I'm sorry too, I wish I could help. I know you have a duty to your people and how deep you must care deeply for them."

"My p... Yes. My duties as a princess are rigorous and overwhelming at times, but it will all be worth it one day. I need to get back to them as soon as I can. I've fallen really too far behind already."

"What kinds of things do you do as princess?" they asked, leaning forward a bit.

“Well...” Linh said, “Every day at 6:00 I balance books on my head and walk around to practice my posture.”

“Of course,” said Sam, nodding intently.

“Then I respond to my... letters. I get about a hundred letters each morning. Each one is like a little quest, but mostly it’s writing and thinking about how to phrase things—the hardest part is tying the paper to the doves. And after that I do rowing for about an hour.”

“Do you have a river like the Diamonsoul?”

“We practice in the lake.”

“Woah. Then what?”

“Usually I have classes after that. They’re a lot like yours. I meet with my tutors and learn chemistry and zoology and all sorts of things. And in the evenings I often attend galas where I meet dukes and doctors and guild masters and heads of state.”

“That sounds like fun! Do you like it?”

“I’m very good at it.”

“Sure, you can be good at something and not like it.

“I don’t think I know anyone else better at it than me.”

“Wouldn’t you rather just lay in a field?”

“God damn... My head... It’s killing me.” Unable to demonstrate this sentiment by pressing her hand to her forehead, she leaned back and looked beleagueredly at the rose-colored ceiling.

“Do you want me to get your Aibi Proping?” Sam asked.

“That would be really nice of you. Can you bring the whole backpack? Or just the brain if it’s too heavy for you. It’s detachable.”

“Be right back!” they said, hopping to the door.

“Thank you so much, Sam.”

Samira was back in a few minutes with Linh’s bag, which they dropped on the floor in front of the desk.

“I didn’t know what the *brain* was so I brought the whole thing,” they said. “The guards searched it but they didn’t take anything except for a can of oil or something. What does your medicine look like?”

“Here, just let me look, I’ll be faster.”

“We’ve got time. What’s it look like?”

“Sam, you can just give me the bag.”

Sam was silent for a few seconds. Then they said, “You know, it’s funny? I’m pretty sure I saw them bring you to the healing ward. You were bleeding a little, and when you came out, you weren’t.”

“Sam, humans are a lot more complicated than blood and skin. A lot can go wrong with someone without showing on the surface.”

“Have you been lying to me this whole time?” Amari asked.

“No... No, Sam, of course not. I care about you as a friend. Of course I want to go home, but I would never hurt you to get there.”

They looked down. “Do you think I’m annoying?”

“Sam, you’re you! That’s beautiful. There’s nothing more important than that.”

They smiled a little and looked back up at her. “Okay. I trust you. So, what does your medicine look like?”

“It’s the tall red cylinder. It says ‘Bic,’” Linh said.

“Medicine has such funny names,” Samarium said, handing the lighter to her. “I should go. They’re wrapping up, so you shouldn’t have to be tied up much longer. And, hey, maybe you can teach me about human physiology later. Sometimes the older kids and I get together after dinner and do presentations on topics we know a lot about. You could do one about human culture. Present Patience is going to do one on monster gardens.”

“I’ll think about it. That sounds fun.” she smiled, and Sam left, handing off her backpack to the guards as they closed the doors.

Linh let her smile settle with a calm breath out, and flicked the lighter, working carefully at the ropes.

When they fell away, she rubbed her hands and looked around. Behind the chair, there was a shelf with a model ship, a crystal-cased treaty paper, and a powerful cudgel with a gilded knob.

She took the cudgel, testing its weight, then searched every drawer in Samarskite’s desk. She pocketed several things that looked useful—a chunk of sunstone, a letter opener, a pendant of blue amber that looked suspiciously similar to the one Ode’imin used to manipulate air currents, and all the documents written in the language she couldn’t read.

A moment later, a violent burst of wind knocked the doors open. The guards jumped to attention, the one on the left almost even managing to draw his sword before falling to the ground for cudgel-related reasons. His compatriot, nearly able to take a swing, found himself doubled over from a blow to the stomach and subsequently falling out a shattering second story window.

Linh flicked her backpack into the air and clipped it on in one motion, which would have made either a five-star gymnastics move or a very lame magical girl transformation if anyone had been watching. Running down the hall at a light trot, she came down where the council chamber let out, to the storage room that Amari had shown her on their exhaustive tour of 78 best hide-and-seek spots in the Assembly.

There, behind the door, were her sword and shield. Also one of her 2-liter water bottles, which must have had fallen out when Sam took the bag.

The council room beside was empty, but she heard murmuring in the courtyard. She took a breath, readied her sword and shield, and bounded up the stairs.

Outside, council members were spreading out twos and threes, mixing with the citizenry, becoming part of the town. No one noticed her, an anomaly in a city of anomalies, and she walked with her head bowed and weapon down as she marched toward the junction at the edge of town.

As she was nearing the edge—a wall of rock arching up and becoming ceiling—she heard ruckus and the clatter of many voices from the winding streets behind. She stopped, still stooped, and stood in the center of the market square, where the south end bordered by pillars, all the stones tiled black and white like a chess board. And she waited as the armored footsteps filed in.

The first thing she had learned from fighting monsters three times a day for the past week was that you should never allow yourself to be surrounded by pack animals.

She stared dully at the cavern ceiling while the guards surrounded her.

“Drop your weapon!” said the guard on the north, who had moved the least.

Linh unclipped her backpack and it hit the floor.

"Your weapon," repeated the guard, although they didn't quite finish the word before a broadsword made an appearance in their diaphragm.

Linh's hand grabbed the body and her feet spun the two of them around each other like a waltz.

The two closest soldiers moved in to flank the new position, and the rhythm of the waltz carried a shield into the left one's cranial cavity and pushed her sword into the heart of the other.

She parried a blow from the fourth as they swung desperately, and Linh's left leg moved to deliver a toppling strike to the spot behind the knee. A sick crack.

The guard scrambled away on the floor, tracking blood on the checker pattern as she tried to stand.

Linh admired the patterns of blood like they were a Rorschach test. A very slippery Rorschach test, so said her brain. Her feet took her to a dry spot, clockwise around the recovering guard.

What *was* that strange red ink pattern on the floor? A pointy wolf? A wolf with a proboscis? Six angry bees? It must be some kind of dwarf. Or a snowstorm.

The guard stood falteringly, like her knee was broken.

"Hey. What's your name?" Linh said sleepily.

"Lucaria Beveled Edge" the guard spat.

"Beveled Edge! Good friend," Linh said, "do you know where I can find someone who can actually fight?"

"Don't try to bait me."

"Did it work for them?" Linh gestured to the dead. "Not being baited into tripping up, I mean." She spread her arms wide open. "It's a genuine question. Who around here could actually stand up to me one on one?"

The soldier said nothing, but readied herself.

"The Magistra put up a good fight," said Linh. "I wonder if she'll be in the show tonight. I'm desperate for a rematch."

"You want a fight?" said the guard. "Find those Eastern burrow wasps. If your tongue were as sharp as your stinger, you'd fit right in."

"Is that supposed to be an insult?"

Beveled Edge charged. Linh let her in, and when their blades connected, she held them, locked at their apex. Bevel's strength gave way far too easily, and Linh grabbed her wrist, forcing the sword to fall. Bevel tried to break the grapple, stopped in horror at the impossible strength of her human opponent, looking up, like a frightened animal, at Linh. This only lasted for a moment, as Bevel then gasped and fumbled at her abdomen, which newly included (one) inconveniently placed letter opener. She fell over dead.

Beyond the market, up inside the hall, where the fossil-phreatic tunnels began again, Linh heard voices and hammering. As she put her pack on and passed the columns, she heard a deeper voice say "That's the last of it. Where's the Magistra?"

The reply was lost in another round of banging.

"Alright, now that's the last. Leave it for Cirrus, we're done for now."

Linh flattened herself into an alcove, struggling to be as thin and still as possible as the demolition party returned to the Assembly. She turned her head away as their lanterns came and went. When she could no longer hear their voices or see the sway of the light, she pushed off of the wall and began to run.

It was a hurried, determined run, her backpack bouncing ungracefully along on her hips.

Once she was on the surface, wherever in the country she was, she could run for miles. The backpack was a hindrance, but she estimated it would only add a few extra minutes on each mile. And, with four liters of water at her disposal, she could keep it up for a good while.

Would they be chasing her?

How committed were they? Would they hunt her down for what she'd done? She scratched the wording of that thought out of her head. She'd done what she'd had to. There was no objective difference between the guards and the monsters. They were just obstacles. But how persistent would those obstacles be? If the cavern exit let out deep in the wilderness far from any city would they come for her with ancient magic and crossbows? Or would they accept that the secret of their subterranean empire was potentially forfeit?

And of course she had to ask it: Was there anything to gain by exposing it? She could be a legend. The woman who discovered a new, secret world. She certainly would have to explain her absence... somehow. But could she prove there was an entire secret world underground without sounding like a complete fraud and/or lunatic? Maybe. She had artifacts. She would have to think about it. Carbon date the strange teeth. See about the markings on the shield. Test for the chemical that made the sunstone glow.

And oh, there would be the emails.

Oh.

If she really had been gone over a week, she would have to answer to everyone in her entire department, redressing the assumption that she had died, not to mention the assailment from her family. Hmm. Why hadn't she died then? In retrospect, it would have been much easier to have died tragically in the caverns. Damn her good sense and reflexes.

"There you are!" Sam yelled.

"Fucking hell!" Linh said. "Fuck!"

The kid was standing next to a pile of dynamite as tall as them.

Linh quickly wiped the blood off her sword. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Yo! Dad's looking all over for you. Hey! Dad! I fou—"

Linh was already running forward, and clamped a hand over their mouth. "Quiet!" she whispered.

"What's up?" they asked.

"These explosives are incredibly volatile."

"Oh gosh, really?" Sam whispered back. "What's volatile?"

"It means very dangerous. They go off at the slightest sound. You should head on back to the city. I'll go find your dad."

"He definitely wanted you to stay in the Assembly," Sam said. "What are you doing here already?"

"He does, no—they convinced me. They just wanted my help checking the dynamite before we seal the entrance."

"Will it work? The rock will block the entrance? Do you think it'll damage that statuette?"

"Pretty sure it'll block it up. I just need to check one thing. Can you do me a favor and run back and tell them I'll be right there?"

"Um. Can you..." Sam said. "Can you come with me?"

"What for?"

Samira shuffled their feet. "I'm scared to get lost," they said. "I've never been up this far."

"You've got this," Linh replied, "you're a big kid."

"It's just. I followed them out here and I didn't have a lantern. I can't see as good in the dark as they can. Please, will you?"

"Alright. I'll come with you halfway—if... you can tell me how to say your last sentence correctly."

"Oh—I can't see *well* in the dark?"

"See, you're a smart kid."

"So you'll walk me back?"

"Sure. Just halfway."

She doffed her backpack and hid it in an alcove.

The two of them walked back several hundred feet in silence, Linh nervously flicking the wind charm around her neck. So fucking close. Sam hummed a song she didn't know.

When they made it to the short ladder that led to the geode room in the space above the majority of the city, Linh said, "Think you can make it back from here? We're basically in your backyard."

"Can you just come a little further?"

"Sorry, Sam."

"Please? Pleasepleaseplease?"

"Sam! I said *no*. Stop complaining."

She turned to go, at Sam's protest, but before she could retreat from the edge of the ladder she felt the wind turn, and she began to be dragged toward the room below.

There was an instant of sheer animal terror as she became weightless. She twisted in the air and rolled with her shield as she hit the ground.

Admittedly she had never done an acrobatic leap or somersault while carrying a broadsword and shield, but it went off relatively well for someone coming from an eight-year gymnastics hiatus. In the same motion as the landing, she (unintentionally) blocked the bolas aimed at the bottom of the ladder with her wrist and (reflexively) slashed the larynx of the nearest soldier.

There were nine soldiers in the room, not including the Magistra, or Samarskite, or the one bleeding out from the throat.

Linh took a step forward.

"Go!" shouted Samarskite, and two soldiers dashed past her toward the ladder.

The one that made it there managed to climb a little over halfway before taking a letter opener to the shoulder and tumbling back down.

Samarskite sprang at Linh and grappled her, pinning her arms.

"Did you just impale Bright Drapery with my goddamn letter opener?" he said.

"Beveled Edge sends her regards too." Linh wheezed. She struggled to break his balance, but he tightened his grip, lifting her slightly off the floor.

Linh's elbow to his abdomen met with solid stone. He twisted them both around into the path of an oncoming soldier, and before Linh could do anything to react, a rapier had pierced fully through her side, stopping only when it hit Samarskite's chest.

Linh screamed. A holy ringing imitation of all nine hells, white hot, blind, adding another two or three hells as the blade came back out.

The soldier made to go for it again, through the heart, and Linh forced her arms forward and grabbed the sword by the blade, forcing it back against the soldier's grip, screaming as the surface became

painted entirely red. She grabbed the hilt from his startled hands and swung it around, bashing it rudely into Samarskite's head, whose temple made an unpleasant cracking sound.

He stumbled and let go, and Linh shot away with the wind charm to the base of the ladder and then up it, into the passage cudgeling an escaping soldier into the wall.

"*No one leaves this room!*" Her voice belonged to someone else.

"Seriously?!" Samarskite said. "With my decorative cudgel?"

Hardly conscious, Linh plunged down, out of the hall into Samarskite with her shield, smacking him again and again, chipping away his face.

She tripped him, bludgeoned a guard, and impaled another.

"Enough!" Ode'imin yelled, hoisting Linh in a trembling gale and jettisoning her from the chamber.

She tumbled over the black bridge between the geode room to the arcology tower and slid a few feet on the smooth surface with a squeaking sound, coming to rest against the low wall.

The rest of the Assembly was spread out below, like an audience.

Linh stood up, no trace of pain or anger left in her at all. She felt only her heartbeat, but she turned it off, and under it, there was nothing but a smooth, silver line of intent, the line that her sword had traced in the air as it cleaved through empty space. Through absolutely nothing. Imaginary bodies. The trace of a sparkler waved in the dark on the fourth of July.

To their credit, they all attacked at once.

In the midst of so many enemies, each individual strike felt like putting a period at the end of a stanza. Each of her responses were specific, tailored to the individual, the length of the stanza dependent on the skill of the soldier, the motions of each like a poem about the *idea* of movement rather than motion itself—not at all like the steps and swings of someone who was in the room that the events were happening in—but through the eyes or the voice of the body of someone there many years later, in a museum gallery, writing a poem about a painting based on a stained glass window whose church was bombed in the mid 40s and whose pieces were scattered everywhere and never fully put back together; a poem about the bits of colored glass on the sand, the pieces that were not reassembled, but were smoothed down and spat up by the sea; phrasal, ecclesiastic. Ekphrastic. Meaning: a poem about a piece of art. An epistle between a person who didn't exist and a picture of a person... who did.

"Linh!" Sam shouted. "Listen to me!"

Someone's fingers were being broken. Someone's hiking boot was moving to intercept.

A guard fell off a bridge a hundred feet into a dark and glamorous city.

"Linh, I'm gonna blow it up!"

When she moved, there was no one in the way, just various colors of blood in a mosaic mirroring the one on the walls and roof. She passed an old woman, asleep on the ground.

There was a yell of dismay from behind her, a man's voice, probably directed at Sam, but they had already scampered up the ladder and disappeared.

The semi-darkness of the tunnel moved past her, the walls were like a person finding their seat in a movie theater. Should I move past them face to face, or with my back to them? Which is least awkward?

"You lied to me!" the someone something something's movie house echoed. "I can't believe I trusted you again! You never changed your mind about staying!"

They passed the alcove where her backpack was and she grabbed it up.

“And then you did it again! You lied about liking me! You thought I wasn’t as smart as you and that that made it okay! That really doesn’t make it okay to lie!”

Sam stopped talking suddenly, and Linh was up in the small cavern with the mossy statuette at the far end, conscious only of the still image of Samarium Sweet in front of a large, loose pile of dynamite with their hands on the T-bar.

“It won’t happen again,” they said. And they were silhouetted by blinding light, and both of them were blasted back down a straight length of the tunnel. Sam seemed almost completely unaffected, breaking the stone as they smacked into the wall. Again and again. Head hitting the floor. Were those her hands? Still blood-covered. Still attached. Again and again?

And then she was the one being struck, driven back, back down the hall and through the colorful room, over the bridge, by a man who looked awfully like some kind of living statue—which was impossible, but maybe he was one of those people in Paris who dress up like statues—and, if she was going to be honest, not very masterful; too human.

But she was driven back—she let herself be, of course, like running from a man with a rubber bladed chainsaw: because that’s the direction you’ve parked your car, and all your friends are running that way anyway towards somebody’s mother’s SUV in the warm night—half laughing at the actor with the stone-colored face paint, driven all the way down to a wide terrace above a large river canyon in the night, where he yelled something terrible, horrible at her, which made her heart jump, and he stood squared off, ten feet away, like his next line was coming up, but it wasn’t soon enough to start his blocking, which left him just waiting awkwardly, waiting for her line to queue him to monologue or react in some scripted way.

And Linh smiled and waved goodbye with her prop sword like a patron who didn’t think the haunted house was very good, but didn’t want to be rude, because the scary people were just, after all, people in costume, just like her and you really should be nice to them as a general principle; you should always be cordial and nice to everyone, even if you don’t get what you want from them, because who knows who they are—they might be very influential; and she slipped away into the dark, towards the river, because the water seemed like a nicer place to be. She wondered if she really was deep underground, or if this wasn’t a university library basement, or a hallway on the second floor of the church with the curtains drawn.