

Where is the Magic?

Ilea focused on the dull sound of her fists hitting the bag. Her world narrowed. Her own breathing and heartbeat grew distant as she pummeled blow after blow into her inanimate enemy. Nothing mattered but the moment, every bit of thought focused on the single-minded task.

She loved it.

A shrill beeping sound woke her from her trance. Her phone, lying on the padded floor nearby, announced the end of her final set. Sweat poured from her brow as she looked around the gym.

She smiled, feeling that some of the tension in her body had finally faded. It would've been nice to continue, but responsibilities called.

She picked up the phone a moment later, then grabbed her towel as she made her way toward the exit.

“Bye Mark,” she called out to the bald man engrossed in a conversation with another customer near the counter.

He smiled at her, pausing his discussion to flag her down.

“Ilea, hey, I just wanted to ask again about you joining the local tournament prep classes. Are you sure you don’t want to give it a shot?”

She stopped and looked at him, wiping her face with the towel.

“I appreciate the offer, really. You know I’d love to, but with uni starting next week I just can’t.”

The younger man who had been chatting with Mark raised his eyebrows.

Ilea noticed his stare and locked eyes with him until he shifted his attention away from her.

“Mark, are you kidding me? I’ve been training every day for the past two weeks and you won’t let *me* join the locals,” he said, his voice a slightly higher pitch than he’d likely intended. He wasn’t quite whining, but it was close.

The new guy was obviously upset, but Mark just smiled at him.

“Jon, be careful, or she’ll show you the reason why I want her to go instead of you or anybody else. Two weeks doesn’t make a tournament-ready fighter. Ilea is the real deal.” He nodded to Ilea and smiled.

Of course, she knew Mark understood her situation. Still, she couldn’t help but feel a little bad about repeatedly turning him down.

Mark had always been there for her. He never interrupted her sessions other than to correct her form. He constantly crowed about her ‘potential’, but it didn’t matter. She had crunched the numbers already and didn’t plan to end up as a thirty-year-old still working in a fast-food joint – with a fucked-up face to boot.

Even if she somehow won at the locals and moved on to become a professional, she wasn’t ready for destroyed knees at the age of forty. Not to mention the risk of more severe injuries.

She shook her head and continued toward the exit. The petulant sound of ‘Jon’ still complaining behind her nearly made her stop and reconsider the whole thing. But she didn’t. She had already signed up for a different life.

It’s a hobby, and that’s what it will stay.

With what she had in mind, she could at least help people who *were* willing to risk destroyed knees.

Walking out of the gym, she was met by the bright afternoon sun. The inner-city street was lined with parked cars of differing colors, gray blocks containing offices rising up behind them. A sports car blasting rock ’n roll skidded to a halt as a kid ran past, the shouts and curses ignored in turn.

Ilea smiled and crossed the street herself, checking briefly for any other cars.

The walk back to her small one-room apartment was brief. Once inside, she dropped her towel on the pile of unwashed clothing near the door.

Sunlight filtered through the half-closed blinds and illuminated the battlefield of a room that hadn’t seen much cleaning in the past couple of days or even weeks. Dirty bowls, food wrappers, and empty bottles littered

the table, piled around two screens and a half-covered keyboard. The ground was covered in clothes, books, and various other debris.

Tomorrow I'll clean up, I swear.

The thought wasn't meant for anybody in particular but was simply a reminder of the trained shame she should feel at the scene before her.

Ilea closed her eyes and smiled. It wasn't the largest place, nor the most organized, but hey, it was hers.

She undressed on the way to the shower. Some cold water was exactly what she needed after her workout. The bliss was short, mostly to save a little bit on utilities. After she had dried off once more, she started looking for her work uniform.

"There you are."

She found it stuffed in a corner of the room. She frowned at the wrinkles on it before throwing it on the big pile near the door alongside her previously discarded towel. Luckily, she had three sets, one of which had been washed and was at least somewhat folded in the drawer below her bed.

"Time to get to work."

She sighed and left her mess behind.

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"Good day and welcome to shitty fast-food place 87. What would you like to order?" she asked, greeting the person in front of her in a monotone voice.

"Did you just say shitty fast-food place...? Well, whatever... I'd just like a coffee and the cheeseburger deals. And only a little sugar, I'm on a diet." The man winked at her as she typed the order into the computer in front of her.

"Anything else?" she asked.

The man shook his head. "Your company with the coffee, if that's on the menu?" He smiled at her. It was every bit as creepy as she'd expected.

"I'm afraid slavery is illegal, sir, although I hear the chicken nuggets can tell some interesting tales."

He frowned at her, brow furrowing as he attempted to process her response.

Small jokes helped pass the time a little. At first, the repetitive job had offered a kind of meditative quality, but at this point she'd been doing it for too long. It was mind-numbing. She hoped for a robbery every day, thinking of scenarios where she could show off some of her kickboxing prowess. Alas, the real world was dull. And she was stuck for now, if only due to the greatest endboss of all: bills.

They'd just shoot me anyway. Not like I could actually do anything. She sighed at the thought.

"That'll be 3.99."

The man, still frowning, put the money on the counter, and Ilea placed the requested order on the tray in front of her before handing it to the man.

"Have a wonderful day," she said without meaning it in the slightest. She saw her own radiant smile and piercing blue eyes reflected in the man's thick glasses.

He marched off in a huff, clutching his low-calorie meal of burger and fries.

Just one more week... Well, not quite.

The monotony continued until her reverie was broken by the sound of Jeff's voice as he came to take over her place a couple of hours later.

"Hey Ilea, you're not coming in tomorrow, right?"

"No, I have orientation at my college. All day."

He smiled. "Oh, interesting. So we'll be seeing less of your beautiful face around here from now on then? Major?"

She grunted and replied, "Medicine."

She knew he studied philosophy, but Ilea needed something a little more... hands on. Contemplating the nature of existence definitely had its place, but it wasn't quite as immediately useful to her as punching a bag of sand. She wanted to see some progress. The field of medicine at least had clear uses and results.

"Oof, that's a tough one. Didn't think you'd go that way," Jeff said, making her raise an eyebrow. Ilea had thought about what to choose as her major for a while and knew she definitely wanted to go into the health sector. Nursing school was an alternative, but her snarky comments would likely cause problems with the potentially stuck-up doctors. So why not infiltrate their ranks? The tuition was the same, and she could always change her mind in the first semester. Maybe something with nutrition

might be interesting. Working in a gym would be acceptable. Or maybe therapy or something.

First, though, she had to survive the organizational nightmare that was entering academic life.

“Might change it after a semester or specialize. A lot of the basic classes overlap.”

He nodded and smiled thoughtfully, as he always did. Philosophy majors had a reputation, after all.

“Well, good luck either way!”

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A solid ten hours of sleep after her shift had ended, Ilea lay dozing between the numerous pillows on the bed. She was only semi-conscious and was enjoying the feeling. It would have taken the full force of the sun to force her to shift even an iota. Not leaving waking up to chance though, the small alarm clock next to her bed sprang to life, and the room was filled with an ear-splitting noise.

Ilea groaned and, with an outstretched arm, swiftly disabled the hated device.

“Fuuuuck, it’s too early.”

Going back to her pleasant dozing, Ilea lay there for another fifteen minutes until the first of her five back-up alarms on her phone sprang to life. After another half an hour, the final one had been disabled, and with another groan – and all of her willpower – Ilea finally managed to sit up in her bed.

“Mornings suck,” she declared to the world and any gods that were listening.

Not quite awake, Ilea grudgingly left her warm nest and entered the small bathroom in her flat, her morning autopilot helping her dodge all the stray items strewn across the floor.

Only after standing in the shower for ten minutes did her eyes slowly begin to open. Then she snapped fully awake when she nearly slipped upon getting out of the shower. Her whole world tilted and her stomach lurched, but she caught herself at the last second.

“Avoided death there...” she murmured, leaving the bathroom with a toothbrush in her mouth.

Fighting to get her socks on, sniffing some clothes that had only recently been added to the pile, and going back shirtless to the bathroom, she spat into the sink.

This is going to be every single day for years now. Are you ready?

After finally locating a semi-clean outfit, Ilea made it out of her apartment, grabbed a coffee on the way, and got onto the bus. She watched the houses and streets fly by as she sipped from her first cup of the morning.

The disheveled young woman staring back at her from the murky glass of the bus window looked anything but ready to her.

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The orientation day went by in a blur of introductory speeches, new faces, fancy buildings, and teachers of all shapes and sizes. By the end, it was all just one big multi-colored educational blur in Ilea’s mind. A typical boring college day.

It was just the first day of hundreds, maybe thousands like it. *Great.*

Ilea returned home with her new, packed schedule, including a bunch of papers she didn’t know what to do with. Her floor was already filled with detritus, so she was forced to choose the chair instead to dump them on.

“Why aren’t they giving us these in digital form?”

The mountain of paper was at least a tree’s worth. Something like the fabled internet could really improve the archaic school she had chosen. Or at least its impact on local forests. Sinking onto the bed, Ilea decided to check out the latest trends in cat videos. It had been a long day.

Her friend Rory texted her a few times, but Ilea ignored her. They had chosen the same college, and Rory was downright ecstatic to start what she called ‘the next big part of their lives’.

Ilea wasn’t quite as enthusiastic. Sure, she wanted out of her dead-end job, and the various majors she had been considering provided some interesting options. But really, she just wanted to do whatever felt right. She didn’t want to feel stuck, and right now, that’s what she was.

Sure, she had some choices, some freedom, but not to the extent that she wished. There were other options, but they came with their own issues. Studying something in the medical field presented the most reasonable choice.

The ‘next big part of my life’? What then? Meet some guy, get married? Get a fucking house?

It all felt so suffocating. So *normal*.

She decided to look at more cats instead of confronting her existential dread. She wondered if Jeff could offer some insights, but she assumed he would just offer to share some of his weed instead.

Sooner rather than later, a rumbling reminded her of the purest primal need. With this thought driving her forward, she forced herself to get up and check the fridge. A single pan covered loosely with an ill-fitting lid laughed at her, filled with the curry she had tried to make two days before. It wasn’t a good one.

Adding some more chili and pepper as well as a dash of pure hope, she heated up some of the meal before turning on her computer to check if her favorite producers had uploaded any new videos.

Nothing new today. Man, that sucks. Streaming it is then.

She first wasted nearly half an hour with indecision, but in the end, she sat through four short episodes of a new show about forging.

Eventually, another primal need reared its head, and Ilea decided it was time for bed. Lying on the bed, she stared at the ceiling and frowned.

Tomorrow, university life starts. Grinding for years on end. To continue grinding afterward. Maybe I should’ve chosen kickboxing after all. Still, safe and boring isn’t too bad... maybe the excitement would fade if I fought professionally. Eventually that would become a grind too... One day at a time...

When sleep finally came, she dreamed of academic papers about chicken nuggets and the pricing of sweet and sour sauce, all coming to a close when the class decided to have a sparring match instead.

It turned out to be a good night after all.

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Ilea awoke to the chirping of birds and the sun shining on her face. Her eyes opened slowly.

Only to be greeted by grass. Not something one expected when they fell asleep in their bed. In a house. With walls.

“What the actual fuck?” she said as she took in her surroundings.

Trees rose all around her, and the sun was shining through the gaps between them. She could hear a small stream in the distance. This wasn’t her house. This wasn’t even her city. The nearest forest was miles away.

Or at least it should have been.

Ok, what the hell is going on? The adrenaline of the unexpected situation woke her up far faster than any shower could have managed. Did someone kidnap me? Or is this a very, very bad prank? Maybe one of those famous prankster YouTubers made me his target?

Looking around, only trees could be seen, their trunks thick and high reaching. Not a species she could place on the spur of the moment. Moss covered parts of the ground, the color a deep green. She spotted a strange blue flower growing at the center of such a patch.

Well, where’s the idiot screaming about it being a prank and recording my reaction?

Ilea began to shiver despite the relatively moderate cool morning air.

Should I stay here?

After ten minutes of utter disbelief followed by nothing happening, she grew impatient. Confusion and fear crept into her mind, telling her that this might not be just some unfunny yet harmless prank.

Let’s move then, I guess. Maybe it’s a new survival show or something? They’ll hear from my lawyer if it is... as soon as I hire one.

Her thoughts trailed off in her head, her eyes going back to the strange blue flower. It didn’t look right. The leaves curved to the side in a strange manner, and the top bit seemed to be glowing.

Where am I?

She began to walk toward the sound of a nearby stream.

Where there is water, there is life, people, and towns. So I’ll start there, I guess. Maybe some human traffickers kidnapped me but then somehow weren’t satisfied with me? Huh... Well... Wait, why am I disappointed in them not liking what they got? I’m fucking fabulous, for fuck’s sake!

Trying to distract herself from the growing urge to panic, she walked toward the stream. The forest was seemingly untouched. There was no sign

that anyone else had been there. No sign of civilization. No remotely unnatural or man-made sound could be heard at all.

Part of her knew this was weird. Getting this deep into the forest, where you could no longer hear signs of humanity, took a really long time. She had been hiking many times, even spent a week camping in the woods once, but it was often hard to escape the sound of cars, phones, and other people. Here she heard nothing.

It's not that strange. It looks like I'm pretty far out, after all. At least I have my pajamas.

She looked down at her striped white shorts and plain blue top. The uneasiness in her stomach settled, though there still wasn't anyone to be seen. Ilea walked toward the stream, her only comfort in this unfamiliar place. Head toward water, she knew that much.

A roar broke the serene atmosphere.

It was like nothing she had ever heard. Freezing in place, she turned her head toward the source of the noise. Nothing. Just branches and leaves. Her mind went blank as she stood there for a whole minute.

What was that? What the fuck was that?! A bear? No, they sound different, I've seen a few videos...

Finally making herself move, she snuck up to a tree and hid behind it.

Whatever I do, I need to be quiet and still... I don't think my kickboxing will help a lot against a bear.

Another thunderous roar, much closer this time, caused her to freeze again. Her whole body was trembling, and she could feel her heart trying to hammer its way out of her chest.

Then she heard footsteps. Fast-moving footsteps. But this was not the soft pitter-patter of some tiny mammal. These were loud, meaty thuds. *Huge* was the only thing she could think of as the sounds came closer. A high-pitched cry filled the air, and another roar swallowed it right after, as well as all other sounds around her. A final immense *thud* reached her ears as the steps came to an end.

Next came a sickening crunch. Then silence.

What... what the... fuck... what the fuck...?

Sneaking a glance around the tree, Ilea stopped moving entirely. Her eyes fixated on the sight before her. Barely registering the shaking of her hands, she looked at the dragon before her, which was biting into the mess that was left of whatever the creature was it had just killed.

Three meters in length, it had the head of a dragon and no wings, and its maw was bloody.

Then it looked in her direction. Its yellow reptile eyes locked with hers.

[Drake – lvl ??]

‘ding’ Congratulations! You have learned the general skill Identify – lvl 1

A strange noise reverberated in her mind, followed by a line of text that appeared at the bottom of her vision. Neither seemed real. But she didn’t have time to properly register either of them, given the gory scene before her.

Losing interest in Ilea, the drake continued its meal, bones cracking under the strength of its massive jaws. The smell of blood suddenly brought her back to herself as her senses seemed to amplify.

Run.

Instinct taking over, she started to move. At first, her movement was stumbling and slow, then every step was steadier and faster than the one before.

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