

Chapter 1

Standing there in front of the statue, I couldn't help but think about my short but long life. The thought irritated me as the smell of incense wafted in the air. It did nothing but fuel my frustration further as I stared at the gold-plated statue of a buddha smiling smugly at me. Its expression seemed to be mocking me, a perfect symmetrical sneer crafted by some master artist. A human making something divine, laughable.

Blood from a hole in my abdomen had trickled down my legs staining the wooden floorboards. The sirens were still blaring and occasional shouts could be heard from the officers surrounding the lonesome temple. Red and blue lights invaded through the windows, banishing the shadows in this dimly lit room.

"You are surrounded! Come out with your hands up!".

A familiar voice echoed through the night by the way of a megaphone. It was the detective that has been chasing me for the past weeks. I had a nagging feeling of being watched and got my suspicions confirmed when he showed up at the temple I stayed at. Grinning as he asked me a bunch of questions. I couldn't help but stare at his peculiar scar over his left eye.

In this bustling concrete jungle of a city, stood the temple on top of a hill surrounded by nature. Having nowhere else to go, I eventually found myself walking to this place. A monk sweeping the grounds had greeted me, introducing himself and the history of the temple. I couldn't do naught but stand there and listen to the whole history lesson from the more and more increasingly cheerful monk. I guess even monks get lonely from time to time.

Having learnt the whole in and outs of the temple, I got invited to have a meal as a reward for listening so attentively, something my rumbling stomach accepted for me, eliciting a chuckle from the monk. Stuffing my face with food for the first time in a while, my tired state hit me like a truck. The monk watching me, offered a room I could use as it had gotten late. The room was for monks-in-training but none had shed their modern life in recent years.

The sounds of footsteps coming closer and closer were like a noose tightening around my neck, depriving me of oxygen. No wait, I was just lightheaded from all the bloodloss.

Glancing at my blood-stained knife in my hand, I debated which way to die was less painful. Stabbing myself in the neck or getting shot by those officers outside.

The monks at the temple were a little surprised that a new face had popped up overnight, thinking that I must have been a new trainee. With all the information I got from chatting with them, I could have really been a real monk-in-training but something fundamental stopped me from becoming one. The five precepts.

If I'm going to die anyway, prison was not an option, maybe I could spare one of them from committing the act of taking a life. But wouldn't stabbing myself also be an act of killing? I should've asked when I had the chance.

Having lost strength in my legs, I opted to lay there, in the middle of the room. This was my first time in this room. It was as if something invisible had blocked my consciousness from entering the main room. Maybe the sight of the towering statue acted as some talisman, forbidding a murderer like me from entering.

"Death is not the end and life is not the start, all of us will be affected by the wheel of reincarnation", the monk had said. Maybe I will be a cat or something in my next life. That would be fun, I thought to myself as my consciousness flickered in and out. In the end, I couldn't chose to kill myself.

"Detective, is this really her? The killer making waves in the headlines lately?"

The officer couldn't help but ask, seeing the still body of the girl. He had a daughter about her age and all she did was chat with her friends and stay up late.

"Don't let her appearance fool you, we have four confirmed murders and three unconfirmed"

"Wow, how did a girl like her turn into this? She must have been possessed or something", rubbing his arms, he glanced around.

"Just look where she chose to live. It gives me the creeps I tell you"

"Enough chatting, wrap it up and give me a report later. The media and higher ups have been on my ass ever since that incident".

"He had a promotion lined up and all...", the officer couldn't help but lament, watching the back of the detective leaving and lighting up a cigarette.

"Good riddance", draping a sheet of cloth over the girl, the officer began to write his report.

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"Father!", the mother looked distraught, "My daughter, she will wake up won't she? Shu must be just sleeping, right?"

Having looked over this girl from late morning to late night, I could only come to one conclusion. Her daughter won't ever open her eyes again.

"I'm sorry... She doesn't have long" It was never easy telling a parent about the fate of their child. The woman wailed as she held unto her dying daughter.

"You should begin the ritual". The goddess had given us this magic spell to ensure a person's soul would safely come back into the heavens.

"No!", she cried. "I won't do it! She's not dead! Oh baby, open your eyes please!"

She grabbed my garment, pleading. "You can use healing magic can't you? Just do that!"

"I have already used up all my mana, it had no effect". Even if healing magic couldn't turn a terminal ill person into a healthy person, it should have had some effect. But the spells had failed, almost as if it bounced off her. That was why I was so sure she was nearing death.

"Oh my baby, please open your eyes. What am I supposed to do without you!"

It seemed as if this child was struggling with an illness for a long time as scattered around the room were a plethora of plants and medicine, a pungent smell coming from them. From the explanation I got from her, I couldn't imagine how it was to live with this unknown illness that all these medicines could not cure. Being bedridden from walking too far, getting a fever for feeling the wind, and failing to retain whatever she ate. What a pitiful life this child had.

Her appearance laying there seemed to be at least peaceful. She had inherited her blonde hair from her mother which laid well-combed to her sides. Her mother had combed it, doing whatever she could for her daughter. Her blue eyes glimmered brilliantly under the candle light as it stared at her mother. She looked just like a smaller version of her. Hmm? Staring?

"What am I to tell your father!" Her tears dropped onto the girl's cheek.

"What..."

Flinching from the unexpected sound from, her crying stopped.

How is this possible? My healing magic didn't work and her heart had stopped?

"Oh my goddess!" I could see her face full of joy. "My baby!"

"A miracle... This must be a miracle..." I must document this. I must show the other priests.

As I rummaged through my bags to find something to write on, and while the mother hugged her child shedding tears of joy, the words from the little girl stopped us both in our tracks.

"Who are you?", a hoarse voice called out.

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was a beautiful crying woman. Is this heaven? That can't be. I can't be in heaven. The woman seemed to be shocked about something. Her expression mirrored the expression of the man next to her. He wore some really gaudy white clothes reminiscent of the priests that had visited the temple.

Didn't I die? I tried to ask them but my voice failed to make a sound. Glancing downwards the view shocked me. This wasn't my body. As I thought of moving my hand, a small childlike hand moved accordingly instead. An unnatural gold-colored hair flowed by the sides of my view and my chest had gotten a bit smaller...

This must be a dream, but the aches in my body soon banished that thought. Everything hurt as I laid there in the bed. The pain was even worse than being shot.

Using all the strength I could muster, I focused my attention on the woman. "Who are you?" Even my voice was different.

I stared absentmindedly at the bowl of porridge in my hands. The warmth from it seeped through my hands, heating up my body a little. Its grayish color didn't really whet my appetite but as the flying spoon flew toward my mouth I had to accept it nonetheless.

One shouldn't judge a book by its cover, I remembered hearing someone say. A subtle sweetness enveloped my tongue as the porridge spread through my mouth and down my throat, warming it up.

She looked at me with crescent moon shaped eyes. "How is it?"

"It's good" My childlike voice rang out. "What is it?"

"I'm glad", she said with a big smile, "it's oat porridge, I used to make it whenever you would get sick". I accepted another spoonful from her.

This woman was supposedly my mother. A pretty woman with golden hair the same as mine and brilliant blue eyes reminiscent of a cloudless blue sky. Her youthful stature would make one wonder if she really was a mother, her age doesn't show at all.

According to this woman, Victoria, my name was Esther, 13 years old. I had been struggling with illnesses my whole life but it was especially bad this time, even putting me on the edge of death. The priest had said that it was a miracle as someone not accepting healing magic was a sure sign of death. Although he had no answers as to why I didn't have any memories.

Healing magic. Magic. I don't really know what to expect anymore. But I knew for a fact by instinct that the one that was supposed to be in this body, Esther, was dead. I didn't feel the need to tell him that. Victoria looked gleefully at the now empty bowl of porridge.

A day had passed since I've taken over Esther's body. My body still ached all over but speaking had become less of a strain, so I passed the time by asking a bunch of questions to Victoria.

This country was called the Guillain Empire and it was currently year 563 of the imperial calendar. We lived in some place being ruled by a count whose name I couldn't remember. Yeah, this wasn't earth.

"A planet? Is it some kind of plant?" She was sitting on a chair by my bedside.

"It's not a plant, I just remembered the word"

Her eyes got filled with hope. "Really? Do you remember anything else?"

"No, sorry..."

"Oh, it's nothing to be sorry about sweetie, lets just take it slow"

She put her hand onto my head and began patting me. It felt oddly comforting.

"M-mom?" The word got stuck in my throat. "Can I ask another question?"

"Of course!" She pumped her fists, cheering me on.

"Do I have a dad?"

“Oh...”, she looked a bit wistful.

“He’s on a monster expedition”

“Monsters? They sound dangerous”

“Don’t you worry a bit my little pumpkin, your father is stronger than he looks! Why do you think I married him?”. She began singing her praises. I could tell from the way she spoke about her husband that they were a happy couple.

I searched my memories for some involving my father but quickly stopped. It was a stupid idea.

“Do you think he will be glad to see me?”

“Why do you say that?” Her concerned face came a bit closer as she held my hands.

“I don’t remember him at all.” Clenching my hands in her own, she pulled me into a hug.

“It doesn’t matter my baby, we would still love you all the same. There is always time for new memories, and who knows? Maybe your memories will come back tomorrow?”

I could feel the warmth in her words as she hugged me, warming up my own body. A twinge of guilt took its place in my heart, where her body warmth had seeped into. I didn’t want to let go of this warmth.

Chapter 2

I could hear the front door open downstairs and a manly voice rang out. My mother was talking to him when suddenly footsteps sprinted up the stairs.

“Esther!” A man barged into the room. The first thing I noticed were his clothes. Leather armor outfitted with metal plates and clinking on his belt was a genuine sword.

“Oh, I shouldn’t have left you!” He held my hand, pressing it against his head as he knelt by the bed. I could smell something familiar coming from him. It was a smell I knew all too well; the smell of blood.

“Are you my father?”

“Oh my Goddess it was true!” His eyebrows scrunched together as he seemed ready to cry. Not expecting him to answer, I looked toward my mother for the answer. She had entered the room after him and was consoling her husband.

“Say hello to your father, dear.”

He was a handsome man. His sharp jawline was devoid of hair and his obsidian eyes were looking at me warmly under his jet-black hair.

My mother explained to him how after he left for the expedition, she had to call over a priest to heal me. And as it did not work, she had nearly given up hope, before I opened my eyes.

My mother explained to him what had happened after he had left for the expedition. How the priest had said to prepare for a ritual right before I opened my eyes.

“I knew those people were quacks!” He bellowed.

“Watch what you are saying!”

“How else wouldn’t healing magic not work! They must have sent an unqualified priest!” He looked like one of the demon paintings I had seen in the temple.

“I don’t know either, but please calm down”, she pleaded with him. It was only then that he noticed the situation. He hadn’t even taken his armor off.
He took a moment to collect himself. “So she doesn’t remember anything?”

“That’s right she didn’t even remember me...” Victoria couldn’t stop her emotions from surfacing, breaking out into a sob.

“Oh honey, come here”, now it was the wife’s turn to be consoled.

I watched them absentmindedly. My heart grew heavy with guilt. Esther, are you watching? How am I supposed to act in this situation?

A new day welcomed me as the rays of sun lit up the room and woke me up. A pleasant smell of plants filled the room. My mother had fallen asleep while watching over me again. She looked exhausted, although the smile on her sleeping face indicated otherwise. Sitting there under the light, the dust being lit looked like stars circling around her.

I better get better soon.

From the conversations I could hear the last few days, the main topic seemed to be about money. The priest had refused payment, stating that he couldn't accept payment for something the Goddess herself did. But our funds were trickling out with the amount of medicine being bought.

Feeling particularly well in this body today, I decided to snoop around the house a bit. Sneaking past my mother, I went out of the room, careful not to wake her up. The first thing I wanted to see was a mirror. I still haven't seen myself. I figured the most likely place other than this room would be Esther's bedroom. I had actually been using my parents' room ever since I woke up.

Opening the door, a cozy room greeted me. A bed half the size of the one I've been using, a desk with a matching chair under a window pointing towards the forest in the distance. I searched around the desk and found some books placed haphazardly on top. They were all about plants and their effects on the body. Although I had never seen the alphabet being used in these books, I could still understand their meaning. Was this a form of magic?

Feeling tired, I waddled out of Esther's room and went back into bed, having not achieved my goal.

Victoria woke up and stretched her arms toward the air. "Good morning, sweetie. Did you sleep well?" Her headpats always felt oddly pleasant.

I nodded.

"It looks like your dad is cooking something good." A delicious scent had filled the house while I did my investigation.

Reflected in the puddle was a face resembling Victoria staring absentmindedly at me. She was pretty.

My body had gotten much better the past week with all the rest and food. Today I finally got permission to venture outside. Yesterday's rain had wet the garden, covering every blade of grass with droplets.

"Esther!" Victoria was calling from the kitchen window, "Want to give me a hand with breakfast?"

"Coming!"

Standing up still got me a bit lightheaded, which had become familiar by now.

It was yesterday that mom suggested I help her with cooking by cutting some vegetables. She probably suggested that seeing that all I did was lie in bed reading the few books available.

"Here cut these carrots into cubes, want me to show you how it's done?". It seemed she had gotten used to my amnesia, often asking me whether I knew something or not.

"I think I got it"

It had been a while since I last held a knife. Gripping it with each of my fingers wrapping around the handle, I felt the weight of the knife in my hand. I couldn't help but involuntarily frown a little. This was a terrible knife.

"Is it too heavy?" My mother seemed to misunderstand my inner thoughts.

"No, it should be fine." It was not fine. The balance point was in an unideal position, making one use more energy than needed. And not to mention the nicks on the edge of the blade.

Despite my inner complaints, I still made quick work on the carrots, cutting them into suitable pieces. I had eventually taken over the kitchen while living in the temple. I had originally wanted to just make something to give the monks, but upon seeing my knifework, asked me to help in the kitchen whenever I had time.

"Did you get better at cutting vegetables?" Did I show too much?

"You must have gotten it from me, my daughter is so talented!" She couldn't help but gush and gave me a squeeze.

"Mom, I'm holding a knife." Mom, mom, mom. I don't think I will ever get comfortable saying that three-letter word.

"Sorry, sorry, you're just so lovely!"

"Are these stars?" Victoria studied one of my pieces. "Pretty cute..."

"I think they taste better as stars." I placed the knife down.

"Hmm", she pondered my statement. "Come here!"

A full on hugging attack.

"How is my daughter this cute!" Sometimes, I don't really understand Victoria. Nonetheless, whenever she hugged me I couldn't help but feel a bit happier.

Setting the table for three, my father came down the stairs groggily.

“What’s for breakfast today?” He asked, slumbering toward his seat at the end.

“Vegetable stew and fried potatoes”. We were now all seated. “Phew, you better wash up afterwards. I can practically smell the alcohol coming from you, how many did you have yesterday”

“I didn’t even get to take a sip, some guy spilled his whole cup all over me”. He lifted his spoon toward his mouth. “Wow, is it just me or did your cooking get better lately?”

“It’s a secret ingredient I found lately”, my mother smirked mischievously, as he inhaled the bowl of stew.

“Poison is it?”

“What nonsense! Why would I poison the same food as Esther and I are eating”

“She didn’t deny it…”, my father murmured to me.

“What you are tasting is the talents of your daughter. She has helped me in the kitchen lately.”

“Really? She did feel more mature lately, but to think my child is now all grown up…”, fake-wiping his fake tears, he gave me a few pats.

“I should give a gift to my now all grown up daughter, say it and it shall become yours”, he said theatrically, eliciting a chuckle out of his wife.

“I don’t really need anything”

“She really did go and grow up...” Father slumped his shoulders. “How about this?” Rummaging through his pockets, he pulled out a silver coin.

“Isn’t that a bit much, honey? You could buy a day’s worth of food with that”

“And that’s not all”, leaving the table, he came back with a book in hand.

“I heard you were interested in monsters.” It was a monster lexicon.

“Whoah, thanks!” I could finally see what the monsters looked like.

“So my daughter likes monsters more than money, noted”

“Where do you keep finding these books? Aren’t they expensive?”

“Don’t worry, I got this for less than that silver coin”

Flipping through a few pages, I understood why my mother didn’t worry too much about her husband going out and slaying monsters. Each page had a picture and a description of a monster. A rabbit with antlers, a deer with four eyes and other animals with an assortment of features either added or subtracted. Well, I guess you could call these weird beasts monsters.

“Speaking of which, you know the people I met yesterday? They had a really good job offer for us. I’m sure a lot of money will be paid out.”

“Really? Who are they?”

He explained how some people from out of town had come here to find something, and needed people to show them the way. They wouldn’t give more details until they finalized the contract.

“We won’t have to worry about money for a while if my gut instinct is correct!”

“This sounds too good to be true”, my mother seemed suspicious, “I’ve never heard of guarding duty being well paid”

“Well, by the way she was acting, it seemed like the leader was a noble. *I* would know”

“That makes sense...”

I guess nobles need more protection than necessary. Anyway, how should I spend this silver coin?

Chapter 3

“Hey kid, you want to buy something?”

I was currently standing in front of a toady looking street vendor selling meat skewers. I haven’t had grilled meat in a while so following the smell I arrived at this place.

“Go ask your parents if you’ve got no money”

Three coppers for a skewer. That's nearly half of what I had. I didn't really like to use money on things like food, but maybe an exception could be made this time. The smell was calling me to be eaten. Opening the coin pouch my mother had gifted me, I was about to take my one silver turned ten copper coins out.

"Do you want me to buy you one sweetie?" Mom had finally arrived and with her considerably fatter pouch.

"Can I get one?"

Taking my first bite, the taste surprised me. It tasted amazing, a bit gamey maybe but it only added onto its charm.

"Is this meat from the four-eyed deer monster?"

"Oh you know about them monsters, kid? You should probably learn monsters aren't edible"

"They were supposedly poisoned by the goddess to defer us from not seeking them out", my mother explained.

"Really?" I put the last cube in my mouth. "Wouldn't it be better to hunt them for food?"

"Worry about yourself, kid. All bones and no muscle, just looking at you makes me want to feed you. Here take another one, on the house." The toady vendor gave Victoria the side-eye.

"You're too kind, sir. My daughter was just bedridden you see..."

The vendor clicked his tongue and began nagging at her, regaling us about how back in his days no children would be as thin as me. I didn't like his tone of voice.

"It's not my mother's fault, I'm just a picky eater"

"Whatever, scurry off now", the vendor shooed us away grumpily.

We walked away from the grumpy toady vendor. "Thanks, Esther." She eyed the skewer in my hand. "I better make something good when we get home!". A smile definitely suited her better.

With two empty skewers in one hand, and my mother's hand in the other, I accompanied her wherever she led me. The sight of the town was quite something. It looked just like a medieval city. Cobblestones laid on our path and carriages with

horses could be seen going up and down the streets, clipping and clopping all the while. Passing other people on the street we arrived in front of a shop.

"Why don't you wait on the bench here?" A bench was set outside the store, shaded by a big leafy tree.

My legs ached a bit so I accepted her preposition. Sitting on the bench and watching the people was entertaining enough. There were some guards walking around with spears in their hand, patrolling the area, people who were haggling with the vendors trying to get the most for their money, but what caught my attention were the striking hair colors. Red, blue, green, a bunch of colors littered the heads of the passerbys. Speaking of, someone with red hair stood in front of me.

"What's a young lady like you doing here? Never seen you here before"

A young lady, wasn't that usually used when talking to nobles? Well I did wear a rather pretty dress and a fancy sunhat. Victoria had given me one of hers to protect me from the blinding sun. Anyway, who's this kid?

"I'm not a young lady, my name is Esther. I've never seen you before either"

"Is that so? I'm Eric, I live in that house over there", he pointed at the house next to the shop. "I'm 14"

Is this how you are supposed to introduce yourself?

"I live outside town, I'm 13"

"Looks like I'm older than you", he smirked.

"Are you lost or something?"

"I'm waiting for my mom".

"I see", the boy took a seat beside me as if it was natural. He was a whole head higher than me.

It hadn't even been a full minute before he said something. "This is boring, wanna go play instead?"

"My mother said to not go with strangers"

Victoria didn't tell me this but the point still stands, I think. *She* didn't really exude a sense of confidence.

"I'm not a stranger, I know your name and you know mine. Oh I know", he rummaged through his bag, eventually pulling something wrapped in paper.

"My dad told me to give a gift to someone to make them your friend. Here take one"

It was hard-candy. I thought sugar was supposed to be pretty rare, how did this kid get some? Not passing up this opportunity, I unwrapped one and popped it into my mouth. The sweetness felt like it was burning my mouth. It had been a while since I had some sugar.

"There, we're now friends"

"Is that how that works?", I said, sneaking another piece into my mouth.

"Hey, don't take all of them!" Tsk, he took them away.

"Don't click your tongue at me!"

"Who's this Esther? A new friend?". Mom was finished with her shopping.

"Yeah, he gave me some candy".

"Did he now? Well thank you for that". Victoria gave him a smile.

"O-oh it was no problem. My name is Eric. I live over there". His face nearly turned into the same color as his hair.

"Mom, can I go play with Eric for a bit?"

"Hmm", she looked around at the guards, "just meet us by the fountain on the next bell, okay? I will go find your father in the meanwhile"

"You heard her, lets go Eric"

"Oh, sure"

I took the lead with Eric in tow while mom gave us a wave. Mom, you shouldn't smile like that to other men besides father.

"Hey where are you going, that's the wrong way"

"Really? Where are we even going?"

“Weirdo” Eric gave me a funny look. “This way. All the kids play over there.”

Snaking around some alleys and streets, we arrived into a clearing, where a group of kids were chatting and running around.

“Hey guys! A brought another one to play with”

“Eric!” a girl in shorts came running up to us. “I told you to stop bringing over random kids!”, she said grumpily.

“She’s not some random kid, I befriended her with some candy, isn’t that fine? She looked pretty bored so I took her along.” Rubbing his nose, it looked like he thought he did something heroic. I wasn’t actually bored.

“Ugh, well what’s done is done. I’m Karrie by the way”.

Tilting my head up to move my sunhat from blocking my view, nothing could have prepared me for the view as the girl greeted me.

“What? What are you doing here?” That’s what I want to ask you.

“You know her?”

“She’s my neighbor. Did you get sick again? Haven’t seen you around lately”

Chestnut-brown hair done in a short bob, a pair of brown eyes and above them, two thin eyebrows framing her face. A vivid image of her laying in a casket filled my head. There was no mistaking it, the name was different but this was definitely *her*.

“Hello? You home?”, a hand appeared in front of me, waving back and forth.

“Oh, sorry. Nice to meet you, I’m Esther. I live outside of town”.

“What kind of greeting is that supposed to be? And I already know who you are.” Tilting her head to the side. Her eyebrows seemed to question me.

“Is that so? Sorry, I lost my memories a few days ago. I don’t really remember anyone”

“Are you joking? How’s that possible”

“I don’t know, the priest examining me didn’t know much either”

“You called a priest? Must have been serious then...”

"Whoah, that's so cool!" Jumping into the conversation was a cheerful looking Eric.

"So you don't remember anything?", I nodded

"What about your parents, did you remember them?"

"Hey! What are you saying!". Seeing her slap Eric on the back resurfaced some old memories.

"Oh, when I woke up, I just saw this pretty lady looking at me"

"Yeah that's right, she's really pretty!". Eric said, rubbing his back. Tsk.

"Hey, stop clicking your tongue at me!"

"Well? And then what happened?"

"Hey quit it, look how sad she is getting!"

Did I? Well this works. I had something I wanted to investigate.

"I don't really want to talk about it, can't we play something instead?"

"Oh right, you said something so shocking I forgot. Any ideas?"

Shaking her head, Karrie said. "Well, there's only three of us for now-"

"Wow, you gonna ditch the others?"

"They only do tiring stuff, I don't want to get all sweaty in this weather. You know anything interesting to do, Esther?"

"I don't remember"

"Wow... I bet you use that often", Eric said incredulously. Karrie glanced at me and couldn't help but agree.

Ridiculous as it sounds, it was the truth, or more correctly, I didn't know any games. Having never had the chance to play with others, remembering games or fun things to do was just wasted energy I could instead use to survive. Well, there was one game I was subjected to against my will.

"How about truth or dare?", I spat out.

“You serious?” They said in tandem.

“Sorry, that was a joke...”

Chapter 4

“Well I see you still make bad jokes...”

“How about a guessing game?” The girl whom I swore should be dead, got an idea that seemed to be perfect for doing a test.

“That sounds fun, how about we guess each other’s drawings.” I picked up a stick nearby and squatted down in the dirt.

“Well I guess that works”, Eric said.

Let’s start with something easy first, something they would guess correctly. A circle for the body and head, a triangle for the beak and wings, and some lines for the feet. Scribbled into the dirt was a bird. I was quite proud of how it turned out.

Eric and Karrie seemed deep in thought as they squatted over the drawing, our head nearly touching.

“Uhm, Esther?” Eric broke the silence, looks like he will get the first point.

“I have no idea what these shapes are supposed to be”.

“Yeah, you’re worse than I thought...”

“What are you guys talking about, it’s obviously a bird.” I couldn’t help but feel a bit indignant.

“Look, there’s the beak and the wings, and these lines are the feet.” Pointing at my drawing, I explained to them.

“I still don’t see it”, Eric said after a momentary pause.

“Me neither”, agreed the girl with the same face.

What are they talking about? Are they stupid? And since when did you become Eric’s yes-man, just stay dead!

"Well, let's see how much better you are then", I said, practically shoving the stick to Eric.

"No need to get so worked up, Esther"

I don't want to hear that from you of all people.

"Hmm, let's see". With a practiced hand, Eric began drawing in the dirt. First there was a square and then a-

"A sword"

"Correct! A point to Karrie."

"What, he didn't even finish it yet"

"It's obvious if you have played this before". Upon realising what she just uttered, clamped her mouth shut. "Sorry, I didn't mean that"

"Let me try again"

It wasn't my turn yet but I had to check this before I missed my chance. Getting permission, Eric gave the stick back to me. Let's see if Karrie also has memories of her past life.

Ann, aren't you supposed to be dead, I wrote it in a language only us could understand. I studied her face as she looked at what I drew.

"Esther", she called my name hesitatingly.

"What is it?"

"I think we should switch games, this won't be fair at this point..."

Looking at what I drew, Eric roared. "Hahaha, what is that?!"

It wasn't supposed to be something you would guess! Her face didn't even flinch when she looked at it. I still had to do more tests.

Upon my insistence, Eric and Karrie agreed to play a few more rounds. The sun in the sky had dipped a bit at this point and the air was getting noticeably cooler. It was on my fourth drawing that the bell rang in the distance, signaling the end of our game. The other kids seemed to also wrap up their games.

I grit my teeth. "This game sucks." I threw the stick to the ground.

"Maybe we should have done something else?" Karrie was standing there with 4 points to her name. "Are you heading back too?"

"Aw, shucks. Esther, you should play with us next time too. I can't believe you got zero points." He pointed at me and laughed with his stupid winner-smile. He managed to get 5 points. I didn't try to win, I had better things to do. I concluded that she and Ann only looked alike. Otherwise her poker face was impenetrable, hah, yeah right.

I marched out of there, stomping my feet in the process, only to have the both of them follow me.

Not wanting to talk to him anymore, I started my march towards the town square. The only problem being the winding alleys and streets all looked the same. I hadn't really paid attention to the directions. My march got halted after a few stumps.

"That's the wrong way, Esther. The fountain is this way." He smirked at me.

Karrie joined us as Eric led the way and so the three of us began our journey through the alleys. Chatting along the way were the two of them, their topics ranged from this to that. Occasionally, I gave an affirmative "Yes" or "I see" pretending to listen as I focused all my strength in my feet instead. They were really sore.

"Hey did you hear about the dead people popping up?" I perked my ears towards Karrie.

"I did see that there were more guards than usual lately"

"Finn said that his dad would get a huge amount of money if he were to catch him"

"That sounds serious", Eric put his hand to his chin, "how much are we talking about?"

"He said 5 gold coins!" Karrie gestured with her hands.

"Oh my goddess", feigning shock he said, "and so, you really believe him?"

"Well..."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I can't remember the last time he said something that was true"

"You have a point..."

The fountain came into view as we rounded a corner. Mother had met up with father and were currently talking to a woman. Judging by her bow strapped to her back, it must have been one of the hunters in father's group.

"Miss Victoria!" Karrie shouted. "We brought Esther back"

Turning her head to having her name being called, she smiled upon seeing us. "Goodness, there's a whole group of you now." I could hear Eric mumbling my mother's name.

"Oh my, how cute. Are these all your children?" The woman with the bow asked.

"As if, one is more than enough for us", father crouched down, meeting me at my eye level. "Did you make new friends already?".

"Yeah, this is Eric and Karrie"

The woman looked at me and then my mother. "I see the resemblance. Nice to meet you, I'm Ravel, I work with your dad."

"Hello, I'm Esther, I live out of town." My introduction got a chuckle out of her.

"I suppose it is time for the children to head back, same time next week?"

Father confirmed and Ravel left us, blending through the crowd of people.

"I better leave before I get scolded again. See you guys next time, you too, miss Victoria!" Eric left waving toward my mother.

"Did that boy just..?" Yes he did, father.

"What a charming boy", my mother waved back. "Did you come alone today, Karrie? Want to head back with us?"

"If you wouldn't mind", Karrie said shyly.

With Karrie and I at the front, we began our journey home. It was a wonder how much she could talk by herself. At least she looked happy chatting away. If only she could hear my inner thoughts.

What would happen if I just killed her again? She wasn't Ann at the moment, but her face was. Honestly, it was pretty fun playing with them. I enjoyed the experience. *It wouldn't hurt to just observe her*, I thought to myself, staring at her mouth rapidly opening and closing.

We finally arrived at her house. It looked similar to ours, standing there in the distance. Even the tree in the backyard stood in the same position.

"See ya! I had fun today, let's play again!".

My parents said that they would come visit when the time allowed it, saying farewell to Karrie's mother, who had come to scold her daughter.

"Was she one of those people who had that idea you were talking about?"

He adjusted the grip on the shopping bag. "Ravel? Yeah, I can't really tell you all the details." Ravel's employer had apparently found a treasure map and needed some experienced people that knew the lay of the land. No one knew this place better than his group and that was why she and her employer had approached them.

"I don't know about this idea of hers, doesn't it sound dangerous? Such a high sum just for some guide work..."

"You know how nobles think and act. How about this", he tried to reassure her, "I will tell my men to immediately run should I sense anything dangerous. This job would bring our coffers back to a comfortable state." He planted a kiss on the back of her hand.

"I'm sorry for making you always do all this work..."

"Nothing to be sorry about, I chose to marry you, remember?" That's weird, I thought to myself. They both said the same thing.

Getting tucked in by my mother became a routine after I had moved rooms. It still felt awkward as I laid there, the blanket covering half of my face.

"Did you have fun today?"

I nodded.

It was a bit of a commotion when my legs gave out and father had to carry me the rest of the way. She had fretted about the house blaming herself for not taking better care of me. It wasn't until father comforted her saying that none of it was her fault, that a child had to fall to learn how to pick themselves up.

My mother patted my stomach as she sat there with a somber expression.

“I drew a bird today”

“Really?”

“They said that I had talent”

“Of course, my daughter is the most talented person in the world.” She planted a kiss on my forehead.

Her mood always changed whenever something happened to me. Happy, when something good happened. Sad, when something bad happened. Apparent even to me, I could see how much she loved her daughter. I must be a better daughter so that she won’t be sad so often.

She left the room, seeing as my eyes drooped. Today was really tiring. I met someone who already knew Esther, someone who didn’t know her and even got to play with other kids for the first time. The skewers were good and the thought of the sweet candy I snatched from Eric, made the corners of my mouth turn up a bit.

A sudden realization shook off my drowsiness. I had forgotten my main goal. Laying on top of my desk was my pouch still filled with the ten copper coins. The whole point of me going out to town today was to spend it. I had forgotten my main goal. This had never happened before. I couldn’t decide whether this was a good or a bad sign.

Tomorrow, I would spend some money tomorrow, whatever it took.

Chapter 5

Sitting on the prayer bench, I couldn’t help but feel a little irked as I stared at the marble statue of the Goddess. Today was the day of the Goddess, the seventh day of the week.

I had already made out a plan for today. First, wear something comfortable, then go to town, maybe with Karrie if she wanted and then use the whole day to go find something interesting to spend my money on. My plan went into the bin when my mother woke me up and told me to get ready to go to church.

The sight of statues was starting to really annoy me. Towering over us under the stained glass window, it was draped in all kinds of colors. Did they all really need to

have such a smug face? I contemplated how high I had to grow to be able to punch it in its face.

The headpriest raised his arms. "And onto us the Goddess bestowed us these five commands!". That sounded familiar.

He went on to explain the five rules one had to follow to not be damned: Murder, theft, adultery, lying, and intoxication.

I was taken aback. It was the same as the five precepts the monks used to tell me.

"Do you know why intoxication, being drunk in other words, is mentioned last?" The monk had said to me once. "You are probably wondering why murder is last, right?"

"Let me tell you a story"

There once was a man living with his wife in a village. He had a good reputation as an upright man, helping whoever needed help and many envied how harmonious his family was.

One day, walking back to his home after a long day of work, he felt really thirsty. The sun had been beating down on him the whole day, making him sweat through his clothes.

The way back home was quite a distance so he knocked on the houses he passed by to ask for some water.

Knock, knock!

"Mister, what are you doing knocking on my door this late?" The house owner opened the door.

"Sorry about this, but I'm just feeling so thirsty! You wouldn't happen to have some water lying about?"

"Water?" The house owner pondered. "It's a bit late to draw up some water right now, would you like some wine instead?"

"Water or wine, I will take whatever! I can feel my mouth turning into sand"

And so the man got a bottle of wine.

The truth is, the man had never had a sip of alcohol before. He had seen other people drink it, and they typically took the whole thing in one gulp. Opening the cork, he drained the whole thing, not even a drop remaining.

The man immediately got drunk.

Walking a bit further, he suddenly got really hungry.

“Is there nothing to eat?”, he glanced around. The whole village was sleeping.

It was still a while before he arrived home and really wanted to eat now. Then he spotted a really plump chicken sleeping in a cage behind a house.

“That chicken looks really good”, the man said as he jumped over the fence.

Lifting up the axe he found nearby, he chopped off its head.

Luckily, the backyard had a kitchen. Plucking off the feathers, he threw it in a pot of boiling water.

“Ah, now that hits the spot”, the man said as he rubbed his belly. Only bones were left of the plump chicken.

Hearing the commotion in her backyard, the house owner went out to investigate.

“My chicken!”, she said upon spotting the blood-soaked man. “You killed my prized pet! Guards!”

Not wanting to get in trouble, he assaulted her, making her stay quiet. The men in the village often discussed which lady was the prettiest, and this woman always ended on top of their lists.

I can't let a chance like this slip away? He thought to himself, and pulled down his pants.

With the deed done, he found himself in a pickle. What if she were to report him the next day? It was then he got a brilliant idea. He picked up his axe again.

It was morning when he finally arrived home. Slipping into bed with his wife, he slept soundly with his clothes on. They were stained with blood and dirt.

“A good story, no?”, the monk commented. “A drunk person will lose all reason and do whatever their instincts tell them to do”

"I don't know", I said, "would some alcohol really make someone do all that?"

The monk chuckled. "You may still be a bit too young to understand"

"May you all be blessed!" The booming voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

The sermon ended and the dozens of people started streaming out of the church. We went the opposite way.

"What a surprise to see you here today, TKfathername, something good happened?", the headpriest smiled.

I could see my father clench his fist. "Good to see you too, father. We were wondering if we could meet with the priest who paid us a visit a few days ago?"

"What's with the hastiness?" The priest slowly closed the holy book and dragged his feet away from the altar. "How about we chat over a cup of tea?", he motioned with his arms to the door at the back.

"It's quite all right, thank you. We don't want to take up more of your time than necessary"

The priest stood still for a moment, still smiling. "What a shame I just got these new tea leaves from TKcapitalname." He thought for a second. "You must be talking about the father who joined us recently."

"Speaking of which, he consulted with me on an interesting matter of his" He turned his head away and stared at me. His jovial expression was still plastered on his face.

"Hmm, I see. It is as he said"

Something gold flickered in his eyes as my father stepped forward to shield them from me.

"Sorry about, a force of habit", he raised his hands up, "he should be in the library."

The priest left first through the door leaving us behind.

"They are still hard to converse with wherever it is", my father sighed, "I will be back soon". And so only I and my mother were left.

"Want to go visit the park?", my mother bent down to talk to me, "I heard they got some new pretty flowers!"

The smell of flowers tickled my nose as I strolled around holding my mothers hand. Roses the size of my hand and hydrangeas in all kinds of colors lit up the well-trodden path.

"I wonder if we could take some home with us", she studied the peonies, "don't you think it would spruce up our home, Esther?"

"Yeah, they are pretty." I couldn't care less about flowers. They cost too much and I had seen enough of them already.

We sat on a bench, watching the church.

"Mom", I asked, "would you rather I had my memories back?"

"What are you talking about sweetie?", she furrowed her brows.

"Isn't that the real reason why we are here? To ask for a cure?".

"Well...", it looked like she tried to find the right words, "you know we will always love you, right?"

I nodded.

"We just figured that you may be a bit sad not knowing all the things we are talking about." She looked at me.

"I'm not", I turned away from her gaze. "It's kinda fun learning new things everyday".

I didn't need to look to figure out what expression she had. She wrapped her arms around me and gave me a hug.

"Esther!", someone shouted my name.

"Let's play together!" It was Karrie. She seemed to also get dragged by her family to church.

I got permission to play for a bit and went over to where Karrie was waving.

"Are you still getting hugs at your age?"

"I like them, it warms my heart"

"Wow... I still can't believe how different you are..."

“Really, how did I act before?”

“Uhm”, she hesitated, “it didn’t look like you liked your mom that much”

“That’s ridiculous, was I stupid or something?”

“Yeah, I thought so too! Your mom is ten times nicer than mine”

Karrie told me more things about Esther, like her favorite color and how she never looked to have fun whenever she played. Karrie seemed to like this Esther better.

“Hey, let’s go find some cool insects”

“How do you do that”

“Oh right, you just need to find a really big rock and lift it.” She motioned with her hands. “I saw some really big ones behind the church”

Following her, I looked at my mother as she disappeared from my view. She had taken a nap.

“This one will do”, turning over a rock, a bunch of insects scrawled around as their home had disappeared. I took note of a particular worm as it squirmed there in the dirt. It was disgusting how it looked as it twirled into itself in a continuous motion. Was the bright midday sun burning it? Why don’t you just dig downwards instead, you incompetent worm. Would I have done the same thing had I been reincarnated as it instead?

I tried stabbing it with a stick and it squirmed away, seemingly harm-free. I still don’t have the strength to even kill a stupid worm.

“Whoah, look at that beetle!”

I refocused my eyes.

“I bet ya it will stink twice as much”, she seemed to enjoy herself as she upturned rock after rock, looking for the biggest beetle. TKinnerthoughtsmaybe

“What are you dumb kids doing?” Someone interrupted Karrie’s playing.

Strutting toward us were three boys, the one in the green-haired boy in front seemed to be the leader of the group.

“Ugh, it’s Finn and his sidekicks”

“Who’s that?”

“Someone annoying, just ignore them”

“Hey! Don’t ignore us!”, the short boy on the left demanded.

“Yeah, we’re talking to you”, the tall boy on the right agreed.

“What do you want?” Karrie scoffed.

“Why are you hanging with Esther?” Finn crossed his arms.

“It’s Nonya”

“What’s Nonya?”

“None of your business!” Karrie guffawed to herself.

“Thats not funny!” He interjected. “Didn’t you say you hated her”. That shut Karrie immediately up.

“Yeah, you always went around saying you hated her”, the left boy said.

“She is always making that sad face, I’m sick of it’, didn’t you just this last week?”
The boy on the right added.

I looked toward Karrie, it seemed like it was true.

“Esther, I didn’t really mean what I said-”

“Yeah right”, Finn interrupted. “You shouldn’t hang out with those types of people”, he reached his hand toward me. “Dad said good company brings a good personality. Come play with us instead.” His cheeks reddened a little.

Oh, I see what’s going on.

“No thanks”, I said flatly, making Finn’s subtle grin disappear. “I’d rather play with Karrie.”

“What! Do you know what you are saying?” Sidekick no. 1

“Not just anyone can play with us, you know!” Sidekick no. 2

"I didn't know you were like this Esther, I'm trying to help you right now!" Finn looked angry. "Whatever, you will regret this!" And off he stormed.

"Hey, wait up!"

"Weren't we supposed to get her to join us?", the sidekicks asked as they ran after him.

They came and went like an unwelcome storm, bringing only our mood down.

"Karrie", I turned to her. She looked downtrodden.

"The truth is, I'm not Esther, so you don't need to concern yourself with how I was before I lost my memories"

Karrie's eyes blew up like a pair of plates before steeling herself.

"Sorry Esther..." she looked conflicted.

"But your jokes are still not funny..."

"It's not a joke." I felt like this situation had happened before.

"Thanks for cheering me up, Esther." She took a deep breath.

"The truth is, I always wanted to be friends with you, but you were a bit hard to talk to...", she bowed her head. "I'm sorry".

Being on the receiving end of an apology felt weird, it was always me who apologized. Standing there watching the top of her brown hair, no words came to mind.

"This is so embarrassing!" Karrie couldn't take it anymore, her cheeks were red like beets. "Just say whether you accept it or not!"

"Oh sorry, I accept your apology."

"No! Now it just sounds like I forced you", Karrie seemed to struggle with something as she hid her face behind her hands.

"It's fine Karrie, I want to be friends with you too"

"Really?", she peeked between her fingers. "Even when I said those things about you?"

“Don’t worry about it, you didn’t talk about me”

“Yeah right...”

“More importantly”, something had nagged at me for a while now, “where does Finn live?”

“Why, are you joining his group?”

“No way, it’s so that I can stay away from him. He looks stupid.”

“You’re right about that”, a chuckle slipped out.

She told me what his address was.

“I see,” I gave her the biggest smile I could, “Thanks”.

Chapter 6

Tk plan first “killing”, try to justify having the drunk story included in this chapter

TODO: fix chap 4 with better dialouge and add things from the new chap 2